

INTRODUCTION

The mental health and wellness of students is a critical factor for success in higher education. The development and implementation of intentional, high-impact practices and strategies to support students while in college can contribute to the persistence and retention of students. We must be prepared to work collaboratively within PASSHE and with our local, regional, and state agencies in supporting our students toward the best well-being possible. With the growing demand for mental health resources both within the State System and throughout the Commonwealth, we need to remain agile and responsive to the needs of students.

The Mental Health and Wellness Task Force investigated, jointly discussed, and developed several key recommendations that may help to support institutional and PASSHE-wide efforts toward our collective student success goals. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the work of the Task Force was tabled in March 2020, curtailing some of the research that was originally planned. However, members of the Task Force reconvened virtually in December 2020 and January 2021 to discuss and draft its recommendations to PASSHE. As these recommendations are considered, it is imperative that (1) we explore these ideas through a justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion lens; (2) applicable resources and timely assessment be part of the framework as these recommendations are implemented; and (3) institutional leadership support timely implementation. The Task Force also recognizes that the COVID-19 pandemic has had mental health impacts that are significant, that are not yet fully understood, and that will continue to reverberate in higher education for some time to come.

TASK FORCE GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

Goal

Acknowledging that students' well-being contributes directly to their success and that more students are experiencing unprecedented levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and sleep difficulties, the Mental Health and Wellness Task Force's goal was to review and research efforts to respond to the growing campus mental health crisis and present recommendations to proactively address students' mental health in order to advance student success and retention.

Objectives

- Research best practices and conduct a SOAR Analysis (Strength, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results) to assess the current state of services and scope of practice within the several campuses that make up the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education.
- Make specific recommendations for developing, implementing, and assessing new strategies to address mental health and overall student wellness on State System campuses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Provide mental health and wellness educational outreach for incoming and continuing students.* Through strong collaborations and partnerships between Academic and Student Affairs, establish mechanisms, programs, and early outreach initiatives that help new students become familiar with campus resources that can support their adjustment to college, and provide information on how to access mental health and well-being resources on and near campus. Additionally, programs and initiatives should empower students to identify and develop self-care strategies that will help them maintain personal wellness.

The content described in this recommendation can be embedded into First Year Seminar (FYS) and/or other gateway course curricula.

- *Make mental health and well-being a campus-wide priority.*
Create and implement a vision for ongoing intentional programming that supports mental health and well-being for members of the campus community. Such endeavors can include developing “wellness days” throughout the academic year with activities centered around supporting mental health and wellness. Campus Behavioral Intervention Teams may be a helpful resource in creating and executing such programming.
- *Develop and implement thoughtful and meaningful mental health training modules for faculty and staff to participate in on a regular basis.* Annual and or semiannual training should be explored, funded, and offered to faculty, staff, and other front-line employees. Training should focus on how to recognize and respond to students in distress, available campus resources, and how to refer a student. Again, Behavioral Intervention Teams are an important source of knowledge and expertise that can help customize training sessions to meet individual campus and constituency needs.
- *Conduct biannual study of student body.* Identify and allocate personnel resources and secure technical support for administering an empirically validated instrument that may help campuses better understand students’ needs, habits, and trends relative to their mental health and overall well-being. Such organizations as American College Health Association (ACHA)/ National College Health Assessment (NCHA), and Healthy Minds provide such research tools. Leveraging these types of resources can provide the evidence for modifying and/or reasonably adding services to support students.
- *Establish and maintain a culture of assessment.* Develop a multi-pronged approach to provide for assessment of several areas related to wellness, including effectiveness of clinical services, adequacy of clinical staffing, mental health needs of students on each campus, and students’ subjective experiences of counseling and mental health outreach. Assessment outcomes should be used to facilitate programmatic change, but campuses should avoid relying on only one form of assessment to make program decisions.
- *Establish a plan to evaluate community resources, compile and update a database, and plan for maintaining the resource.* Identify personnel, such as a nurse navigator or case manager, who can establish, regularly evaluate, and maintain a list/database of resources that may help to reduce widespread reliance on a single source (i.e., the campus counseling center), and may aid in providing students and their families with access to appropriate and timely off-campus resources to support a student’s continuity of care.
- *Share a succinct/sustainable scope of care statement.* Students and their families should be well informed about the extent of mental health resources and services available on campus, with the understanding that individual PASSHE campuses may vary somewhat in the resources they can provide. As suggested by the Education Advisory Board (EAB), it serves the best interest of both campuses and families if the campus counseling center’s scope of care statement is disseminated upon enrollment or during the new student orientation process.

- Support annual diversity and inclusion training for mental health and wellness faculty and staff. Students' background and experiences are important; understanding these backgrounds and experiences can help to provide optimal support and assistance.
- Diversify workforce to reflect campus population. In consultation with divisional leads, Chief Diversity Officer, and or Social Equity (or equivalent), review and, as necessary, revise hiring practices that prevent minorities from securing employment and training opportunities within the mental health and wellness areas. Efforts should remain ongoing to develop an inclusive department environment for all students, staff, and faculty.

SUSTAINING THE WORK

As we navigate the various nuances of providing optimal support for students' mental health and well-being, we must remain cognizant not only of the challenges that exist, but of the limitless opportunities that will enable us to be more responsive to our changing demographics. Collaborative institutional and system-wide dialogues are potential conduits to remaining aware of, and responsive to, what works for students. These collaborative dialogues can be established through the following:

- Establish a mental health and wellness/well-being advisory group on each campus. To facilitate the ongoing efforts at each campus, a group comprised of students, faculty, and staff should meet regularly to support the implementation, assessment, and evaluation of the proposed recommendations or other initiatives specific to each campus.
- Establish a PASSHE Mental Health and Wellness/Well-being Advisory Group (similar to the Task Force). Like the Alcohol and Other Drugs Coalition, a Mental Health and Wellness/Well-being group should be a collaborative team comprised of representation from each university/region. This group will help to discuss, explore, navigate, implement, assess, and evaluate state- and system- wide mental health and wellness efforts.

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