



Supporting Students: A Model Policy For Colleges and Universities—<http://www.bazelon.org/portals/0/education/SupportingStudentsCampusMHPolicy.pdf>

How Colleges Flunk Mental Health—<http://www.newsweek.com/2014/02/14/how-colleges-flunk-mental-health-245492.html>

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focus

What is the Focus?

The *Focus* newsletter highlights important issues in mental health, providing timely information on a range of topics, including work-force development, supported education, organizational development and sustainability, peer-to-peer services, youth transition and system transformation. Have a suggestion for a topic? Let us know!



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A Model Policy to Support Students with Behavioral Health Needs

As CAFÉ TAC has examined in a previous Focus newsletter ([Focus 31: Thirty Schools Recognized for Quality Mental Health Programming](#)), efforts to support and accommodate students with behavioral health needs at our nation's colleges and universities are presenting major challenges for students and administrators alike. It is certainly positive that a public conversation about the realities faced by students of higher education has been taking place, with students becoming more willing to openly discuss the need to address behavioral health on campus, and administrators acknowledging the role they can play in encouraging students in distress to come forward.

Although activism and growing awareness have brought progress, with students, administrators and other stakeholders agreeing on the need to counter stigma and treat behavioral health as an integral part of campus life, this consensus tends to break down when it comes to students in crisis. For administrators, concerns about safety and liability can lead to decisions that can negatively impact students experiencing mental health crisis, including eviction from campus housing, interruption of classes and isolation from the campus community. These measures can be disruptive and detrimental for the student in question, while also discouraging other students from seeking help, for fear of suffering similar measures.



A Policy to Guide Campus Mental Health

To help administrators develop a policy framework to support students with behavioral health needs, whether or not they are in crisis, the [Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law](#), which exists to “protect and advance the rights of adults and children who have mental disabilities,” has put forward a model policy that universities and colleges can look to as a roadmap for creating their own policies and procedures. While institutions of higher education are not subject to the same standards that apply to K through 12th grade students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), they must adhere to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which prohibits discrimination against people with any type of disability. The suggestions offered by the Bazelon Center offer colleges and universities a way to create a safe, compassionate and stigma-free campus community, while accommodating students with behavioral health needs as called for by the ADA.

Bazelon’s model policy offers 48 specific policy tenants, broken up into a number of categories. The full document, in all its detail, can be found at <http://www.bazelon.org/portals/0/education/SupportingStudentsCampusMHPolicy.pdf>. This issue of the *Focus* will examine a few highlights and essential principles that each category includes.

Guiding Principles

This section offers six guiding principles that all campus programs should embrace. They include **a promise to counter stigma, emphasis on suicide prevention, encouragement for students to seek help and a promise of confidentiality** when doing so. It also emphasizes the value of keeping students on track academically through **appropriate accommodations**, and the need to **avoid punitive actions or discrimination**. These are not radical principles, and it’s likely that most students and administrators would agree to them. The details of how the principles are realized can be more complicated. That said, the value of having basic principles explicitly stated in policy comes in the sense of agreement and good will that having basic, fair first principles evokes. While agreeing to details and approaching individual cases may inspire conflict, the guiding principles ensure that a common ground will always remain.

Counselling and Mental Health Services

The emphasis on this section is availability. It calls for universities and colleges to **make services readily available to all students on a voluntary basis**, and to **make sure that those services are organized to meet the student on their own terms**. There is also a call for peer-run services, which can be preferable to traditional one-on-one counseling for some students. While there is provision for an institution to refer a student to its counseling center, the policy encourages institutions to make individualized efforts to reach out to students that may be reluctant to seek help. It also notes that there is a role for campus counseling centers to play in planning the transition back to campus life for students that experience hospitalization.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is an important part of any behavioral health relationship, and is something that requires special protection in the higher education context. This section notes that **the student must be considered the driver of the process**, and the decision to involve family members, faculty or any other individuals is theirs alone.

Accommodations

In addition to pointing out the obvious need to accommodate students with mental health conditions, this section lists some potential accommodations specifically. They include **reduced course loads, extra time to complete assignments, opportunities to work from home, permission to drop courses when needed and flexibility in terms of rooming situations**. It also notes that the process for requesting accommodations should be simple, and not require written requests. Should the student consent to it, there can be a roll for the counseling center to play in securing accommodations. Additionally, there should not be a need for a student to disclose their condition in order to receive an accommodation.

Leaves of Absence

One of the more complicated and difficult-to-navigate areas of campus mental health policy deals with how, when and why students can leave campus, so it's no surprise that this is the largest section of the Bazelon model policy. It includes three sub-sections, on voluntary leave, involuntary leave and returning from leave.

In cases of voluntary leave, it's suggested that the counseling center work with a student to reach a decision on taking leave, and that critical social supports with friends and other members of the campus community be maintained.

There have been many cases in which students have been made to take involuntary leave by their schools (see <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/02/14/how-colleges-flunk-mental-health-245492.html>), and **the issue of involuntary leave is really where the balance between safety, liability and reasonable accommodation must be found**. The model policy recommends that a committee that includes counseling center personnel be established to make determinations regarding involuntary leave, but does not suggest what other members such a committee should include. It emphasizes that involuntary leave should be a last resort applied only when accommodations cannot sufficiently support a student's continued participation in campus life. Such a committee must also notify the student involved, and provide them an opportunity to appear personally before the committee.

When returning from leave, the model policy once again suggests the use of a committee to make a determination. A given student can apply to return at any time, and the committee will seek information from the mental health professional the student has been working with. It is also important to note that the policy supports parity, as it recommends that students returning from mental health leave be treated in the same manner as those returning from physical health absences.

Alternative Housing

This section applies to students that have not been found to need involuntary leave, but still have challenges related to living in campus housing. In other words, it allows for a third option between involuntary leave and campus housing, under which a student isn't being asked to leave campus, but may need a different living environment to support their continued participation in campus life. Again, the policy calls for the same committee that will make decisions regarding leaves of absence to play a deciding role in determining whether a student should be asked to find alternative housing. Any **students that do require alternative housing should still be allowed to participate in all aspects of campus life, so disruption to their campus experience will be as limited as possible.**

Disciplinary Action

The first principle regarding discipline is that **it cannot be used as a pretext for discrimination.** Furthermore, suicidal thoughts or self-injury cannot be considered actions worthy of discipline. Treating suicidal or self-injurious behavior as a disciplinary issue can further traumatize the individual being disciplined, while also deterring others from seeking help. There is a provision for any disciplinary actions to be postponed during leaves of absence, and the policy advises that disciplinary actions should always be avoided when the behavior in question is the result of a mental health condition.

Education and Training

The final section of the Bazelon model policy supports the notion that **all members of a campus community should be familiar with signs of distress and mental health conditions,** know how to access supports and services including the campus counseling center and student peer-run resources, and be aware of emergency procedures to be followed in moments of crisis. It also suggests that information on mental health, available services and college/university policies be made available to students and parents at orientation.

From Policy to Practice

While the model policy put forward by the Bazelon Center definitely lays out a comprehensive framework for colleges and universities to apply when crafting their own policies, the quality of a given institution's approach to behavioral health will really be determined by how the policy is applied, and the culture of understanding, compassion and accommodation that it creates on campus. To make a comprehensive policy that supports students with mental health needs work, an institution must change attitudes and adopt a culture that calls out stigma, encourages those in distress to seek help in a safe environment, and accepts students with mental health needs as individuals capable of recovery and deserving of empathy. As more colleges and universities adopt policies to deal with mental health on campus, it will be incumbent on students and activists with lived experience and their advocates to engage the system, and bring policies to life with compassion and equanimity.



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