



It's not just college students. Higher education itself is experiencing a mental health crisis — <http://qz.com/608367/its-not-just-college-students-higher-education-itself-is-experiencing-a-mental-health-crisis/>

Choosing a College When Mental Health Is an Issue — <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/triggered/201304/choosing-college-when-mental-health-is-issue>

Issue 45

focus

What is the Focus?

The *Focus* newsletter highlights important issues in mental health, providing timely information on a range of topics, including 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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Finding the Right Fit: What to Look For in a College or University

As documented in a [recent article on the website Quartz](#), the situation surrounding campus mental health has continued to grow more dire. The demand for mental health services is at an all-time high, and colleges and universities are struggling to meet the need for support and counseling among their student bodies. The end result is a crisis not just among the students, who report extraordinarily high levels of depression and anxiety, but among institutions of higher education as a whole, as schools struggle with the demand for mental health services. **Given the pressure on colleges and universities to provide for an ever-growing number of students in need of support, it is more essential than ever that people with mental health needs seeking to pursue higher education make decisions about where to study that are grounded in an understanding of their own needs, the unique culture of each campus, and the level of support and accommodations each school is able to offer.**

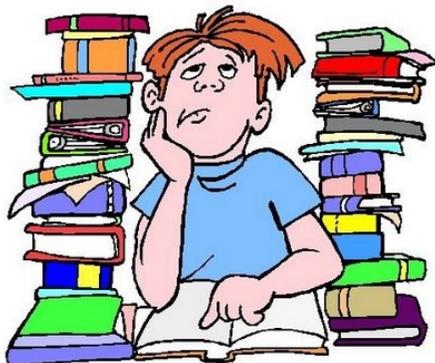


Current statistics available through the American College Health Association National College Health Assessment (NCHA) paint a portrait of a college population that faces enormous difficulty in maintaining wellness. [Most recent data](#) shows that 48% of students report feeling hopeless in the last 12 months. An alarming 58% report feeling overwhelming anxiety, and 35% say they have been so depressed that it was difficult to function. Nearly 10% have considered suicide. It is difficult to say what is driving the widespread sense of stress and



discontent among American students, with possible causes ranging from growing awareness of mental health, to larger social and economic forces that have increase the pressure students feel to succeed in increasingly competitive environments while projecting an image of confidence and composure.

Whatever the reasons, institutions across the country are struggling to meet the behavioral health needs of their students, and even asking whether or not offering counseling and other services is something they should be doing at all. Schools including the [University of Pennsylvania](#), and [University of Missouri](#), the [University of Swarthmore College](#) have resorted to creating wait lists for counseling services. In some cases, schools have expanded their capacity by increasing counseling services. There are also many documented cases of schools dealing with the issue by requiring students in crisis to re-take leaves of absence, and making it difficult for them to re-enroll, effectively abandoning their role as a source of support (see [Focus 43, Campus Mental Health and Leaves of Absence: A First-Hand Perspective](#)). In community colleges, where resources are fewer, many schools don't even have any mental health resources available at all.



Given the pressure on colleges and universities to handle the demand for counseling and mental health services, and the range of approaches that they take to the issue, it is more important than ever that prospective students with mental health needs make decisions about where to study based on strong knowledge about the culture and resources available at the schools they choose to attend.



One resource that can be helpful in that assessment is a publication created by the The Bazelon Center entitled *Supporting Students: A Model Policy for Colleges and Universities* (<http://www.bazelon.org/Where-We-Stand/Community-Integration/Campus-Mental-Health.aspx>). This policy breaks down what the ideal campus mental health environment should look like over several categories. As “guiding principles,” it states that all institutions should promise to counter stigma, emphasize suicide prevention, encourage students to seek help with a promise of confidentiality, offer appropriate accommodations, and avoid punitive actions or discrimination. Under the model policy’s “Counseling and Mental Health Services” section, it advises that schools should make services available to all students in a timely manner, meeting students on their own terms, and using peer-based services whenever possible.

Another key area is accommodations. In university settings, the only legal protection for students is the Americans with Disabilities Act, and various schools offer differing levels of accommodation to meet ADA requirements. Bazelon advises students to look for the availability of accommodations like reduced course loads, extra time to complete assignments, the ability to drop courses if needed, and flexibility in rooming options. They also advise that a leave of absence policy that makes leave a last resort, allows input from the student and counseling staff, and reduces barriers to readmission be in place.

Beyond policies that are in place or resources that are available, it's also important that prospective students develop an understanding of the campus culture at each school they are interested in attending. What is the balance between academics and social life like? How much academic pressure is there? What opportunities exist for developing the social relationships that play such a large part in wellness? Does the campus have any mental health organizations, like an [Active Minds](#) chapter? Are there wellness programs, suicide prevention programs, or other organized anti-stigma activities? What kind of peer support services are available, if any?

It's also important to know what counseling or psychological services are available, and on what basis. Is the counseling office on campus readily available? Is there a cost attached to accessing its services? Is there a limit to the number of counseling sessions? How long does it take to get an appointment? What emergency mental health services does it offer? What about the disability service office? Does it help students to get accommodations from individual instructors? Can it help with special housing needs?

Of course, the most important part of the puzzle is the individual student. The more one knows about their needs, the better able they will be to find the right fit. If a student has an individual education plan (IEP) that laid out accommodations in high school, or a wellness plan that they use to stay well on a regular basis, it may be helpful to compare that document with what's available on campus. Do the accommodations or strategies match up with the services and environment on a given campus? If so, it could be the right place to go.



No matter what kind of educational environment works best for an individual student, the important thing is to be proactive! The more a student knows going into a campus community, the better off they will be. By doing research and actively seeking out information about policies, services, and the campus community, students with mental health needs can avoid finding themselves in an academic environment that doesn't work for them, and will be more likely to thrive on campus.

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