

Building Effective Postsecondary Referral Pathways to Community Mental Health Providers

INTRODUCTION

College can be a time of significant personal transition and development for students of all ages. For those younger than 26, this includes major changes in physical, psychological, and social domains.¹ This is also a critical period for mental health, as 62.5% of mental health conditions occur before the age of 25.^{2, 3} Despite the need for transition support, life guidance, and mental health care, there is a gap in access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate mental health care that is tailored to the unique needs of college students. Campus-based counseling centers play a pivotal role in bridging this gap in two ways: 1) by providing direct services to students, and 2) by building referral pathways to trusted community providers who serve the unique needs of this population. This resource provides an overview of considerations, tools, and strategies for building effective referral networks and pathways to community providers.

Overview of Effective Referral Pathways

With the rising number and complexities of mental health concerns, campus counseling centers simply will not have the capacity to meet every need and the scope of their services should not be designed to do so. This is where referrals and community providers play an important role in the mental health ecosystem of care for college students. Having community partners who can offer appropriate, timely, and affordable care to meet needs that fall outside the scope of the counseling center's services is critical, particularly for individuals with moderate to serious needs. It is important for institutions to have referral pathways established so that students with moderate, serious, and complex needs can access care in a timely manner; otherwise, unmet needs can escalate to the crisis level which has implications for the student's

life circumstances and outcomes, including a higher risk that they may drop out of school.

We know that colleges play a pivotal role in improving access to needed services by 1) providing direct mental health services to students (either through on-campus health and/or counseling services), and/or 2) building referral pathways to trusted community providers who can meet the needs of this population. Some campuses may be providing referrals through their counseling centers, while others may be routing students via student health services. Others may be providing information about community mental health providers to students through other areas of the university. No matter where the need for mental health services is identified, there are key factors to consider to ensure students are successfully connected to the right services.

¹ <https://hr.mit.edu/static/worklife/youngadult/brain.html>

² Solmi, M., Radua, J., Olivola, M., Croce, E., Soardo, L., Salazar de Pablo, G., Il Shin, J., Kirkbride, J. B., Jones, P., Kim, J. H., Kim, J. Y., Carvalho, A. F., Seeman, M. V., Correll, C. U., & Fusar-Poli, P. (2022). Age at onset of mental disorders worldwide: Large-scale meta-analysis of 192 epidemiological studies. *Molecular Psychiatry*, 27(1), 281–295. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-021-01161-7>

³ Kessler, R. C., Amminger, G. P., Aguilar-Gaxiola, S., Alonso, J., Lee, S., & Ustun, T. B. (2007). Age of onset of mental disorders: A review of recent literature. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, 20(4), 359–364. <https://doi.org/10.1097/YCO.0b013e32816ebc8c>

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Considerations for Making Referrals

The following provides a brief overview of key considerations for making trauma-informed mental health referrals; these are listed in two categories, considerations for the student and provider qualities:

Student Considerations

- Insurance status (e.g., public, private, no insurance)
- Schedule flexibility for working or parenting students
- Provider location convenience and transportation access
- Preference for identity-specific counseling, such as sexual and/or gender identity, faith tradition, ethnic and/or racial identity, etc.

Provider Qualities

- Provider specialization like grief, sexual violence, substance use, eating disorder recovery, LGBTQ+ affirming, and more.
- Sliding scale payment options
- Accepting new patients
- After-hours or flexible scheduling
- Telehealth options
- Provider values, such as antiracism, in accordance with student needs

Other strategies to strengthen referral pathways may include:

- Track local resources and potential partners in a centralized campus inventory so that all on-campus mental health providers can access these resources, refer to the network of providers, and update it with new contacts and relationships.
- Consider hiring for a part-time position (or building responsibility into an existing role) that locates, vets, maintains inventory, coordinates contracts, and builds relationships with local community providers.
- Facilitate “warm handoffs,” or a transfer of care, to community providers on behalf of students with more serious needs. An important part of a warm handoff is to educate the student around how to select the right therapist (e.g., what to look for, questions to ask, and how to schedule a consultation call to determine fit).
- Expand capacity to serve mental health needs by contracting with organizations that offer telehealth options. The Higher Education Mental Health Alliance (HEMHA) has a [comprehensive guide](#) for institutions deciding whether and when to engage in telehealth services for mental health care.

The [School Mental Health Referral Pathways toolkit](#) distributed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides additional guidance around developing referral pathways. Knowing the resources available in your community is an important step in developing these pathways. Another essential ingredient is understanding your counseling center’s scope of practice as well as your clinical team’s strengths and competencies. As a starting point, we encourage you to reflect on and clarify your center’s scope of practice so that on-campus clinicians can accurately determine when a student’s mental health needs are outside the scope of practice and a referral to an outside provider is needed.