

Guiding Frameworks for Postsecondary Mental Health

INTRODUCTION

College campuses understand and address the increasing challenges of their student populations by applying frameworks to organize thoughts, strategies, and services to meet student needs. Since 2001, the World Health Organization has advocated for using a public health framework to understand and address mental health concerns, but a 2023 study from the RAND Corporation highlighted how many colleges are implementing multilevel mental health supports without a clear guiding framework organizing these efforts.¹ This brief introduces several guiding frameworks, including a **tiered public health framework**, that can be used to understand and address mental health needs within postsecondary settings. The public health framework can assist postsecondary leaders in developing a holistic, well-coordinated campus and community mental health system for their students.

Existing Frameworks for Postsecondary Mental Health

The Socioecological Model, which emphasizes individual-level and population-level factors that influence health outcomes, is commonly applied to understand health and wellbeing needs in postsecondary settings. This framework supports a broad understanding of the various factors that influence health and wellbeing for college students, including the social determinants of health such as access to food, housing, healthcare, and more.

Another framework that has been used to enhance postsecondary mental health approaches is the Equity in Mental Health Framework (co-created by The Steve Fund and The Jed Foundation). Importantly, this framework emphasizes prioritizing the mental health of students of color by providing actionable recommendations institutions can follow to better support their students of color. Similarly, the Guide to Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education (Education Northwest) provides tips and strategies for institutions who want to better serve the large number of students who have experienced trauma. To adequately serve the mental health needs of all students, an understanding of both equity and trauma is essential and should be infused into every effort to improve mental health on campus.

A Public Health Framework for Postsecondary Education

Using a tiered public health framework to address mental health in postsecondary settings is useful for guiding a comprehensive, campus-wide approach; it combines campus-level population supports with individual-level responsiveness. This tiered approach allows leaders to develop: 1) a campus-wide culture around mental health promotion and prevention (**Universal Supports**); 2) skills and specialties to treat and/or support some students with mild-to-moderate needs (**Targeted Supports**); 3) individualized supports provided to students with more serious or specialized needs that can be offered by a campus or via partnerships with community-based providers (**Individualized Supports**). Figure 1 outlines a tiered public health framework, including examples of interventions, which includes:

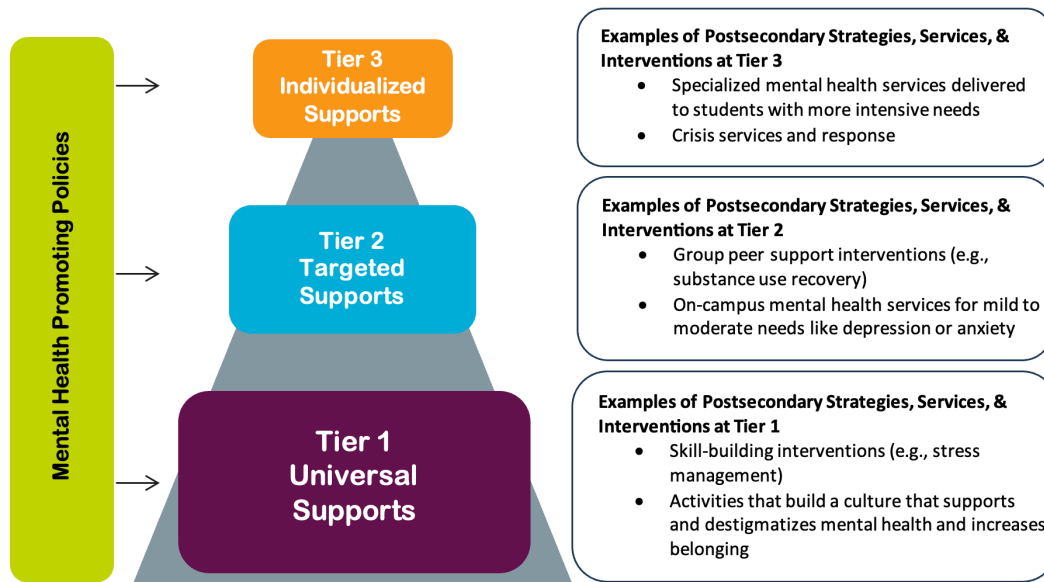
- **Tier 1**, or universal, supports that offer mental health and wellbeing strategies for the entire campus population to support student success. Among other positive impacts, these types of supports help with increasing a student's sense of belonging on campus, which growing evidence suggests can have mental health and academic benefits.²

¹ Sontag-Padilla, L. et al. (2023) *Supporting the mental health needs of Community College students*, RAND Corporation. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2552-1.html (Accessed: 27 July 2023).

² Abelson, S., Lipson, S. K., & Eisenberg, D. (2023). *What works for improving mental health in higher education?* American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/What-Works-Mental-Health.pdf>

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Figure 1. A public health framework for postsecondary mental health



• **Tier 2**, or targeted, supports that are provided to a subset of the campus population with mild-to-moderate mental health needs. These services can be delivered in group settings.

• **Tier 3**, or individualized, supports that are provided to a subset of the campus population with complex mental health needs and are often delivered by a community partner.

Importantly, an equity and trauma-informed lens should be applied at each tier. All interventions should be trauma-informed to best meet student needs and campuses should avoid re-traumatization through policies and practices. In addition, to be truly comprehensive, administrators must take care to recognize and address the unique needs of marginalized groups. This includes recognizing the potential for compounded trauma (i.e., experiencing more than one traumatic event) or acknowledging

the impact of traumatic or chronic stress resulting from repeated experiences of racism or other forms of discrimination over time. It is critical to collect, disaggregate, and analyze campus-wide data around mental health services and interventions to uncover trends that may be more prevalent among various communities on campus, allowing administrators to assess gaps and opportunities to improve.

Your institution may already use a framework to reflect on and inform your strategy around supporting the mental health needs of your students from promotion to treatment. We encourage you to explore your institution's mental health ecosystem through a public health framework lens, mapping out your supports at each tier and using data to uncover where there may be gaps and opportunities to better serve your students and help them succeed through their educational journey.