

Making the Case for Investments in Postsecondary Mental Health

INTRODUCTION

Postsecondary mental health leaders play a critical role in conveying the importance of investing in campus mental health resources. To be successful, their communication must appeal to multiple stakeholders with varying concerns, interest, and investment in the importance of mental health programming. This requires an understanding of various stakeholders' needs and constraints and developing a communication strategy that effectively addresses how mental health programming will meet those needs. This resource provides an introduction to crafting messaging that will effectively reach your target audience, whether they be students, institutional leaders, funders, faculty, and more.

Messaging the Link Between Mental Health and Student Success to Stakeholders

Since the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, there has been a renewed focus on postsecondary mental health. Research emerging from the field validates a truth that mental health professionals and postsecondary leaders deeply understand: mental health is a basic need that is critical to student persistence and academic success.

Students with untreated depression are twice as likely to drop out of postsecondary education than their peers, and they report lower academic achievement on average.¹ Students who leave higher education are 19.6% less.² Further, as society grapples with persistent workforce shortages and skills gaps, this attrition leads to billions of dollars in economic losses to higher education institutions, communities, and society at large. Dropouts stemming from mental health concerns can be avoided by investing in postsecondary mental health. Mental health concerns can be prevented, not just treated, in higher education settings. As the nation continues grappling with persistent workforce

shortages and skill gaps, it is critical that communities invest in postsecondary mental health as a retention, academic achievement, and overall workforce strategy.

A growing body of evidence supports these truths, while delineating the links between mental health and a students' likelihood of entering and persisting through higher education to a postsecondary degree. Key points from this emerging research include:

- A large analysis of nearly 200 studies globally found that, by age 25, mental health disorders have emerged in 62.5% of individuals.³
- In 2022, emotional stress and personal mental health reasons were the top cited reasons why students considered stopping their coursework. This held true for both Bachelor's degree and Associate degree students.⁴
- Studies show that the dropout rates for students with a diagnosed mental health problem can range from 43 percent to as high as 86 percent.⁵

¹ *Students with depression twice as likely to drop out of college* (2009) *University of Michigan News*. Available at: <https://news.umich.edu/students-with-depression-twice-as-likely-to-drop-out-of-college/> (Accessed: 27 July 2023).

² *Hanson, M. (2022) College dropout rate [2023]: By year + demographics, Education Data Initiative*. Available at: <https://educationdata.org/college-dropout-rates> (Accessed: 27 July 2023).

³ *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> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41380-021-01161-7>*

⁴ *Inc, G. (n.d.). Gallup-Lumina State of Higher Education*. Gallup.Com. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/468986/state-of-higher-education.aspx>

⁵ *Leshner, A. I., & Scherer, L. A. (Eds.). (2021). Mental Health, Substance Use, and Wellbeing in Higher Education: Supporting the Whole Student*. National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26015>

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The Power of Targeted Messaging

Securing stakeholder buy-in requires curating messages to meet the needs, interests, and concerns of the target audience. A single message can be packaged and delivered in countless ways to maximize its impact on the audience. The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes the importance of messaging with relevance and outlines the following strategies for effectively communicating with diverse stakeholders:⁶

- **Know your audience:** Identify your target audience and endeavor to understand how they prefer to receive messaging, who they trust, and what communication channels they rely on.
- **Listen to your audience:** Engage partners, public opinion, publications, and enquiries from your target audience to gauge their level of interest in the issue, their current position, concerns, and competing information they may have received—all of which may add to or detract from their support for the issue.
- **Tailor your message:** Craft messages for the specific audience member—whether it be a student, policy maker, or institutional leader—and address barriers that they may face when trying to take the action being recommended.
- **Motivate the audience:** Effective messages motivate the audience by showing the positive effect a call to action can have on their interests, whether that be improving the health of a loved one or saving funds for their organization.

Relevant Messaging in Action: An Example

One messaging opportunity that many postsecondary leaders engage in is pursuing philanthropic funding for student success projects. Below, we put the WHO relevance

strategies into action within the context of one of these asks: a counseling center drafting a grant application for funding to launch new peer-to-peer programming centered on mental health.

- **Know your audience:** Research the funders' mission, vision, and goals. In this example, the funder has a significant focus on equity and the academic success of men of color.
- **Listen to your audience:** Knowing that the funder places an emphasis on the academic success of men of color, research how to tie your ask to this goal. Many of the articles readily found online state that people of color are less likely to have access to mental health care, are less likely to receive needed treatment, and may delay care or not seek it at all. Reasons for not seeking care include cultural norms that discourage seeking mental health supports and mistrust of the healthcare system due to historical and structural discrimination.⁷
- **Tailor your message:** Given what you know about the link between mental health and postsecondary persistence, and the obstacles to receiving care faced by men of color, you can tie these two together in your grant application. Additionally, as an institution hoping to implement peer-to-peer programming, you know the positive impact it can have on reducing stigmatization and increasing empowerment.⁸ This is your opportunity to tie all those things together and draft a grant application that speaks directly to the funder's mission!
- **Motivate the audience:** Now that you have set the groundwork, you can close out this messaging effort by emphasizing the positive impact this investment will make not only on the target audience but all students that will be served by this programming.

⁶ *Relevant*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://www.who.int/about/communications/relevant>

⁷ *Stakeholders Reflect On Issues Highlighted During BIPOC Mental Health Month (2022)*. Retrieved June 09, 2023, from <https://www.diverseeducation.com/health/article/15294198/bipoc-mental-health-month-highlights-an-increasingly-prominent-issue>

⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9294224/>