

Navigating the Mental Health Personnel Shortage in Postsecondary Student Services

INTRODUCTION

In early 2023, 98% of Texas' 254 counties were designated as mental health professional shortage areas by the federal government, defined as more than 30,000 residents per clinician.¹ With more than 60% of practicing psychiatrists over the age of 55, an aging workforce and retirement drain were already depleting the workforce before the pandemic. COVID-19 exacerbated existing issues by spiking both public demand for mental health services and provider burnout.² This statewide personnel shortage combined with the increased demand for mental health services poses challenges to community efforts to address mental health broadly, creating pain points that uniquely affect higher education institutions' ability to provide mental health services and supports to students, hire clinical staff, and connect students with resources in their communities. Many institutions are navigating this shortage of clinical providers by investing in universal and targeted supports in addition to utilizing other strategies,³ some of which are outlined in this brief.

Overview of Efforts to Navigate Mental Health Personnel Shortages

Postsecondary institutions are navigating the shortage by building effective systems that do not hinge solely on the availability of licensed clinical providers and that provide ample services and supports beyond clinical care. This brief touches on many of these strategies, including revisiting hiring initiatives, leveraging unlicensed staff to provide mental health supports that do not require licensing, peer support and student engagement opportunities, and maximizing the contributions of licensed clinical providers by reviewing their current responsibilities.

It is important to note that many of the solutions outlined in this brief are, at their core, short-term solutions for a larger systemic issue. This overview is restricted in scope to what counseling and student services staff can do now to continue providing as many high quality and accessible services as possible amid a persistent personnel shortage. Policy makers, licensing boards, and higher education leadership teams must continue to explore systemic changes that tackle the core issue, such as funding and

financial incentives, or institution-wide approaches, such as integrating behavioral health care screening, diagnoses, and management into student health and medical services at institutions where these services are available.

Student Services Strategies for Navigating Mental Health Personnel Shortages

Strategies that postsecondary student services and counseling center leaders are using to provide mental health services and supports to students during the personnel shortage are outlined below.

1. Revisit Hiring Strategies, Compensation, and Benefit Packages

First and foremost, institutions should revisit compensation and benefit packages, with the aim of making them as competitive as possible. Compensation packages are inclusive of salary, paid time off, benefits, and more.

Secondly, institutions should consider the scope of work when hiring a counselor or clinical mental health provider. Direct service work can often lead to burnout. To recruit and retain qualified candidates, it is important to work

¹ Simpson, S. (2023, February 22). Texas' shortage of mental health care professionals is getting worse. Texas Tribune. Retrieved April 21, 2023, from <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/02/21/texas-mental-health-workforce-shortage/>

² Weiner, S. (2022, August 9). A growing psychiatrist shortage and an enormous demand for mental health services. Association of American Colleges. Retrieved April 13, 2023, from <https://www.aamc.org/news/growing-psychiatrist-shortage-enormous-demand-mental-health-services>

³ Abelson, S., Ketchen Lipson, S., & Eisenberg, D. (2023). What works for improving mental health in higher education? American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/Events/Pages/Improving-Mental-Health.aspx>

Navigating the Mental Health Personnel Shortage in Postsecondary Student Services

with clinicians to balance caseloads with other tasks and activities of interest to them. For some clinicians, this might mean ensuring their caseload is not composed entirely of students with high needs, but who represent a mix of needs. For others, it might mean holding a smaller caseload, but acting in leadership roles on campuswide initiatives with a mental health focus. Institutions must understand the emotional weight that clinical staff carry as a result of direct service work and build positions that offer flexibility to prevent provider burnout. At the same time, institutions should revisit clinicians' responsibilities and identify tasks that do not contribute to balance or leverage their clinical expertise, such as course advising or coordinating with health insurance, and explore opportunities to support these tasks with our institutional resources, such as unlicensed staff.

2. Leverage Unlicensed Staff

Building on the last point, it can be helpful to determine whether licensed staff time is being used on tasks that could be supported by unlicensed staff with proper training. Referrals to outside partners, administering assessments, managing scheduling, working with insurance and payers (if billing for services), and facilitating small groups are examples of services that can be supported by unlicensed staff with proper training and oversight.

Colleges are also leveraging unlicensed staff by serving as practicum and internship supervisors, expanding their students' access to services while helping to train future clinical providers. This has the added benefit of building the institution's relationships with early-career mental health providers who may choose a career in campus counseling.

3. Maximize Peer Programming and Student Engagement

Peers can play a role in promoting mental health, educating students about mental health and mental health resources, and preventing and reducing distress, thereby reducing the number of students needing clinical services. Research indicates that students are often already playing all of these roles in their interpersonal relationships, as students are often the first line of responders for their peers with mental health concerns.⁴ There are many strategies for engaging students in peer-to-peer mental health programming and giving them active roles in efforts to shape the culture around campuswide mental health. Consider systematically training student leaders on what mental health resources are available, and engaging student groups in opportunities to build and promote postsecondary mental health programming. Learn more about the different types of peer programming and how institutions are leveraging peers in this [report from the Mary Christie Institute](#).⁵

SUMMARY

The behavioral health workforce shortage will likely persist. This brief highlighted a few strategies that student services at higher education institutions can utilize to continue providing mental health supports to students. Another key strategy that institutions can use to navigate the personnel shortage is leveraging community partnerships to support student mental health and basic needs. Community partnerships are invaluable components of successful postsecondary mental health systems but, like all relationships, pose unique challenges and opportunities. The next brief in this series provides an overview of community partnerships as a strategy for supporting postsecondary mental health and provides tips on how to form successful partnerships.

⁴ Morales, G., White, J. M., German, L., Dozal, M., Bentley, J., & Weiss, D. (2021). Designing binge-drinking prevention campaigns that target Hispanic/Latino college students: Importance of individual attitudes and real-time peer support. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 7, 12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1929681>

⁵ Humphrey, D., Malpiede, M., & Ragouzeos, Z. (2022). Peer Programs in College Student Mental Health. The Mary Christie Institute. <https://marychristieinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Peer-Support-Presentation.pdf>