

Navigating the mental health crisis on campus

A tangled web: Causes of the mental health crisis on campus

The incidence of mental health conditions is at an all-time high, particularly among teens and young adults. Since 2007, rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide have increased dramatically among 15–24-year-olds, and those who hold marginalized identities have seen disproportionately higher increases. Suicide is now the [second leading cause of death](#) in this age group after unintentional injury.

“Adolescent mental health is ‘the defining public health crisis of our time.’”

— Dr. Vivek Murthy, United States Surgeon General

The causes of the campus mental health crisis are complex and not fully understood. Experts point to factors such as the proliferation of social media use, mass gun violence, climate change, social injustice, and more as contributing factors. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic is considered an accelerator — not an initiator — of this phenomenon, given that the rates of mental health conditions have been increasing for nearly two decades.

IN BRIEF

- The mental health crisis among college students has been building for the past 15 years, with rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide rising dramatically.
- Recognizing that wellness is a prerequisite for learning and success, colleges and universities are looking for ways to support students’ mental health. Also, this situation has become a flashpoint for reputational and legal risk.
- Addressing student mental health requires a deep understanding of the institution’s unique context, including its people, traditions, and resources.

The effect of this young adult mental health crisis on college and university campuses has been significant. Like other young adults, college students have experienced explosive growth in the severity and prevalence of mental health-related illnesses, which puts them at risk of achieving their goal of a college degree. One sign of the times: many prospective students and their families evaluate a school’s ability to provide mental healthcare in their college selection process.

Managing risk

Student mental health has become a flashpoint for reputational and legal risk. In November 2022, a highly publicized suit filed against Yale University by its students for its mental health leave of absence policy resulted in what Yale described as “sweeping changes” to its mental health practices.

Higher education leaders have taken notice. For example, in a [recent American Council on Education survey](#) of college presidents, 73% of respondents cited student mental health as one of their most pressing concerns.

Recognizing that wellness is a prerequisite for learning and success, institutions are looking to address the campus mental health crisis. This endeavor is complicated by:

- A long-standing and worsening national shortage of mental health providers
- A proliferation of emerging technology and tele-mental health platforms and tools with as-yet unproven efficacy
- The lack of a cohesive institutional approach to support student mental health and well-being

Skyrocketing demand for mental health services

36% Of college students [engaged in mental health therapy or counseling](#) in 2022 - 2023.

60%+ Of college students met the criteria for one or more mental health problems in 2020 - 2021, [a nearly 50% increase since 2013](#).

The student mental health crisis is a multifactorial, societal problem. Addressing it requires a [cohesive systems approach](#) that incorporates a deep understanding of the institution’s unique circumstances and knowledge of its opportunities and risks related to well-being.

To discuss the factors unique to your institution’s campus health and well-being strategy and begin creating a new path forward, [contact our team](#).



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