Supporting Student Mental Health on the College Campus

Supporting Student Mental Health on the College Campus

College is an exciting time for students. It's also a time of great transition which, for some, can lead to stress, anxiety, or depression. The college years are a time when many students experience their first signs of mental health problems. One in five adults live with a mental health condition, and three quarters develop it by age 24, according to the _National Alliance on Mental Illness_.

According to the _Healthy Minds Network_, which conducts a mental health survey at hundreds of colleges and universities each year, rates of depression and anxiety have doubled in the past decade, suicide ideation rates are rising, and demand for mental health services is overwhelming the system.

Mental health issues can negatively impact students' academic success and cause them to drop out. Therefore, it's important that students have resources available to them and that staff and faculty are prepared to recognize if students' mental wellbeing is suffering and understand how to help them.

In a Vector Solutions webinar, "_Understanding and Addressing Mental Health in College Student Populations_" Dr. Sarah Ketchen Lipson, Principal Investigator of the Healthy Minds Network, discussed the state of college students' mental health, and what colleges and universities can do to help both students and faculty address this critical issue.

Mental Health Statistics

· ·

Survey results from the National Institute of Mental Health illustrate the increasing problem of student mental health on college campuses:

Indicators of mental health	Percent change between 2013 and 2023
Flourishing	-33%
Depression	+135%
Anxiety	+110%
Suicidal Ideation	+64%

The State of Student Mental Health

The Healthy Minds Study revealed the following troubling statistics:

The percentage of students who are considered to be "flourishing" (a term used to describe a state of positive mental health) decreased significantly over the last decade – **falling from 57.1% in 2021 to 36% in 2023.**

The percentage of students reporting symptoms of depression **increased from 22% in 2013 to 41% in 2023.**

The percentage of students reporting having symptoms of anxiety more than **doubled from 17% in 2013 to 36% in 2023.**

The percentage of students who reported suicidal ideation also **went up slightly during the past 16 years from 6% in 2007 to 14% in 2023.**

It's important to note that symptoms of mental health concerns were more prevalent among underrepresented students such as transgender and non-binary students. For instance, the survey found that more than 30% of transgender and non-binary students had seriously considered attempting suicide within the past year versus around 10% for cisgender students

Stressors for Students

In addition to being a general time of transition and change, the college years are also marked by specific stressors that the Healthy Minds Study found are significant predictors of mental health struggles.

Financial stress is the biggest predictor.

The survey found 40% of students say they are often or always stressed due to their financial situation – and of those students, 45-60% meet the criteria for more than one mental health condition.

Loneliness is another significant predictor.

Many college students reported feeling left out and isolated from others which can have a negative impact on their mental health. Again, this issue is worse for transgender and non-binary students with 49% saying they don't see themselves as part of the campus community and 40% reporting feeling isolated from campus life.

Strategies to Support Student Mental Health on Campus

Supporting student mental health is a priority for colleges and universities, and for faculty and staff. However, many faculty and staff members say they aren't sure the best way to do this, according to the Mental Health Survey. Here are some strategies discussed in the webinar, as well as some issues to take into consideration, when thinking about ways to support student mental health on campus.

1.

Consider Student Wellbeing When Communicating With Students.

Use outside vendors for particularly hazardous or complex situations such as managing hazardous waste, or for cleanup after a flood. It can also help to partner with vendors for training content.

Whether it's through conversations, emails, letters or phone calls, the way college faculty staff and administrators communicate with students matters.

Consider these tips:

- Talk about stress and anxiety openly and acknowledge if something significant has occurred that will impact students' mental health. For instance, if there has been a shooting on campus, instructors should acknowledge what has happened and show they understand the toll it may be taking on students' mental wellbeing. It will help students feel their stress and anxiety has been acknowledged and may help them productively move back into academic routines.

- Think about the stakes when communicating bad news to students such as a failed exam or a disciplinary issue. Ketchen Lipson noted a court case in which Stanford University was the subject of a wrongful death lawsuit, citing a disciplinary letter sent to a student who later that night committed suicide. "If stakes are high, make that clear in communication to students, but also make it clear that we care about their wellbeing and are here to answer questions," said Ketchen Lipson.

- Review student-facing documents for language that could alienate students. For instance, if a non-binary student is reading materials that constantly use the phrase "he or she" it may increase their feelings of not being connected to their college which can lead to depression and other mental health issues.

2.

Help Students See The Connection Between Mental Health And Learning.

More than 80% of students surveyed by National Healthy Minds reported academic impairment due to mental health concerns. Poor mental health can decrease one's interest in the future, which would reduce one's willingness to make long-term investments like their education. Students typically want to do well academically. Instructors can help by reminding students that prioritizing mental health can improve their academics. Instructors can even include mental health information and resources in a syllabus or their class website. When students see the connection, it can motivate them to take action to support their mental health.

3.

Think About How Courses Are Structured.

Deadlines, grading practices and types of assignments can all have an impact on student mental health.

Consider the following tips:

- **Set deadlines at "healthy times."**
  If an instructor requires courses to be turned in by midnight, students will likely skip meals and work late into the night to get it done. Explain why there is a 5 p.m. deadline instead –because the instructor doesn't want the class to interfere with students' wellbeing. With deadlines at healthy times, students are less likely to skip meals or lose sleep to get an assignment done.

- **Consider if grading practices are harmful.**
  For instance, grading on a curve, or having a single assignment be worth 40% of the grade can cause additional anxiety and stress. Lowering the stakes on assignments in a way that doesn't jeopardize outcomes, and grading on a traditional scale, can help support student wellbeing. Talk to students about required activities that may cause stress, such as

4.

Bring Mental Health Resources Into Students' Daily Routines.

The Healthy Minds Study noted many students who need help aren't getting it. The main barrier is a lack of urgency – for instance, they don't have time or don't think the need is that great. Bringing mental health resources into student's daily routines rather than expecting them to seek them out can help close this "treatment gap." Offer resources in different departments such as residence life and in extra-curricular programs. If students are coming across these resources regularly in their daily lives, they are more likely to take advantage of them.

5. Train Students And Staff Members How To Support Student Mental Health.

- **Staff training.**
  The Healthy Minds Survey notes that although many faculty members say they talk with students about student mental health and would reach out if a student is in distress, only half said they have a good idea how to recognize those symptoms. Many also aren't aware of what their campus offers in terms of mental health training. Offering high-quality training for faculty and staff can help ensure they will understand how to recognize if a student is having symptoms of mental health issues and how to help. When implementing training courses, make sure all departments have access, not just instructors. For instance, this type of training can be especially important for those who work in financial aid offices because finances are such a significant stressor for students.

- **Student training.**
  When colleges and universities make mental wellbeing courses available –or even a requirement – for all students, it can go a long way toward helping students understand how to recognize if they are having symptoms of depression, anxiety or other mental health issues, and what to do about it. Training courses are also a good way to reinforce what resources are available to students.

6. Promote Inclusivity And Connectedness.

Making a campus more inclusive and helping students feel more connected and less lonely will support their mental health.

- **Consider underrepresented groups.**
  BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students and TNB (transgender and non-binary) students have higher rates of mental health issues and are less likely to seek treatment. Putting in place policies focused on equity and inclusion, and that help them feel like they belong, can consequently help support these students from a mental health standpoint.

- **Talk about loneliness.**
  Loneliness is an epidemic. Recognizing this can help students feel okay talking about it and can prompt them to engage in activities to connect with others. For instance, instructors can provide time in class for students to connect with their peers – and explain why they are doing this and how important it is to students' mental health and their academics. "Recognize the issue and set the stage, telling them why we're being intentional about doing this," said Ketchen Lipson. Colleges and universities can put in place programs for first generation college students or other cohorts of students and make sure they know the sole purpose is to help them form connections with each other.

Take a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health

When doing strategic planning and institutional programming, prioritizing mental health as part of overall student success will help create a campus environment where students will "flourish." The strategies discussed above: enacting policies, vetting communications, ensuring all students and staff members participate in training and have access to resources, and creating programs that support inclusiveness and connectedness all intertwine to support success for a common goal – creating a supportive environment where students will thrive.

Resources to Support Student Mental Health on College Campuses

Vector Webinar:
Understanding and Addressing Mental Health in College Student Populations

Vector White Paper:
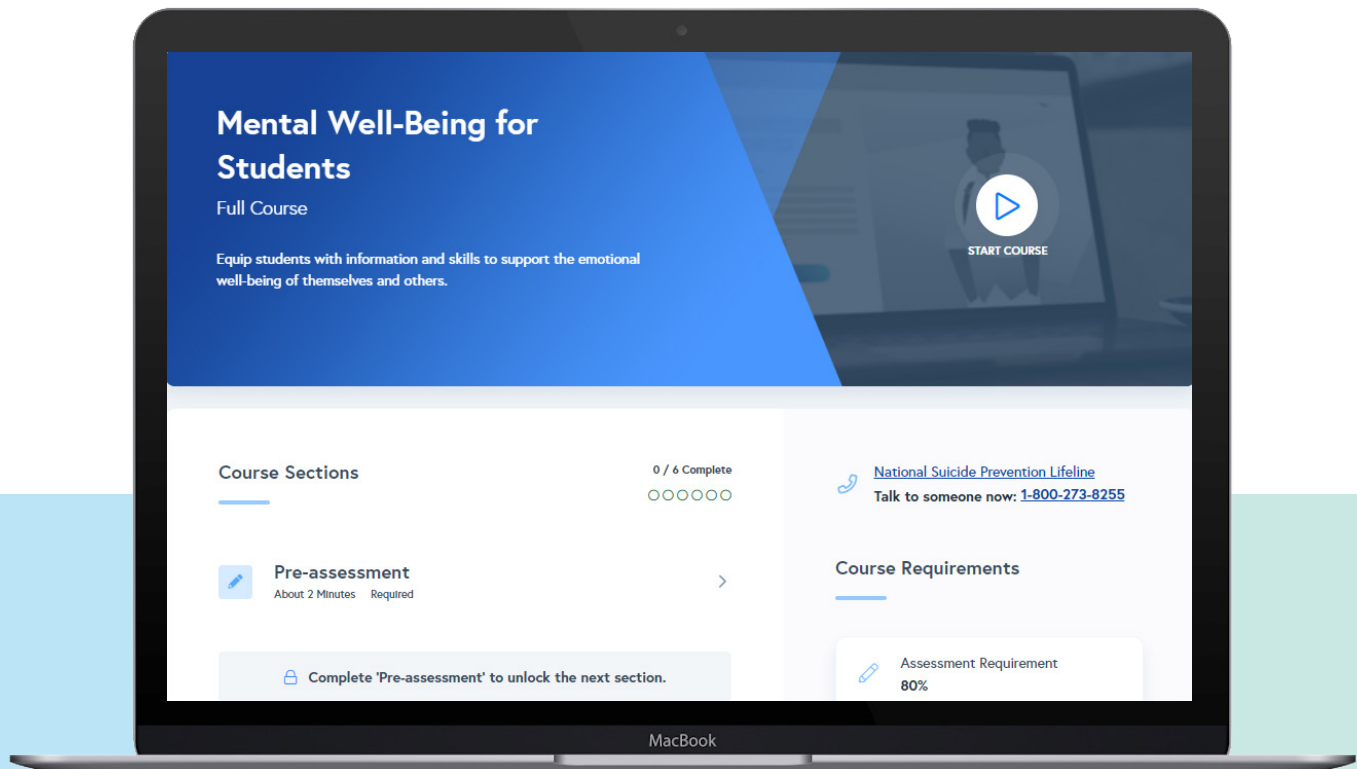*Four Components of a Comprehensive Mental Well-Being Plan for Athletes*

Vector Report:
The State of Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education

National Alliance for Mental Illness (*NAMI*)

How Vector Solutions Can Help

Vector Solutions provides expert-authored training courses for students, faculty and staff to help support student mental health on campus. The online courses are authored by experts in the field and provide a convenient, high-quality, engaging resource to help support student wellbeing on campus.

Vector's Mental Well-Being Courses
equip students, staff and faculty with resources and essential skills needed to support student mental health and wellness.

Courses include:

- Mental Well-Being for Students
- Mental Well-Being for Graduate Students
- Mental Well-Being for Athletes
- Mental Well-Being for Faculty and Staff
- Mental Well-Being for Student Organizations

Vector's Wellness and Safety Library
teaches students the skills needed to navigate the stress and challenges of the college experience safely.

Courses include:

- Mental Well-Being
- Hazing Awareness and Prevention
- Active Shooter
- Cybersecurity

For More Information Visit:

VectorSolutions.com/HE

800-434-0154

VectorSolutions™