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University student counseling and mental health in the United States: Trends and challenges

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Abstract

This article reviews the status of the delivery of counseling and mental health services at colleges and universities in the United States. It provides an overview of historical and current trends of student mental health concerns and of the ways in which campus counseling services have responded to these challenges. Data from several sources are referenced to demonstrate both the increasing numbers of students seeking counseling services and the increasing severity of their concerns. Examples are provided for how these trends have influenced the delivery of counseling services and how they are changing college and university communities.

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Introduction

The mental health needs of university students have become a national focus of attention in the United States during the past decade. A series of highly publicized, tragic incidents at a number of educational institutions, including campus shootings and murders at Virginia Tech University and, more recently, the University of California, Santa Barbara, for example, have brought national attention to the unmet mental health needs of students. Widespread concern has focused on the safety of university campuses throughout the United States and on the

role of university counseling and mental health services in addressing students at risk.

This article provides an overview of historical and current trends in university-based student counseling and mental health services in the United States. It presents the current status of students' mental health as evidenced through reviews of utilization data from university counseling centers and through national surveys of students and university counseling service directors. It also provides specific examples from the University of California, Berkeley's Counseling and Psychological Services to illustrate a number of themes that are common nationwide. Two specific trends are highlighted in particular: increasing numbers of students are seeking out counseling services and the level of severity of their mental health concerns is increasing as well. The impact of these trends has transformed the ways in which counseling services are designed

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and delivered in the United States. Furthermore, these trends have begun to change the landscape of American higher education itself.

The origins and development of campus-based counseling services

College and university counseling services first were established following World War II, in the late 1940s. Military veterans were awarded financial incentives to attend college, and campus counseling services were instituted to assist them with the transition to civilian and college life through vocational counseling and testing. Counseling services soon expanded to serve all registered students for a wide range of counseling concerns but services continued to focus strongly on career counseling and assessment. In the 1960s, personal counseling and psychotherapy gradually became a focus of counseling centers' work and more rigorous training and licensure requirements for staff members followed. Today, the typical staff member of a university counseling service in the United States holds a license to practice, typically as a psychologist, and students' primary presenting concerns are anxiety and depression (Gallagher, 2013). Nationally, a dwindling number of counseling centers continue to offer specialized vocational counseling and assessment; campus career centers typically have become the primary location for that work.

Until the 1970s, the design and delivery of student counseling services evolved informally throughout the country. Best practices were shared among directors but no official standards guided the structuring and evaluation of services. In 1970, a task force of counseling center directors formed under the leadership of Barbara Kirk, the Director of the Counseling Center at the University of California, Berkeley. This group expanded on the earlier work of the Canadian University Counseling Association to form the first set of guidelines that would eventually become the Standards for University and College Counseling Services (Spivack et al., 2010). Today, these standards are the basis for accreditation by the International Association of Counseling Services (IACS).

Three goals formed the motivation for the development of national standards: (1) to establish and encourage high standards for professional performance; (2) to assist counseling services in improving programs; and (3) to build public confidence about the quality of counseling services on college and university campuses. The current standards focus on the following four essential functions of counseling services to insure that counseling services offer a breadth of services to students and to the campus: individual and group student counseling; prevention and outreach; consultation to faculty and staff; and contributions to campus safety. The latter function has received heightened attention in recent years, as counseling centers have been called to direct significant resources toward caring for students with serious psychological concerns and toward providing the campus with consultation regarding the level of threat posed by some students' behaviors.

The IACS Standards detail sets of expectations for a wide range of specific counseling center functions and policies such as the relationship of the counseling center with the campus, counseling center roles and functions, ethical standards, and staffing levels. The full set of guidelines and standards are

designed to insure that counseling services serve as the center of their institutions' effort to maintain the wellbeing of students. The standards have undergone multiple revisions and they continue to evolve to reflect changes to the counseling and mental health needs of students and to changes in professional practice. They broadly reflect both the practical and aspirational principles that underly the professional practice of student mental health in the United States. Most recently, IACS adapted the standards to encourage accreditation of greater numbers of college and university counseling centers outside the United States - with the aim of broadening the scope of IACS and with the goal of expanding the standards to better reflect variability in best practices and perspectives internationally.

Although a large number of counseling centers in the United States have gained accreditation by IACS, an even larger number of centers remain unaccredited but use the standards to structure and benchmark the services they deliver. College and university counseling centers obviously vary according to the type of institution to which they belong (e.g. public, private, religious, large, small etc.) and according to the unique characteristics and demographics of the students they serve. Nevertheless, most centers in the United States typically are structured in ways that match the IACS standards through offering a broad range of services such as timely client intake systems, emergency services, individual and group counseling services (typically time-limited), prevention programming, outreach to underserved student populations and consultation services to the larger campus community.

Recent trends in college student mental health

High profile, national conversations recently have focused on student mental health issues. One excellent summary of these discussions was the report published through the collaborative efforts of several American professional associations, The American Council on Education, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and the American Psychological Association. Collectively they recently published a strategic primer on college student mental health (Douce & Keeling, 2014). This document was written in response to President Obama's national call for a need to better understand mental health issues. The report convincingly documents how mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety and excessive alcohol consumption disrupt students' ability to learn and retain information. The report is especially compelling in its argument that mental and behavioral problems are learning problems that are critical impediments to students' academic success. The work of college and university counseling centers, they stressed, is central to the mission of higher education and is essential to addressing these problems that have reached crises levels.

Two influential studies first documented the emerging, dramatic trends in the mental health concerns of students in the United States. Over ten years ago, Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, and Benton (2003) gathered and analyzed client records (primarily from traditional age undergraduates) throughout a 13 year period. The authors concluded that the majority of student problem areas had increased significantly over time, often doubling or tripling in frequency. For example, they noted dramatic increases in the frequency of major

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