

“Our College Students are Struggling”

Opinion: *The Star-Ledger*, October 1, 2023

By Michael J. Avaltroni, Ph.D., President, Fairleigh Dickinson University

I have spent much of my college experience and career on the campuses of Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU).

I’ve been an undergraduate student, faculty member, administrator and now president of the college. During that time, I have witnessed seismic political, social and economic shifts that have had major effects on college communities throughout the nation. But as this new academic year unfolds, I see a generation of students facing immense challenges that require higher education to evolve to meet their complex emotional and social needs so they can thrive both academically and personally.

While momentum has been growing in some political and educational circles for colleges to focus our resources primarily on professional skill-building, students are crying out for mental health help. According to the most recent data from the [Healthy Minds Study](#), 44% of college and university students struggle with depression, 37% experience anxiety and 15% have considered suicide. These are the highest rates of mental health disorders reported over the 15 years this survey has been conducted.

No matter how stimulating and instructive our college courses may be, students won’t be able to benefit from these educational offerings while experiencing high levels of psychological distress. In fact, nearly one in three students responding to the Healthy Minds survey reported their emotional or mental difficulties hurt their academic performance between three and five days over a month’s time, and the same number were affected for six or more days during that period.

The isolation experienced by students during the height of the pandemic and its impact on their social interactions continues to reverberate. We have also seen the effects COVID-19-induced school closures and disruptions have had on students’ academic readiness. And, while remote learning was a lifeline for delivering education during the pandemic and continues to expand access to higher education for many, in-person interactions and support programs provide essential engagement and connections that are vital for good mental health.

These factors, as well as students’ deeply felt concerns about climate change, gun violence and social justice issues, to name a few, place enormous stressors on undergraduates, further exacerbating the mental health crisis colleges were facing prior to the pandemic.

To succeed, students need so much more from colleges than an excellent academic education. We must adapt by rethinking our traditional role as educators and work toward creating campuses that are a holistic ecosystem of well-being, providing the resources, support, and caring environment that enables our students to develop into healthy and independent adults.

Our nation needs this future workforce and citizenry to emerge from their years of schooling with the intellectual and emotional strength, curiosity and resilience necessary for successful and fulfilling lives and careers.

More than ever, students crave meaningful connections and a community of belonging. Schools must respond by creating a culture of caring within our campuses. Our responsibility is to not only proffer knowledge, but also to embrace our roles as navigators, parental figures, coaches and mentors who truly engage with students on a personal level. That also means preventing students with mental health needs from slipping through the cracks.

Faced with a scarcity of mental health professionals and an increased demand for care, colleges are finding alternate avenues for equipping employees with training and tools to support students in distress. As part of that effort, more than 300 FDU faculty and staff have received training and certifications in [Mental Health First Aid](#), a program providing basic skills to help support those with mental health and substance use disorders.

While not a replacement for mental health counseling, this training can serve as a first line of defense for those in critical situations. Further training will take place this fall to increase those numbers. In addition, more than 100 faculty, staff and students received empathy training to help them understand others and themselves.

Another way we're creating connection and support for students is through our new Transforming College Campuses (TCC) program that embeds graduate students from our School of Psychology and Counseling in a mandatory freshman course, "A Transition to University Life," and pairs them with students enrolled in that class for a two-year period.

In addition to supporting undergraduate mental health needs and facilitating a smooth transition to college life, the program aims to foster opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to pursue careers in mental health-related fields, professionals who are desperately needed to treat the nation's mental health epidemic. The TCC program also provides physical spaces on our campuses where students can go to get support or find resources.

While students of all ethnic and racial backgrounds suffer from mental health disorders, utilization of treatment resources is [lower among students of color](#) making it crucial for schools to expand outreach and overcome existing barriers for those populations.

Colleges can no longer just be institutes of higher learning. While we can't protect students from the factors impacting their mental health prior to their arrival on our campus, we can and must transform our schools into supportive and nurturing communities that help set students on a positive path for the rest of their lives.