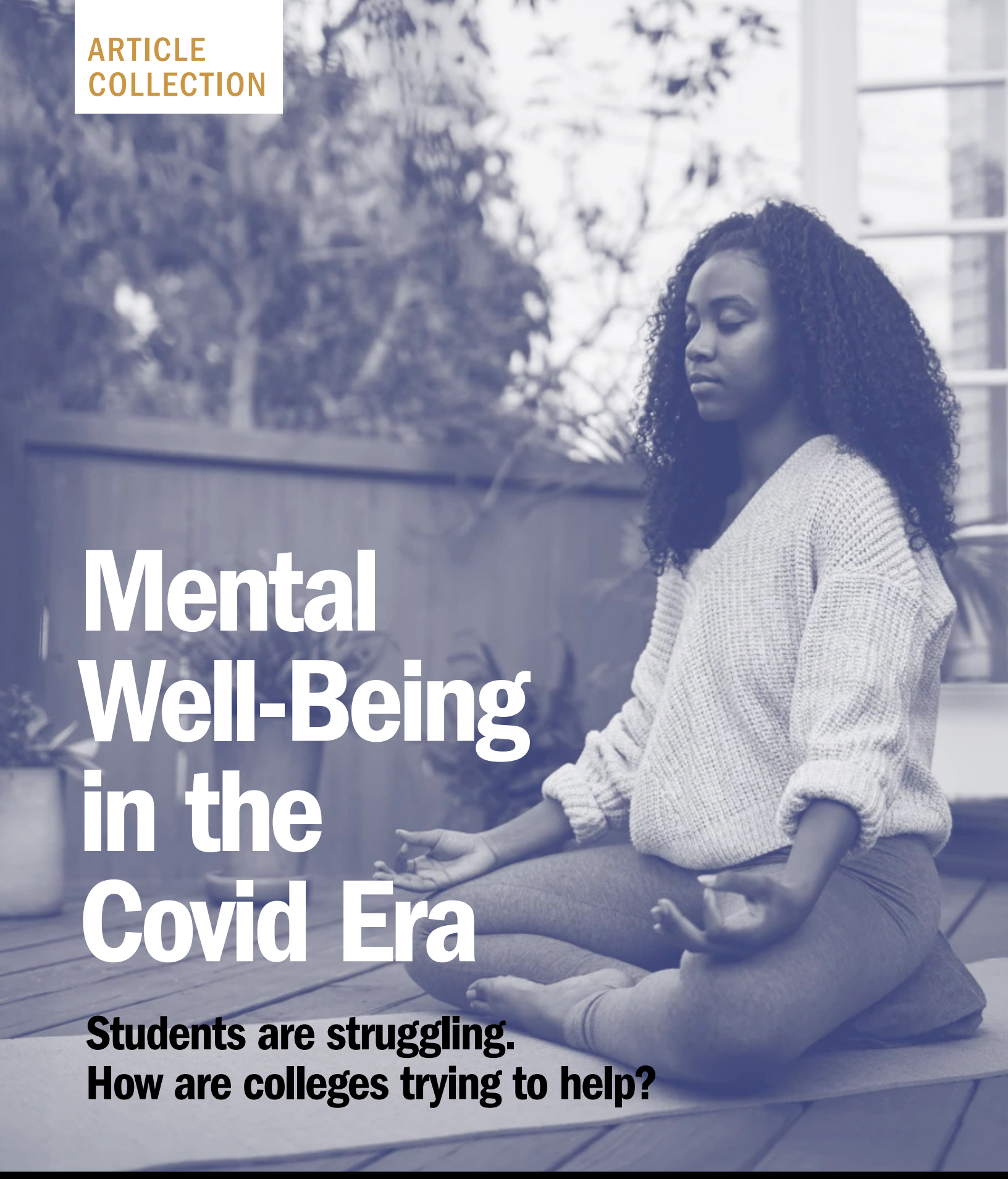
ARTICLE COLLECTION



Mental Well-Being in the Covid Era

Students are struggling. How are colleges trying to help?

With Support From togetherall

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Togetherall proudly partners with the Chronicle of Higher Education to bring this special content report to colleges and universities as an ongoing resource to develop effective solutions for student mental health concerns during—and beyond—the era of COVID-19. We also applaud the commitment, resources, innovative thinking and tireless efforts that higher-education professionals have invested, and continue to invest, in order to support the mental wellness of their students to nurture a thriving campus community.

Togetherall is an online peer-to-peer mental health community monitored by mental health practitioners that empowers individuals to safely, anonymously seek and provide support 24/7. At the start of 2021, students from nearly 200 colleges and universities used the Togetherall platform. During the pandemic, Togetherall's user base of college students has seen nearly a quarter-million logins and more than 100,000 conversations.

I would like to acknowledge the mental health leaders at these institutions for taking a proactive step to address the escalating need for mental health support during this crisis by incorporating Togetherall as a resource for their students.

Togetherall has always believed the first rule of success in the student mental health arena is community. This is ingrained in our culture and evident in our continual assessment of students' user experience, level of engagement, changing mental health concerns and expressed need for support. Creating a community demonstrates our commitment to working in full partnership with institutions to integrate the Togetherall platform as a component of a comprehensive, campus-specific mental health program.

The power of community is also driving the success of colleges and universities nationwide who support students academically, physically and emotionally during the extraordinary challenges of COVID-19. We are honored to contribute to the sharing of experiences and best practices contained on the following pages, and we very much see these stories as a continuation of the collaboration that will enable higher-education institutions to achieve thriving campus communities for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Matthew McEvoy
SVP and General Manager, North America
Togetherall

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

Mental Well-Being in the Covid Era

Students are struggling. How are colleges trying to help?

In recent years, the dramatic rise in students' mental-health problems has been a pressing concern on college campuses, and the nation's frightening, intertwined crises — the pandemic, reckoning over racism, and political strife — have only increased students' distress and deepened educators' worries.

Active Minds, a nonprofit organization that advocates for mental-health education and awareness for young adults, reported this summer that 89 percent of college students are experiencing stress or anxiety as a result of Covid-19. One in four reported an increase in depression. Seventy-eight percent felt lonely or isolated. Fifty-six percent report that their level of daily physical activity has decreased or dramatically decreased. And a survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the summer of 2020 found that 25 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds had considered suicide within the previous 30 days.

Uncertainty, upheaval, and strife have continued to dominate the news. In this fraught, stressful time, college leaders have been striving to develop creative approaches to promote campus well-being and deal with students' troubles — a task made even more difficult by the isolation, physical distancing, and financial strains imposed by Covid-19.

This *Chronicle* collection includes articles and advice pieces that examine the state of mental health among college students, new approaches to college counseling and psychological services, online mental-health resources, and innovative strategies that colleges are taking to ensure the well-being of their students.

Cover image: *Chronicle* Illustration, Getty Images

For questions or comments about the collection, email ci@chronicle.com

College Students Have Been Stressed Out During the Pandemic. Here's How It's Affected Their Mental Health.

By AUDREY WILLIAMS JUNE

ALAMY

Being a college student often comes with a set of struggles, like homesickness, poor time-management skills, and impostor syndrome. Add a global pandemic to the mix, which has disrupted students' education, wiped out their finances, and upended their social-support systems, and the stage is set for them to experience a wide range of psychological repercussions.

New research from the Healthy Minds Network and the American College Health Association shows that depression is one of those repercussions, with the rate of depression among students rising since the start of the pandemic. The survey of more than 18,000 college students on 14 campuses, conducted between late March and May, also provides a look at some of the factors contributing to the coronavirus-related stress college students are dealing with.

One of the lead researchers of the annual national Healthy Minds study said the survey's findings can be of use to colleges as they prepare to welcome students back to campus — in one form or another — this fall.

"There is a strong economic case for investing in programs and services to support student mental health," Sarah Ketchen Lipson, an assistant professor of health law, policy, and management at Boston University, said in a news release about the survey. "Our prior research has shown that mental-health problems such as depression are associated with a twofold increase in the likelihood of dropping out of college."

The survey showed that administrators and professors received high marks for the support they provided during the pandemic. College administrators were deemed supportive or very supportive by 69 percent of students, with 78 percent saying the same about their professors.

The effects of Covid-19 are likely to make an impact on the mental health of many students for some time. Here's a look at students' concerns and stressors.

Audrey Williams June is the news-data manager at The Chronicle. *She explores and analyzes data sets, databases, and records to uncover higher-education trends, insights, and stories.*

Originally published July 13, 2020

CONCERNS ABOUT THE FUTURE

Students identified the following worries in response to this question: **Over the past two weeks, on average, how much have you been concerned with the following?**

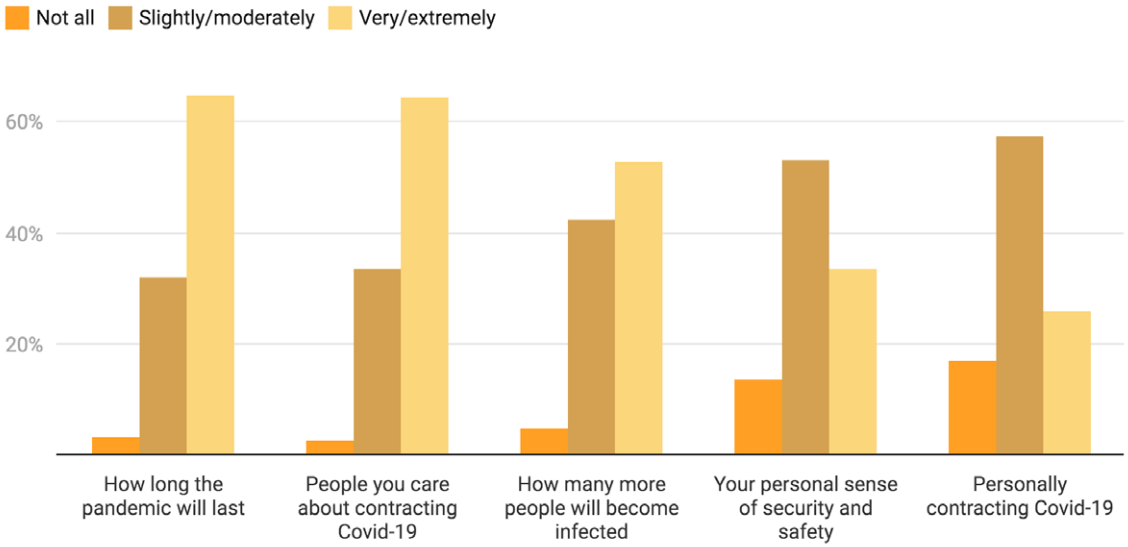


Chart: Audrey Williams June
Source: The Healthy Minds Network/American College Health Association:, "The Impact of Covid-19 on Student Well-Being" Created with **Datawrapper.**

FINANCIAL FALLOUT

Two-thirds of students said their financial situation had become more stressful because of the pandemic.

Chart: Audrey Williams June
Source: The Healthy Minds Network/American College Health Association:, "The Impact of Covid-19 on Student Well-Being"
Created with Datawrapper.

HARD TO GET HELP

Most of the students who sought mental-health services said the pandemic made it difficult for them to do so.
How has your access to mental-health care been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?

Note: Over all, 58.2 percent of students indicated that they have not tried to access mental-health care. Data represents the 41.8 percent of students who did attempt to seek care.

Chart: Audrey Williams June
Source: The Healthy Minds Network/American College Health Association:, "The Impact of Covid-19 on Student Well-Being"
Created with Datawrapper.

MENTAL HEALTH BEFORE AND AFTER

The share of students with depression was up this spring, along with the percentage of students whose mental health affected their academic performance.

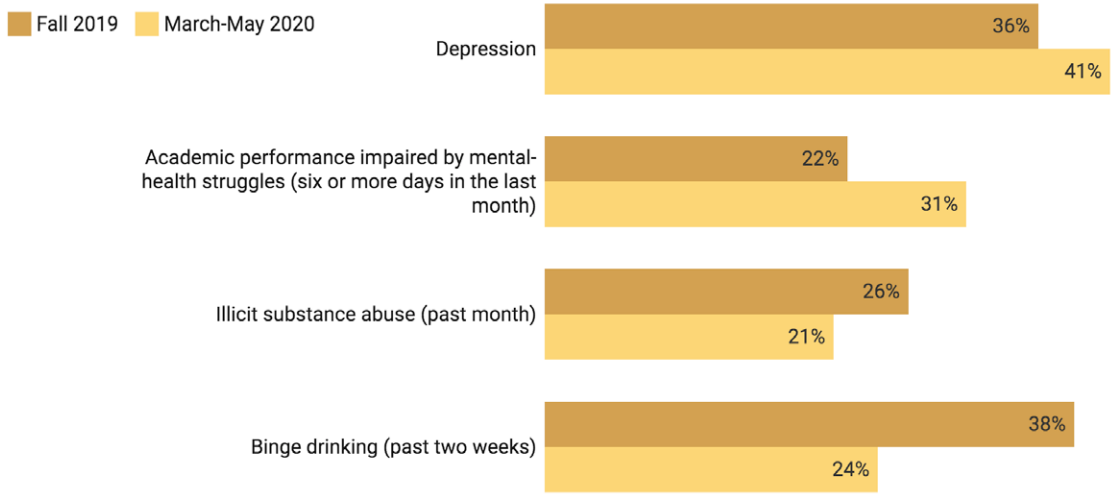


Chart: Audrey Williams June
Source: The Healthy Minds Network/American College Health Association:, "The Impact of Covid-19 on Student Well-Being" Created with Datawrapper.

STRONG SUPPORT

Students overwhelmingly reported that their college's administration and their professors were supportive as the pandemic unfolded.

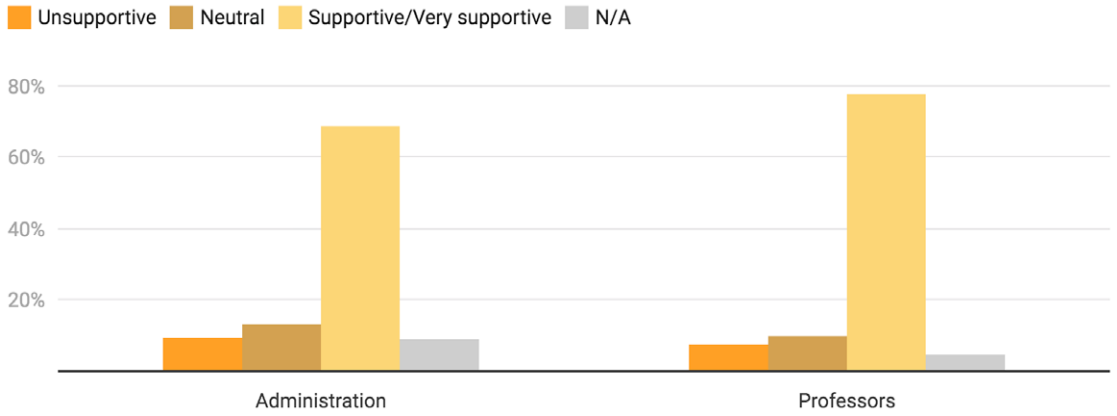


Chart: Audrey Williams June
Source: The Healthy Minds Network/American College Health Association:, "The Impact of Covid-19 on Student Well-Being" Created with Datawrapper.

Shock, Fear, and Fatalism: As Coronavirus Prompts Colleges to Close, Students Grapple With Uncertainty

By ALEXANDER C. KAFKA

JASON ANDREW FOR *THE CHRONICLE*

Alana Hendy, a junior at Georgetown U., is now at her family's home, in Bowie, Md. Speaking of her classmates, she says, "a lot of people are anxious because not everyone can afford a flight home or a flight to campus to pick up their stuff."

Effectively booted off campus in an effort to contain coronavirus contagion, hundreds of thousands of college students are reacting with shock, uncertainty, sadness, and, in some cases, devil-may-care fatalism. Even as they hurriedly arrange logistical details, the stress of an uncertain future is taking a toll.

"A lot of people are anxious because not everyone can afford a flight home or a flight to campus to pick up their stuff," says Alana Hendy, a Georgetown University junior studying international relations. She is among the rapidly growing number of students nationwide who were urged not to return to campus after spring break as courses shift online.

Hendy too is anxious, she says, but she is more confused as she sorts through uncertainties concerning her living and academic arrangements. A low-income student from Bowie, Md., she says it would be better if she stayed on campus because her father suffers from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and diabetes, and is particularly vulnerable to Covid-19, the illness caused by the new coronavirus. She filed a form asking to be allowed to remain in her dorm but may not get an answer until next week.

Among the questions on her mind: What will happen to her work-study job, in the dean's office at the School of Foreign Service? How will her responsibilities as a teaching assistant in a geography class change with the new online format?

But counterbalancing the uncertainties, she says, is support offered by the university. It is helping defray low-income students' costs for shipping medication, books, and other necessities, for example. And the campus's food pantry is open and stocked twice a week, which, she says, "we're grateful for."

So she'll cope with the situation, week by week. And after law school or a doctorate in history, when she's a professor, she imagines she'll look back at the Covid-19 pandemic as a case study.

For Rachel P. Angle, a Georgetown senior from Middletown, Conn., studying government and living off campus, the academic disruption should not be too drastic. But, she says, "It's my senior spring. There were so many things I was planning on doing, and now that's sort of thrown into flux." Her grandparents had planned to go to D.C. for her graduation.

Angle knows, however, that "there are a whole lot of people suffering a lot more from this. I have a safe home to go to, parents who are happy to take me in. It's mostly just the stress of uncertainty."

Even as students hurriedly arrange logistical details, the stress of an uncertain future is taking a toll.

'UTTER PANDEMONIUM'

Not everyone is adjusting so philosophically. Students are "definitely freaking out," says a junior at Harvard, who asked not to be named for fear of reprisal by the university. The week before spring break is academically hectic, so students were turning in problem sets and papers, then heading home, when they learned their classes would move online and they were to leave campus. In some cases they zipped right back to Cambridge, Mass., to try to pack up, store, or ship their belongings.

"It's utter pandemonium on campus right now," the student says. "Everybody is partying all day or incredibly stressed out about homework, or both. People really seem upset and confused."

And they're not exactly following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's protocol, the student says, with parties outdoors and in, "scorpion" punch bowls, and games of beer pong, "one of the least sterile things to be doing right now."

Similar seize-the-day mayhem broke out at the University of Dayton on Tuesday, when it said its classes would be moved online. What was initially reported to be a protest against the university's anti-virus measures was in fact, the administration says, "one last large gathering before spring break, and the size and behavior of the crowd required police to take action." More than 1,000 stu-

dents gathered in the streets, according to local news coverage, and when some students stood on cars and the situation grew rowdier, the police launched "pepper balls," which contain irritants, into the crowd.

"Students are often accused of living in a 'campus bubble,' immune to wider social concerns, so it doesn't seem surprising that on some campuses there would be outbreaks of partying," says Mikita Brottman, an author and psychoanalyst who teaches literature at the Maryland Institute College of Arts.

"It's hard for some students to take the virus seriously. They're often cynical about 'media panics,' and even if they do follow the mainstream media," she says, they feel that "this is a virus that targets 'old people.'"

"Beyond that," Brottman says, "I think the celebrating reflects both a feeling of disaster-inspired togetherness — and togetherness is part of the spring-break tradition anyway — along with a sense of social constraint collapsing." The partyers "are like the inhabitants of Prospero's palace" in Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Masque of the Red Death," she says, "getting drunk while plague ravages the nation."

"There's a difference between healthy concern and fear. … Let's make smart choices, but let's not be afraid."

'STAY IN THE ROUTINE'

The stress of uncertainty can be very unnerving, says Alise G. Bartley, a clinical assistant professor in the department of counseling and director of the community-counseling center at Florida Gulf Coast University. The most constructive way to approach it is "to focus on what we do know" staves off illness: wash hands, avoid high-density groups, get sufficient sleep, eat well, and exercise.

As students are yanked from their campus settings, it will be crucial for them to retain structure in their academic and personal lives, she says. They need to "stay in the routine and feel like there's a purpose so that they don't fall into depression." If they're used to Friday pizza night with friends, then they should have pizza night together online.

Counselors, in person or in teletherapy sessions, need to push beyond vague recommendations to help students "operationalize" good habits and a positive outlook. Don't just advise them to get exercise, says Bartley. Talk through with them exactly what walking, jogging, or bike route they're going to take, for how long and how often. It's a disconcerting time, she says, but "there's a difference between healthy concern and fear. … Let's make smart choices, but let's not be afraid."

Gregory Roper, a freshman at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, is more afraid for his grandparents than he is for himself. He was already visiting them, in Fairfield, Conn., during spring break, and "it looks like I might be doing that for a while longer," he says, now that the New York college has announced that classes are going online and students must move off campus. His parents are in Santa Clara County, Calif., which has a high concentration of coronavirus cases. They're considering going somewhere safer, so he won't be joining them at home for now.

A computer-science student, Roper says a lot of his coursework was already online, but the lab sessions in his biology class "are still completely up in the air."

Reactions to the crisis among his friends, Roper says, "are very much a mix." Some think fears are "sort of overinflated." Others, particularly "friends with weak immune systems, are very scared."

In addition to fear, students are aggrieved over losing life experiences like spring of senior year, says Nicole Danforth, director of outpatient programs for child and adolescent psychiatry at Newton-Wellesley Hospital, in Massachusetts. Acknowledge that grief, Danforth recommends, but challenge yourself "to limit how much you let your anxious brain take over."

The bachelor-of-fine-arts students of Jillian Harris, an associate professor of dance

at Temple University, felt "a strong sense of disappointment" that showcase performances of their senior choreography projects couldn't proceed when Temple announced courses would move online starting next week.

But "everyone is trying to be creative," producing instead online rehearsal-progress portfolios with written analyses, Harris says. On stage and in life, she says, "fortunately dancers are very good improvisers."

Technology will be a defining aspect of the mental-health challenge, Danforth says. A life behind blue screens can already be isolating, she says, and we're in danger of succumbing further to that. But teletherapy options are more sophisticated and plentiful than ever, and if Covid-19 leads to greater use and acceptance of them, she says, that is "a win for everybody."

Laura Horne experienced the trauma of displacement herself as an undergraduate at Loyola University New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina struck, in 2005. Her family lived in the city's suburbs, and she couldn't go home. She transferred to Louisiana Tech University for a quarter, and though she tried her best to keep up with friends through Facebook, email, and phone calls, "a lot of students relocated to other schools and never came back," she says.

"I had to somewhat mourn and be OK with letting that go for a time," she says, "and engage with the new environment." Many students this spring might also "go through a period of mourning, and that's normal," says Horne, now the chief program officer for Active Minds, which supports mental-health awareness and education for students.

She offers coping tips for students on the Active Minds website, but "if what you are feeling seems like more than just a bad day," she writes, "seek help from a professional. … If you need it, contact the Crisis Text Line by texting 'BRAVE' to 741-741."

'UNCHARTED TERRITORY'

Active Minds chapter leaders across the country, like Stephanie Cahill, a senior studying psychology at Arizona State University, have a front-row view of their peers' anxieties. Even before the university announced, late Wednesday, that it was moving classes online, Cahill says, a lot of students were "nervous and scared" and just not showing up.

Active Minds meetings on campus saw a surge in attendance — to groups of roughly 25 — and visits by administrators like ASU's associate vice president for counseling and health services helped ease students' worries, Cahill says.

Information is key, but colleges "have to acknowledge that we're in uncharted territory here," says Kevin Krueger, president of Naspa, an association of student-affairs administrators. "We don't have a playbook."

But they're writing one quickly as they go along. Seventeen hundred participants signed up for a Naspa webinar on Wednesday, and they're sorting through best practices on housing and food for low-income students, provision of mental-health services, and, in the longer term, engaging students in the online environment — not just academically, but in critical services like academic advising, orientation, career services and job fairs, and campus culture and Greek life.

As a new normal slowly forms for students, Krueger says, it's also important to recognize that fatigue is setting in among administrators, staff, and faculty: "There's a toll that comes from being in a crisis mode in these situations."

Alexander C. Kafka is a Chronicle *senior editor.*

Originally published March 12, 2020

Students of Color Are Not OK. Here's How Colleges Can Support Them.

By SARAH BROWN

KLAUS VEDFELT/GETTY IMAGES

Drop-in counseling for Black students. Therapy groups on coping with racism. Programs for white students on how to be anti-racist.

As the pandemic and the racial-injustice crisis continue to take a toll on Black people and other marginalized groups, colleges face a newfound urgency to support the mental health of students of color.

Just about every survey conducted since the beginning of March indicates that student distress is only going to get worse this fall. Those mental-health concerns will be exacerbated for Black and Hispanic students, whose populations are disproportionately harmed by Covid-19 and by the police violence gripping the nation's consciousness. Asian American students, meanwhile, are dealing with racial slurs and jokes stemming from the pandemic's origins in China.

What's more, students of color often don't get the help they need. About 45 percent of white students with mental-health challenges seek treatment, according to a 2018 study, but only a third of Latinx students do so. For Black and Asian students, the proportion is even lower — about 25 and 22 percent, respectively.

And this fall, they will return to colleges that look and feel very different. Putting distressed students on a two-week waiting list for therapy sessions won't cut it, mental-health experts say.

In the throes of dual national crises, students of color will need quick access to mental-health-care options that reflect their experiences, recreate their support systems remotely, and acknowledge the physical and emotional tolls the past few months have taken.

CULTURALLY COMPETENT COUNSELING

As Alexa Sass, a junior at the University of California at Los Angeles, was finishing up the spring term, George Floyd was killed in police custody in Minneapolis, and protests against racial injustice exploded nationwide. Processing the news was overwhelming and exhausting for Sass, who identifies as Black and Filipino.

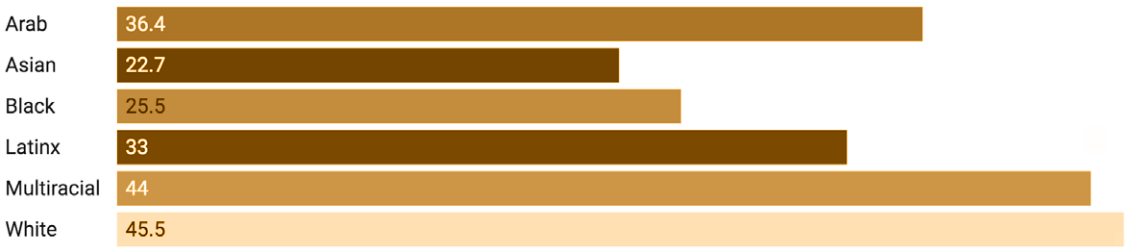
She tried to get through her final exams as best she could. She turned to books on spirituality. She leaned on her communities within UCLA and back home in the Bay Area — virtually, of course. She has tried out some of the university's online mental-health resources, but they're not what she really needs.

Without much in-person interaction, she's struggling emotionally. "The way that I process my mental health is through support systems," said Sass, a leader in the campus chapter of Active Minds, a national mental-health advocacy group.

The pandemic and the racial-injustice crisis have caused fear, anxiety, depression, and hopelessness in Black students,

LESS HELP-SEEKING AMONG STUDENTS OF COLOR

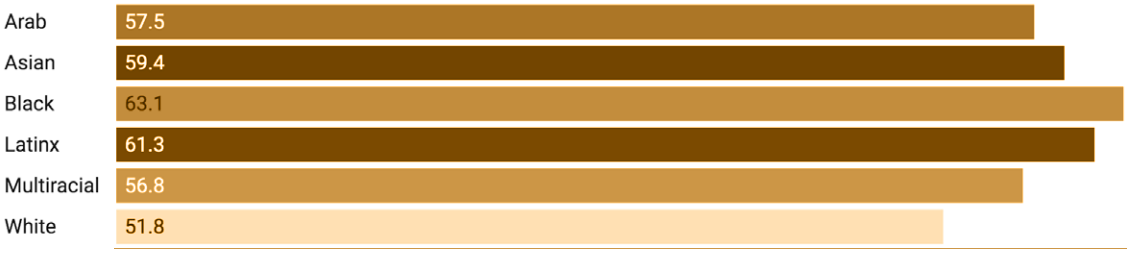
Among students who have a mental-health problem, Black, Latinx, Arab, and Asian students are far less likely than white students to have sought treatment in the past year.



Source: Lipson et al. Created with Datawrapper.

HIGHER RATES OF PERCEIVED STIGMA

Students of color who meet the criteria for having a mental-health problem are more likely than white students to believe that the general public stigmatizes mental illness.



Source: Lipson et al. Created with Datawrapper.

said Kayla Johnson, a staff psychologist at Prairie View A&M University, a historically Black institution in Texas. But those students don't often use mental-health services, because of stigma.

For some Black people, Johnson said, going to a therapist means that something must be wrong with you, or that you don't have enough faith in God. There's also pressure to keep problems to yourself, she said: "There's kind of a level of secrecy about things that happen."

Not only are there cultural barriers that discourage many students of color from talking openly about mental health, but they also encounter a staff of campus therapists many of whom don't look like them, said Annelle Primm, a senior medical adviser at the Steve Fund, a mental-health-support organization for young people of color. Some students, she said, make the calculation that "it's best not to seek help if they can't seek help from someone with whom they feel comfortable sharing such personal feelings."

At predominantly white institutions, counseling-staff members often don't know how to talk with Black students, Johnson added. Sometimes, she said, students end up taking time out of their therapy sessions to explain social, economic, and cultural problems affecting Black families to their white therapists.

"Of course, when that happens, you don't want to come back," she said.

This fall, making sure students of color can connect with culturally competent mental-health providers will be key, mental-health experts say.

Before Stacia Alexander arrived at Paul Quinn College, in 2018, the historically black institution in Texas had a mental-health provider on campus for only a few hours each week, from the nearby University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center.

Once Alexander took over as the college's first mental-health-clinic coordinator, she tried a direct form of outreach: She handed out her cellphone number to students at orientation and told them to text her when they were having a bad day. One of the biggest barriers to accessing care, she said, is that students don't know where to go.

It worked. And many students told her how excited they were to have a Black therapist to talk with.

But students were texting her all night, she said. So, earlier this year, Paul Quinn joined with TimelyMD, a teletherapy company, to ease the burden. Now students can reach a therapist 24/7 through the TimelyMD app, which offers access to providers from a wide range of cultural backgrounds.

NO MORE TWO-WEEK WAITS

Accessibility, experts say, should be another top priority for colleges trying to better reach students of color with mental-health resources.

Dozens of colleges, including George Washington University, Texas A&M University, and Mississippi State University, are offering quick drop-in consultations with therapists meant for students of color. The program, known as "Let's Talk," typically

is set up at different locations across campus during a given week, often in student unions or cultural centers. For now, the drop-in sessions are happening virtually.

Brown University's counseling center uses a flexible-care model, in which most students are served through 25-30-minute sessions that they can schedule just once, or as often as they want. Continuing 50-minute counseling appointments reflect a Western-centric care approach that doesn't appeal to many students of color, said Will Meek, director of counseling and psychological services.

Since March, he said, no Brown student has waited more than a day to see one of the university's campus therapists, a staff that Meek describes as culturally diverse. The university uses a third party to further expand access.

When Brown students call the counseling center with an urgent request, a clinician from ProtoCall, a 24/7 crisis line that works with colleges, will pick up the phone. The clinician will talk with the student and report back to Brown's counseling staff. Often students just want to talk with someone for a few minutes without even making an appointment, Meek said.

To prepare for the fall, he has also been rethinking outreach to students of color. For instance, instead of waiting for students to contact the counseling center, he's hoping to have them opt in to a program in which a staff therapist can contact them directly and connect one-on-one.

At UCLA, which has 45,000 students, there can be long wait times for therapy, said Sass, the junior there. But there are other places that students of color can turn for mental-health support, she said. There's the RISE Center, which stands for "resilience in your student experience." There's an academic-support program for Black students, where Sass serves as a trained peer counselor who helps other students with both academics and life stressors.

UCLA leaders, she said, just need to make sure students know where they can find help.

ANTI-RACISM AS WELLNESS

At Loyola University Maryland, Jason Parcover, director of the counseling center, is also trying to offer a menu of flexible, accessible resources for students. But beyond that, he's creating spaces for white students to learn how to tackle racial injustice. "Our marginalized students are telling us that they want to see action," he said.

The conversations, as Loyola calls them, will help students understand how to be anti-racist, to "make a commitment to taking specific actions, and to hold each other accountable for following through with those actions," he said. The programs fit squarely into Loyola's values as a Jesuit institution, he said, and into the counseling center's mission.

"By definition, anti-racism work is mental-health and wellness work."

"Investing in anti-racism efforts includes really acknowledging and understanding deeply that we are all in this together, and that our health in all forms, including our mental health, is connected to how other members of our community are faring," Parcover said. "By definition, anti-racism work is mental-health and wellness work."

Counseling centers should "name the issues," he said. In public communications, campus mental-health staff members should be specific about what's going on in the world and talk about the impact of trauma on mental health.

Educating white students about being effective allies should be a core part of any campus strategy to support the well-being of students of color, said Erin McClintock, a former campus therapist and director of wellness at Clark University who's now senior director of impact and education at EverFi, a company that provides students with online training in alcohol, sexual misconduct, and mental health.

Socially conscious students are going to return to campuses this fall wanting to act

against racial injustice, she said — but if they want to become good allies, they can't psychologically burden Black students while they take on that work. "People of color don't need to be the ones who are validating their white peers," she said.

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION

Creating a culture of well-being is not just about what the counseling center is doing, McClintock said. Colleges can stop personal crises before they happen by helping students who are experiencing "subclinical" issues — distress that's not yet a mental-health disorder but affects their ability to function. That means investing in food pantries and emergency financial aid so that low-income students, who are disproportionately people of color, don't have to stress as much about basic needs, she said.

Some colleges are turning to online platforms to try to reach students before they spiral into anxiety or depression. More than 120 institutions are offering You at College, which compiles mental-health and well-being resources tailored to campuses.

Nathaan Demers, a former campus psychologist who's now vice president and director of clinical programs at Grit Digital Health, which worked with Colorado State University to develop You at College three years ago, said students' use of the platform increased by 153 percent in the first five weeks of the pandemic compared with the previous three months.

The platform recently added resources that address the racial-injustice crisis, on how to make one's voice heard effectively and how to maintain self-care as an activist. California State University at Fullerton conducted a study this spring and found that students of color used the You at College platform at a higher rate than white students did, Demers said.

Students can use You at College on their phones, and they can do so privately, which is especially important for students who are staying with their families and wouldn't feel comfortable speaking with a therapist in that environment, he said.

With prevention in mind, California State University at Sacramento added mental-health sessions for parents to its virtual new-student orientation this summer — including in Spanish and Gujarati, a language spoken in India.

Like many fields, therapy and wellness work "were originally developed through a white lens and a white framework. It's our challenge to shift that — to really take into account the experiences and needs of students from different communities."

More than 70 percent of Sacramento State students are nonwhite, and many come from cultural backgrounds where mental health isn't discussed openly, said Lara Falkenstein, a campus health educator who advises the university's Active Minds chapter. As students learn online this fall and continue to spend much of their time at home, she said, the university wants to make sure that families can have conversations about emotional well-being and look out for potential signs of distress.

Sacramento State is also beginning a two-year, grant-funded research project on the mental health of students of color that will examine what they need and where the university needs to improve, said Reva Wittenberg, associate director for campus wellness.

Like many fields, therapy and wellness work "were originally developed through a white lens and a white framework," she

said. "It's our challenge to shift that — to really take into account the experiences and needs of students from different communities."

At Prairie View A&M, more of the counseling center's therapy groups, workshops, and other outreach programs will focus on coping with racial injustice and giving students a space to process what they've been going through. "For Black America," said Kayla Johnson, the staff psychologist, "we heal and cope by getting together." She is heartened to see more Black students talking openly about mental health on social media and other platforms.

Black students' well-being this fall, she added, will also depend on their institutions' taking a strong stance against racial injustice. Otherwise, how will students be able to feel safe on campus? "I think schools need to step up and say, 'Hey, we're here. We see what's happening. We support you,'" she said.

Meera Varma, a UCLA junior and a leader in the campus Active Minds chapter, emphasized that colleges should offer support and academic flexibility in recognition of the toll that activism can take on mental health, particularly for Black students.

"This fire, this passion from our students isn't going to die down anytime soon," she said. This fall, "it's really important to understand that school education might not be students' first priority."

Sarah Brown is a senior reporter who covers campus culture, including Title IX, race and diversity, and student mental health for The Chronicle.

Originally published July 6, 2020

Covid-19 Has Worsened the Student Mental-Health Crisis. Can Resilience Training Fix It?

By SARAH BROWN and ALEXANDER C. KAFKA

JACQUELINE RICCIARDI FOR *THE CHRONICLE*

Ai Bui, an architecture student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: "Thankfully, and apparently, I seem to be pretty indestructible."

There were six years of anorexia, two of bulimia, and 10 of depression and anxiety, plus a recent stress disorder from "repeated sexual assaults by a trusted authority." Ai Bui, a third-year architecture student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, knows what trauma is.

"I've fought myself to nothing but vomit, blood, skin, and bones, and all these years I've just wanted to vanish and become air," Bui told an audience at Lesley University in October during a performance series called *This Is My Brave*. "But thankfully, and apparently, I seem to be pretty indestructible."

The pandemic is putting that notion to the test.

With no in-person support system to fall back on, Bui grieved the death of a family friend and faced a looming deadline for a big class project. It "really took a toll on me," Bui said in a late-April phone interview. One night, "I felt so stressed out that I broke down for a solid hour sobbing really badly."

But maybe teary is what tough looks like in this era. As Bui's friend texted: "You don't think it takes resilience to go through this? And then to wake up tomorrow? And the next day and the next day and the next day?"

In recent years, "resilience" and its companion concept, "grit," have become buzzwords in higher education. Colleges have introduced wellness programs, campus campaigns, even full-blown courses that incorporate meditation, yoga, reflective writing and sketching, and stress-management techniques like deep breathing.

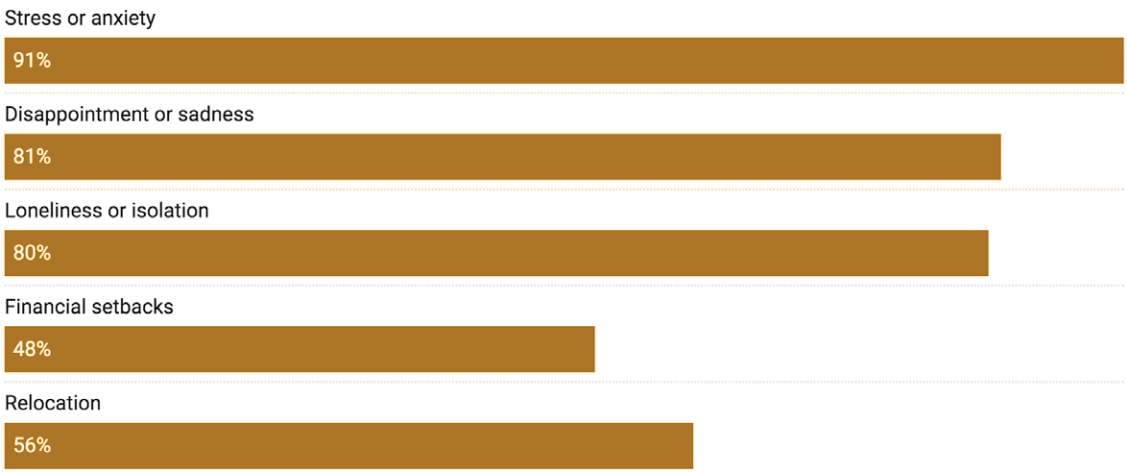
Gritty and resilient students, the thinking goes, know how to persevere through life's inevitable stressors. They know how to halt the negative thoughts that can spiral into a crisis. They're more likely to stay on track, academically and psychologically.

Grit and resilience have become especially salient ideas as colleges try to respond to students' mental-health troubles, which were already skyrocketing before the pandemic. In some ways, the Covid-19 era seems like exactly the right time to educate students on how to manage the intense sadness, isolation, and anxiety they are feeling.

But during the horrible natural experiment called coronavirus, is that the right message to send to students — to push through hardship, bounce back from failure, and come out stronger? Or should it be about empathy, compassion, and getting through this time in one piece?

COVID-19'S EFFECTS ON COLLEGE STUDENTS

In an April 2020 survey of 2,086 college students, the vast majority indicated that Covid-19 had negatively affected their mental health.



Source: Active Minds Spring 2020 Student Survey. Created with Datawrapper.

GRIEVING LOST EXPERIENCES

In a blizzard of bad news, this generation of ostensibly delicate students is already proving pretty strong, mental-health experts say. In the past two months, some have lost family members, their only safe living environment, or the jobs that paid their bills.

According to an April survey by Active Minds, a national mental-health advocacy group, 80 percent of college students say the Covid-19 crisis has negatively affected their mental health. One-fifth say it has significantly worsened.

For many students, uncertainty is at the root of their pandemic-related distress. "The thing I hear from students is a lot of the 'but' sentences," said Kelly Crace, associate vice president for health and wellness at the College of William & Mary. Sentences like: "I can finish the semester remotely. But if this goes into July, I can't handle it."

They've lost their usual coping mechanisms. Students can text or call their college friends, but it's not the same as getting together for a movie night. Classes can feel like an uninspiring imitation of the real thing.

"It's the most social time of your life," said Michael R. Lovell, president of Marquette University. "You're constantly surrounded by your friends." To have that taken away so suddenly is a shock. For students, as for faculty members, there's no substitute for being in a room bouncing ideas off one another. "You can't quite get the same energy in a remote-learning environment."

Emma Brauer, a senior at Marquette majoring in anthropology, misses "those ordinary moments," the everyday contact with classmates and professors — "the physical aspect of being in a classroom" and "just passing them in the hallway."

She tries to structure her day, go for walks, limit screen time, and stay in e-touch with friends. But the bottom line, she said, is that she's "heartbroken."

"I joke with my family that I feel fine in the morning, but who knows what the afternoon will bring, if I'm going to break down in tears or whatever."

Campus leaders are worried about the pandemic's psychological fallout. In a survey by the American Council on Education, 41 percent of college presidents said the mental health of students was among their most pressing pandemic-related concerns. Thirty-five percent of the presidents said they plan to invest more in mental-health services.

But they won't be able to rely solely on campus counseling centers, many of which are already overwhelmed by increasing demand. Meanwhile, financial uncertainty could make it difficult to hire more counselors and therapists.

What's more, teletherapy isn't always an option for students now scattered across the country; licensing laws often don't allow treatment across state lines. An American College Health Association survey in early April found that less than half of the 356 colleges that responded were able to virtually treat students regardless of where they were living.

So colleges will have to help students help themselves through this new wave of psychological distress — and they'll have to be careful about the messages they send,

STUDENTS' SELF-CARE CHALLENGES

Covid-19 forced most students into distance learning, upending their lifestyles and routines. As a result, an April survey found, some are struggling with these aspects of self-care:

Source: Active Minds Spring 2020 Student Survey. Created with Datawrapper.

mental-health experts say. They'll need a nuanced approach, offering resilience strategies while recognizing students' grief.

GRIT VS. GRIEVING

For Ally Beard, a junior at Harvard University, "the grief came first, and it wasn't until we had finished grieving that we were able to be resilient." Being sent home "was just so heartbreaking. Within 24 hours, the world exploded," she remembered in a phone call from Nantucket, where she is staying with her boyfriend and his family.

Managing her depression and anxiety disorder for years has proved to be helpful training, she said. "I'm better at flexibility and going with the flow than I was just two weeks ago."

That, said Angela Duckworth, is how it's supposed to work. Duckworth, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, stamped a buzzword on education with her 2016 best seller, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*.

She is far from being a Pollyanna about the pandemic, particularly on the heels of her father's death from Covid-19. While she sees grit and grieving as "in some ways in tension," like most tensions, it can be resolved, she said.

The first week off campus, more of her students failed to turn in work than they ever had. She reached out to them, said that she wanted to make sure they were OK, and told them that if they weren't they should text or call her for help. But if they were all right, she wrote them, "I really look forward to getting your assignments."

"Sure enough," she said, "all of my students turned in their work. They wrote me apologies. They explained."

Resilience "is not the exception to the rule, it is the rule," Duckworth said. There are real worries for this generation of college students — health, housing and food insecurity, career prospects battered by the economic plunge. But while post-traumatic stress is one possible outcome, she said, "there's also the possibility of post-traumatic growth."

"This is not going to be a footnote. This is going to be a chapter in the history books," she said. And by finding purpose in one's actions and meaning in one's relationships, "one day you'll be telling your children and grandchildren about how you lived through history, and I want you to be proud of how you reacted to it, that you demonstrated character."

THE RESILIENCE RUBRIC

As Covid-19 upended Jacqueline Thornton's life, she immersed herself in a course called "Changing Minds, Changing Lives." It's a student-resilience curriculum developed a dozen years ago by Genevieve Chandler, a professor of nursing at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. The course, which involves eight to 10 sessions over several weeks, is focused on mindfulness techniques, yoga postures, and reflective writing exercises.

"It might appear that someone is less resilient when in fact they're just trying to navigate things that other students don't have to."

"We teach adaptive resilience," Chandler said. In other words: "Bend and come back."

Thornton, a UMass senior, has struggled with her mental health for years. She tried therapy, but it was hard to fit into her busy schedule. Then, as a junior, she discovered "Changing Minds, Changing Lives." She loved the course so much that she took it again this semester.

As part of the course, Thornton and her classmates completed an assessment of their strengths. One of hers is being an "activator." She's good at making plans.

Back in March, when classes went online, Thornton had decided to spend the rest of her final semester with her family in Boston, instead of with her friends in her off-campus apartment. Quickly, she started

feeling left out. She was plagued by negative thoughts: They don't like me anymore. They don't miss me.

That's the kind of thinking the resilience course taught Thornton to recognize and reject. She remembered that she was an "activator." So she planned virtual hangouts with her friends — and made sure they actually happened.

One recent day, feeling overwhelmed, Thornton cried for an hour. But the resilience course taught her that's OK. "Through resiliency, you can figure out a way to do the crying and do the anger and be really emotional," she said, "but not get down on yourself for feeling that way."

Research backs up the course's effectiveness. Student athletes who've taken it are less stressed and more capable of regulating their emotions.

At Florida State University, students can turn to the Student Resilience Project website for resources on breathing, responding to a panic attack, and "grounding," which encourages focusing on today instead of worrying about tomorrow. University leaders have regularly promoted the resilience project in their messages to the campus community.

There's also a campus organization reaching out to far-flung students. If online learning continues this fall, the Resilient Noles — as the group is called — hope to ask professors if they can pop into virtual classes and briefly talk about resilience.

"You can help yourself," said Rima Patel, a Florida State junior and president of Resilient Noles. Using the counseling center remotely isn't an option for her, she said, because she feels less comfortable talking about mental health at home. Instead, she watches the resilience project's videos on tolerating frustration, and how physical space affects well-being.

Patel was on track to get all A's this semester before the pandemic. She struggled with the transition to online learning. But she has adopted a resilient mind-set: "Do not be upset about the things you can't change."

The resilience project doesn't just point students to sophisticated mindfulness routines. It emphasizes basic survival mechanisms, said Karen Oehme, director of Florida State's Institute for Family Violence Studies. Did you drink enough water today? Did you get fresh air? Did you get enough sleep?

At William & Mary, there's been more interest than usual in resilience-focused programs since the pandemic began, Crace said. More than 13,000 people have participated in virtual offerings that range from a two-minute meditation to an art-therapy video. Students have told Crace that they finally have time for resilience training now — and that they need it more than ever.

"If any of us are having trouble getting out of bed one day, or have several bad days, that just means we're responding appropriately to the crisis."

Grit and resilience are not personality traits, Crace said. They are developed with practice. "People who flourish are not less afraid, worried, or upset about what's going on around them," he said. "They have just worked at holding these emotions and thoughts in a healthy manner."

Grit and resilience are worthy goals, but are they realistic ones right now? Not only do college students have to absorb the shock of displacement from their campus lives, but they have to turn it into a saga of triumph and growth? That expectation seems a bit much to Laura Horne, chief program officer for Active Minds.

"If any of us are having trouble getting out of bed one day, or have several bad days, that just means we're responding appropriately to the crisis," she said.

The grit-and-resilience narrative can unfairly suggest some character flaw among today's students, Horne said.

Mark Patishnock, director of counseling and psychiatric services at Michigan State University, said it often builds in assumptions — about financial resources, fami-

ly culture, and other privileges. "We risk alienating a lot of the students we want to help," he said.

Patishnock pointed to the racial disparities in those affected by Covid-19 in Michigan. African Americans make up 14 percent of the state's population, but they account for one-third of the cases and 41 percent of the deaths as of May 11. That is having a disproportionate impact on Michigan State's students of color, he said.

"It might appear that someone is less resilient when in fact they're just trying to navigate things that other students don't have to," he said.

PSYCHIC SCARS?

George Bonanno, a professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University's Teachers College, believes some counselors and therapists have a distortedly pessimistic view of how students will emerge from the Covid-19 era. "If you see pain all the time, you think pain is the norm."

For 30 years, said Bonanno, who runs Columbia's Loss, Trauma, and Emotion Lab, his research has shown that "human beings are very resilient through traumatic events, stressor events, natural disasters, medical emergencies. … I think the same thing is very much true for this Covid epidemic."

"We aren't going to see massive psychological breakdowns over this," he said.

What might be toughest for most students, he and other experts said, is uncertainty and needless confusion. Regular, no-nonsense communication — even if it's just to say, "Things are still up in the air, but here are the factors we're monitoring" — is the most constructive approach college leaders can take, Bonanno said.

Officials must be thoughtful about the mental-health messages they send their students, said Sarah Ketchen Lipson, an assistant professor of health law, policy, and management at Boston University and co-principal investigator of the Healthy Minds Study, which assesses students' mental health.

It's important to create a space for students to grieve, Lipson said, "before we start talking about 'this is going to make you stronger and this is going to make you a more resilient person.'"

Betsy Cracco, executive director of well-being, access, and prevention at UMass, agrees. But stress hurts students' ability to learn, she said, and colleges can respond by helping students understand their strengths and tap into them when they feel overwhelmed. Many resilience programs, like UMass's course, are evidence-based, she added. "It's like medication," she said: Why withhold helpful treatment?

Some resilience practices are easy to incorporate, Cracco said. Start classes with three minutes of breathing or a two-minute wellness infomercial. In the middle of a lecture, get up and twist around. Create buddy systems and small groups in which students can help one another through their stressors.

Colleges can also remind students about available resources that are a text, an email, or a phone call away. "More than half of students," the April Active Minds survey reported, "say that they would not know where to go if they or someone they knew needed professional mental-health services right away."

When a traumatized population starts returning to campus, colleges will need to vet students' mental health as diligently as they do their physical health, Lipson said. "Assessment is hugely important," she said.

Moreover, students might learn a thing or two from classmates who have struggled with their mental health for years.

Their grit takes many different forms, like MIT's Ai Bui, the self-taught ukulele player who sat on the edge of a university stage in October, singing away years of trauma, depression, and eating disorders in an original song called "Darling Me."

"What I went through before — I often say this to my therapist — I've been to the bottom of the bottom," Bui told *The Chronicle,* "so whatever happens, I know I can get through it and get out of it and keep moving on."

Sarah Brown is a senior reporter who covers campus culture, including Title IX, race and diversity, and student mental health for The Chronicle. *Alexander C. Kafka is a* Chronicle senior editor.

Originally published May 11, 2020

ADVICE

How to Prepare for Student Mental-Health Needs

A fall to-do list to help counseling centers get ready for students who will seek help when classes resume amid Covid-19.

By LEE BURDETTE WILLIAMS and DAVID R. REETZ

GETTY IMAGES

Think of Covid-19 as a huge earthquake in the middle of the ocean. Then picture the resulting tsunami, rolling toward the shore, about to flood everything in its path. That image accurately portrays the surge of mental-health needs heading toward college campuses as we prepare for the fall semester.

Like geologists, campus leaders have tools — surveys, focus groups, years of experience — to detect the strength and timing of the wave, and help us plan a response. Here's what we know:

- Demands for mental-health care already overmatched campus counseling services and structures, long before anyone heard the word "coronavirus."
- Students with anxiety, depression, and grief — in the wake of months of loss and uncertainty — will present both clinical and capacity challenges for institutions.
- Some students who have never sought counseling before may be in desperate need of support in the fall.

There's a lot we don't know: It's unclear how many students — new and returning — will enroll, and of those who do, how many will take classes in person (if that's an option) versus remotely. We don't know if we'll be able to keep campuses open for the fall semester, or what the spring term will look like.

To complicate matters further, some of the concerns we are facing are inherently at odds — for example, the need for social distancing versus the emotional dangers of social isolation. The former means we must keep students apart to reduce virus spread, while the latter requires that we bring them together in meaningful ways to protect their mental health. Faculty and staff members must provide the connections and support, yet they too are facing physical, professional, and mental-health challenges.

To manage the coming surge, campus mental-health administrators will need to adopt new strategies and adapt protocols. We have some ideas in mind, based on our years of experience in student services and counseling, to guide institutions in their planning.

Needs vary, and so should mental-health services. Let's begin with students who will be taking classes this fall from remote locations. Some who had relationships with counseling-center staff in the past will be able to continue those services remotely. Others who never made use of campus counseling before might recognize they need those services now.

How can a campus-based counseling center serve students who are not physically on the campus? One approach is to do so via "telemental" health — online therapy using virtual platforms that are compliant with privacy laws (Hipaa) and provide a high degree of confidentiality.

There are, however, limitations to telemental health services. The most intractable are imposed by state licensing regulations that prohibit services across state lines. While some states relaxed requirements in the first few months of the pandemic, those changes are expiring, and the likelihood they will continue is small, given that proposed federal legislation has failed to gain traction. Relying on a state-by-state patchwork of requirements also means that a counseling center must evaluate each request for services in light of what the student's home state permits at that current time — which could change within the course of treatment.

For campuses that serve a national or even regional student population, that simply isn't feasible. Promoting the availability of services to students based on what their individual state-licensing boards allow — especially since a diverse counseling-center staff most likely reflects a variety of licensing boards (e.g., social work, psychology, mental-health counseling) — would be confusing and frustrating for students and staff members.

So does that mean institutions should refuse telemental health services to out-of-state students?

Not at all. Counselors can provide more than just clinical or therapeutic services. Indeed, not all students seek clinical services. Case management, for example, does not

require a license, nor does nonclinical support, and many students will need both of those services right now. A good case-management approach helps a client — in this case, a student — articulate challenges and explore strategies to meet them. Some of the strategies might relate to treatment (helping the student find a local therapist or physician) but others will be nonclinical (a support group, a connection to a faith-based organization, a contact for financial-support information, or even just a referral to an academic adviser to answer complicated questions about classes and requirements).

It might seem ludicrous to set up a virtual session with both clinician and student in the counseling center. But it does meet social-distancing requirements.

When students are anxious, scared, or depressed, the campus counseling center seems like the obvious first call to make. But often, the students do not need therapy. What they need is a careful listener and help with problem-solving.

But what if a remote student is in crisis and clearly needs clinical help? Counseling-center staff can carefully hear students, provide effective reassurance, and help them access services closer to home. And we can offer other campus services that demonstrate our investment in their success and in their eventual return to the campus. Colleges and universities are rich with talented listeners, supporters, and problem-solvers. No student in need will be abandoned.

Outsourcing is an option — sometimes. Many institutions have explored the idea of outsourcing mental-health services. Capable contracted counseling services do exist, and have been aggressively marketing themselves to campus leaders. Carefully vetting those companies is critical. Some promise 24/7 availability. It is crucial to make sure the vendor is able to provide what the institution is, in turn, promising its students. It's equally crucial to note that an outside provider is likely to be less familiar with campus support services, and thus, limited in effectively connecting students to those campus resources.

Before the pandemic, several organizations developed a useful guide to evaluating telemental health services. It's worth a read if your campus is considering outsourcing.

A less costly option to consider is "in sourcing." For students seeking support and reassurance, a call to the counseling center is a way to find connection and encouragement. But this fall, when the counseling center is deluged with such calls, the institution can turn to some of its other personnel to meet the need.

Staff members who might, in a typical year, be employed in residence life, student activities, student-union management, recreation, and athletics, are now in a position to be redeployed. Many of them have an interest in, and experience with, advising and supporting students through common challenges such as homesickness, relationship issues, identity and career questions. Still other staff members are skilled in working with nontraditional students who are struggling with family responsibilities and work obligations.

A lot of students this fall will have difficulties with basic needs — food, housing, health, and grief at the loss of so much in their lives. A consistent connection with a caring individual who simply checks in and provides a supportive, listening ear is sometimes all that is needed.

Be less distant, but not too close. Some institutions are planning to bring students back to the campus. They are engaged in complex planning to balance the physical connection that makes campus life special, with the competing goals of safe behavior and social distancing. In between figuring out mask compliance, putting up plexiglass separators, and estimating how many disinfectant wipes to stock, mental-health

providers must determine protocols that allow in-person services to be offered to students in need.

The key to the complicated logistics is space: Is there enough? Where? And how is it best used?

Begin by looking at the counseling center's own space. Most individual offices will be too small or too poorly ventilated to meet Covid-19 rules governing face-to-face counseling. Instead, set up an office for a clinician to use a virtual platform and connect with a student sitting down the hall in another private office or nearby on the campus. It might seem ludicrous to set up a virtual session with both clinician and student in the counseling center. But it does meet social-distancing requirements, and some students may prefer the privacy of that office space to participating in a virtual counseling session in their dorm room or campus apartment.

And if a student is in crisis, with the possibility of a life-threatening escalation, proximity to emergency responders is preferable.

Some creative thinking will be required at institutions that have maintained a central location for all mental-health staff. But for other counseling centers, scattering staff members into empty spaces across the campus will be nothing new. Even before the pandemic, our centers were running out of space. Higher demand for our services led to increased staffing on many campuses, and subsequently, to an office crunch. Some campuses were already embedding counselors in dormitories and student-advising centers — a space-saving strategy that has multiple clinical benefits.

The "dedensification" of campuses — a high priority for residence-life and facilities staff — means that some spaces will go unused this fall. For example, if dining services are primarily grab-and-go instead of sit-down meals, the small dining rooms often found within a large dining complex will not be occupied. Likewise, group-study spaces in the campus library may sit vacant. Such spaces could be repurposed temporarily as virtual counseling locations where students can find the privacy that often evades them in a dorm or in shared off-campus housing.

Think of clinician-to-student interaction amid Covid-19 as a continuum — running from most physical proximity (two people in a spacious, well-ventilated office, six feet apart, both wearing masks) to none (a clinician at home speaking online with a student living at home). It is possible to imagine other points along that continuum that are feasible for a number of students and settings.

Given a choice — telemental or in-person services — most students will choose the latter because it's familiar. Accommodating their preference will drive up density and risk within counseling centers. To limit exposure to the virus, counseling centers will need clear criteria to determine which students will be seen face to face and which will be referred to virtual counseling.

The key to the complicated logistics is space: Is there enough? Where? And how is it best used?

It is also very possible that — along with an increase in students presenting with severe mental-health cases (a trend that predates Covid-19) — we may see a reduction in students with less-severe issues because they are not interested in remote counseling. For some students, living at home actually reduces the risk factors (social anxiety, peer conflicts, access to alcohol and drugs) that often lead to their mental or emotional distress, and thus, reduces their need for counseling.

Organize more support groups for students. Getting students to shift from individual to group therapy is a chronic and well-documented challenge, but in this unique moment in history, they are demonstrating remarkable flexibility. Support groups, led by staff members or peers, are a good solution for students who are not in need of a clinical intervention.

We have already seen students adapt to online education, so it is not unreasonable

to think they might also show more openness to remote, nonclinical support groups. Organize them for students facing similar challenges — like, for example, staying sober or getting along with now-omnipresent parents. Unique to this particular time, remote support groups could become a highly welcomed and vital service.

Here, too, if the counseling staff is already overwhelmed, other student-affairs personnel can be brought in to help build these support groups, check in with them regularly, and refer particular students who are showing warning signs of needing more direct help.

A fall to-do list. The possibilities and permutations are limitless — a source of anxiety itself for many campus leaders. But we all know the value of planning. Here are some specific steps to make sure your campus mental-health services are as ready as possible:

- Clearly articulate to students which mental-health services will be available, and how to access them.
- Create an easily accessible list of campus resources to guide faculty and staff members in referring students who are struggling with mental-health challenges.
- To offer digital counseling services, adopt a virtual platform that is robust, reliable, and Hipaa-compliant.
- For in-person interactions with students, establish carefully considered policies and protocols that prioritize safety and compliance with local and state public-health guidelines.
- Expand nonclinical mental-health services, like case management and support groups, to help students seeking assistance.
- Conduct an audit to identify potential "deputies" on your campus who are capable of building and maintaining relationships with students.
- Conduct a thorough analysis of space, both within the counseling center and elsewhere on the campus, in order to provide a continuum of approaches for students who return to campus.
- Devise a clear set of criteria to qualify for face-to-face clinical services.

We can't anticipate every drop of the coming tsunami, but thoughtful preparation can make the difference between success and failure. We have enough time and experience to get ourselves to higher ground and, in so doing, protect our students and our colleagues.

Lee Burdette Williams is senior director for mental-health initiatives at Naspa: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. David R. Reetz is director of counseling and psychological services at the Rochester Institute of Technology and president of the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors.

Originally published July 31, 2020

How Colleges Can Ease Students' Fear and Anxiety in Quarantine

By SARAH BROWN

GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Two Smile members, Kori Alejandro (left) and Megan Kemp, pack encouragement bags while a Georgia Tech communications representative watches.

Just seven weeks into her college career, Rhiana Brownell has become all too familiar with the Georgia Institute of Technology's quarantine and isolation hotel.

Within the first month of the fall semester, Brownell's roommate was sent to the hotel twice. For two weeks, the freshmen were reunited — and then Brownell tested positive for Covid-19.

While in isolation at the hotel, she was allowed to leave her room only to take out the trash or use the microwave. She opened the lone window and stuck her head out occasionally to get some air. She paced around the room for exercise. One lap was about 25 steps, she said.

After a couple of days, she looked at Georgia Tech's online Covid-19 dashboard and saw the number of quarantine beds in use: one. She was the only student there. "It did feel weird and lonely," she said.

But there was a bright spot in Brownell's weeklong isolation: the little bag hung on her door when she arrived. It was put together by a Georgia Tech student organization called Smile. Inside were coloring sheets and crayons, information about mental-health resources, stress-relief tips, and a collection of handwritten and typed messages from fellow students.

She lined up the notes on her temporary desk. One was a poem: "Roses are red; telephones are plastic; disco is dead; but you are fantastic!" Another read: "Rona ain't got nothin on you period."

Care packages like these are among the ways colleges are trying to support students in on-campus quarantine, a key strategy for mitigating the spread of Covid-19. Beyond just providing a list of mental-health resources, they're adding points of human contact, even if not in person. They're planning safe workouts and, in a few cases, limited outdoor time. They're creating support groups to help students feel more connected — and to help their parents feel better, too.

At some colleges, hundreds of students have been sent to quarantine and isolation housing this semester. Thanks to contact tracing, a student who tests positive for Covid-19 often lands several close contacts there, too.

As a result, some students, like Brownell's roommate, have already been locked down two, three, or four times within a few weeks. Students in one University of Utah dorm started a leaderboard tallying how many times they had ended up in quarantine.

"This wasn't something that we prepared for," said Monica Osburn, executive director of the counseling center at North Carolina State University, during a *Chronicle* virtual forum last week. N.C. State moved classes online in August after a surge in cases, but about 1,600 students continue to live on campus. The center is offering virtual drop-in spaces to try to combat loneliness.

COURTESY OF GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

The Smile program at Georgia Tech distributes cards, notes, and treats in bags to students who are in Covid-19 quarantine.

"The experience of isolation and quarantine is challenging enough," Osburn said. "And these repetitive experiences are clearly going to weigh down on students."

'ACCUMULATION OF TRAUMA'

Most students get through their brief lockdown period just fine, campus officials said. Several pointed out that students knew coming to campus this fall could put them at risk of contracting the virus and landing in isolation. But for some students, the experience triggers more intense anxiety and loneliness that could harm their well-being — and their academic performance.

Sarah Ketchen Lipson, an assistant professor in the School of Public Health at Boston University who researches student mental health, said isolation, loneliness, and a lower sense of belonging are all "highly predictive" of student well-being and retention.

Lipson described the situation for many quarantined students as "an accumulation of trauma." Beyond loneliness, contracting Covid-19 can prompt fear and panic, she said. Plus, some students might be grappling with other stressors, like racial trauma. "It's a really challenging time to be by yourself and alone with your thoughts," she said.

Smile, the student group that left Brownell's quarantine care package, is trying to make the experience a little less lonely. Smile — which stands for "spreading messages in love and encouragement" — has packed more than 250 bags, said Adam Lederer, a junior who founded the organization in the spring. Georgia Tech, which enrolls about 36,000 students, including 16,000 undergraduates, has had 878 positive cases since the beginning of August, and nine of the campus quarantine beds are currently occupied.

"There was already this disconnectedness in the campus community," Lederer said, due to pandemic-era social restrictions and mostly online classes. "And then, as students started to test positive and quarantine and isolation happened, we noticed that there would be a very large need to spread positivity and make them feel a little bit less isolated."

Amid the chaos of the start of the semester, some students reported that when they went into quarantine or isolation, there were no instructions, and no one from the university ever checked on them. At that point, colleges were mostly focused on logistics, like ensuring they had enough space, Lipson said.

"It's not surprising to me that student well-being was not the first thing that was thought about," she said.

A group of Boston University parents sent a letter to senior leaders last month, asking for daily in-person nurse check-ins for students in isolation and quarantine, daily outdoor time, and the ability to receive mail while in lockdown.

"They weren't thinking about the emotional well-being of these students in isolation and quarantine," said Alessandra Kellermann, one of the parents. A BU spokesman referred *The Chronicle* to links outlining a range of support services for quarantined students. He said the university has conducted more than 200,000 tests in 11 weeks, with 105 students testing positive. BU enrolls 34,000 students.

Campus officials want to support their students, but they don't want to put employees at risk by exposing them to the virus, said Kevin Kruger, president of Naspa: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.

Kruger acknowledged that the stakes are high. "If you don't have eyes on students,

you can end up in a situation where students can slip through the cracks from a mental-health standpoint," he said. "That's the thing we all worry about."

'CONCIERGE RELATIONSHIP'

Campus officials said they've recognized that even a little dose of human contact can go a long way in calming students down. "One of the strategies that a lot of campuses are employing is creating a concierge relationship with folks in quarantine," Kruger said.

Increasingly, colleges have tapped people to do regular check-in calls with each student, during which they'll ask about symptoms, mood, and whether they need anything. At Syracuse University, isolated students get a daily call from a campus nurse, while quarantined students are assigned a case manager in the dean of students office. Syracuse — which has about 23,000 students, including 15,000 undergraduates — has 77 active cases and 191 students currently in quarantine, on and off campus.

If you don't have eyes on students, you can end up in a situation where students can slip through the cracks from a mental-health standpoint.

When students are moved to quarantine, "they have a lot of anxiety, a lot of questions," said Frankie D. Minor, assistant vice president for student affairs and director of housing and residential life at the University of Rhode Island, where more than 100 people are currently in university-operated isolation and quarantine rooms. The campus has about 17,000 students.

"There's a genuine desire to talk about their individual situation with someone who can reassure them," Minor said.

At Rhode Island, he said, the students' resident advisers check in every day. Health staff try to do so every other day, he said, but "the sheer volume" — URI is about to start using its second quarantine hotel — has made that more difficult.

With athletics postponed until the spring, some athletic department staff members have been pitching in, too. Assistant coaches have stayed at the quarantine hotel in the evenings, Minor said. But even that extra support hasn't been quite enough: The university is about to hire someone to oversee the two quarantine hotels and handle "the logistical details of managing students' well-being," he said.

Kruger said he's seen other colleges also doing some "last-minute hiring."

One of the toughest mental-health challenges associated with college-operated quarantine facilities is that, in most cases, students can't leave their rooms. But at Rhode Island, quarantined students — those who have not tested positive for the virus — can go outside during a set time. That's permitted by guidance from the state's health department, Minor said.

They have to wear masks the whole time, can't gather, and can't leave the property, he said. Administrators had considered offering distanced, masked outdoor yoga or workouts for quarantined students, he said, but "we couldn't quite pull it off."

At Syracuse, students can sign up for virtual personal-training sessions, with workouts adapted for their small rooms, said Cory Wallack, executive director of health and wellness. "Just because you're in an isolation room or quarantine room doesn't mean you should let go of those parts of your life," he said during last week's *Chronicle* forum.

Syracuse offers a virtual support group once a week for students in isolation and quarantine, Wallack said, and — in a first for the university — there's now a support group for their parents.

The university, Wallack said, is "really trying to provide those parents two things. One is an outlet for their own anxiety. 'My

student's tested positive. What does that mean?'" Then, he and other staff members offer tips on supporting their children while they're in lockdown.

"In some cases, they're feeding the anxiety of the students as well," he said. "So we want to give those family members a place where they can place their anxiety."

At Rhode Island, where more than half of students are from the small state, many families are within a short drive of the campus, Minor said. Some parents have camped out in the quarantine hotel's parking lot and talked on the phone to their children, who can see them from their window. One parent even put up a scarecrow outside the building with a "get well soon!" balloon.

"None of us have ever done this before," Minor said. Safety and mitigating the spread of Covid-19 is the first priority. But he and his staff are also trying to accommodate "basic human nature."

Sarah Brown is a senior reporter who covers campus culture, including Title IX, race and diversity, and student mental health for The Chronicle.

Originally published October 9, 2020

Colleges Are Canceling Spring Break. In Its Place: 'Wellness Days.'

By BECKIE SUPIANO

CHRONICLE ILLUSTRATION, GETTY IMAGES

As colleges announce their spring-semester plans, a pattern has emerged: Spring break is out, and "wellness days" are in.

From a public-health standpoint, canceling spring break makes sense. The prospect that millions of young people will leave college towns and fan out across the globe — some of them meeting elsewhere to party in large groups — is clearly at odds with efforts to contain Covid-19.

But asking students — and their instructors — to slog through another pandemic semester with no break at all could be detrimental to mental health, not to mention learning.

Enter the "wellness day." A growing number of colleges have announced plans to cancel class on a handful of days sprinkled throughout the spring semester. The trend seems to be putting wellness days in midweek, perhaps with the thought that creating a long weekend could encourage travel or drinking. Some colleges plan to offer wellness programming on the selected days; others will just give students a day off.

It's an understandable and surely well-intended move. A few scattered days off may not be the same as a week off, or even a long weekend, but it's better than nothing. A single, planned day off could offer needed respite — or simply be spent catching up on work or a backlog of chores.

Perhaps that explains why students' response to the idea has varied. At the University of Pennsylvania, the Undergraduate Assembly passed a resolution asking the administration to add wellness days after it canceled spring break, *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, its student paper, has reported.

But other colleges that have added the days have drawn student pushback. "That the university thinks a mere two days off in the middle of the week are enough to help students cope with an increasingly stressful semester only shows that administrators are out of touch with the needs of their students," one student wrote in an op-ed column for *The Massachusetts Daily Collegian*, the student paper at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Students are completing what "felt like the longest semester ever," Ana Pietrewicz, a junior journalism and political-science major who wrote the UMass op-ed, said in an interview. At home, Pietrewicz said, she has additional responsibilities that make it harder to focus on her courses than when she's on campus. Courses and college life have been upended. And then there's the pandemic itself. "There's so much going on in the world right now," Pietrewicz said. "Having those breaks is important; it's more important than ever."

Can a few days off sprinkled through the semester give students the break they badly need?

WHAT MAKES A BREAK WORK

While wellness days have been presented as a replacement for spring break, no one seems to be suggesting that they're its equivalent. Wellness days are a concession, a nod to the fact that students haven't been getting their usual midsemester breaks, and that they're suffering for it.

But why do students need a break, anyhow? And are wellness days able to provide one?

As a general rule, breaks help people regroup. "We use them to catch up on work," said Sarah Rose Cavanagh, an associate professor of psychology at Assumption University, in Massachusetts, who is working on a book about student mental health. "We use them to catch up on some assignments; we use them to catch up on things we've been neglecting while we didn't have breaks, whether that be other life responsibilities — or email."

But work is not the only thing people catch up on during a break. There's also sleep, exercise, and social connection, said Cavanagh, who is also interim director of the university's D'Amour Center for Teaching Excellence. All of those activities, she added, support mental health.

Breaks matter for learning, too: Studies suggest that taking them can improve attention and performance.

One reason the usual breaks in the academic calendar matter is that "we're used to them," Cavanagh said. "If we never had them to start with, we would pace ourselves differently, both in terms of the workload and in terms of figuring out how to build in our own breaks." That's true of both students and professors, she said.

If students need breaks under normal circumstances, it stands to reason they especially need them now. College life has grown unfamiliar and unpredictable on top of however the pandemic is affecting students personally. Many of the healthy ways colleges encourage students to manage stress and feel connected on campus — join a student group! attend a big event! — are hard to square with Covid-19 precautions, while the destructive ways people decompress, like relying on alcohol, are just as available.

If students need breaks under normal circumstances, it stands to reason they especially need them now.

Cavanagh, for one, is wary of how some colleges have avoided giving students long weekends. Colleges may think they're making it less likely students will party, she said. But getting less of a break will only add to their stress, and many of them will drink to cope. "You're making things potentially worse, instead of better, in terms of students' choices with regard to stress reduction," she said.

One way a single day off might be more restorative, Cavanagh said, is if it comes as a surprise. Some colleges give such days off as a matter of course; Davidson College did so this semester, giving students a day off after canceling fall break. It seemed to go over well.

But an unannounced break means students can't plan to travel — or do much of anything else. Instead, Cavanagh said, "everything's canceled" — like a snow day. (Some colleges have also gotten rid of those, figuring that students can simply Zoom into class, should bad weather arise.)

CAMPUS CONTEXT

Wellness days are a good idea in concept, said Will Meek, global director of mental health and wellness at the Minerva Schools at KGI, an undergraduate program. As is the case for most programs, success comes down to how they're designed and rolled out, said Meek, a former director of counseling and psychological services at Brown University.

That requires understanding the culture — and subcultures — of a campus community, Meek said. "Does our campus celebrate big," he said, "and we all put our work down and come together around some big events," like how game days work at a big football school? "There's other places where it's sort of like, we're going to have a break so you can catch up, because we know this is a crucial part of the semester." A well-designed break, he said, matches the campus culture.

Colleges should also be mindful that giving students and faculty members a break could mean creating more work for the staff, Meek added, especially if additional programming will be offered.

Any programming, Meek said, should account for the fact that not all students will need the same thing from a break. Meek uses a model that considers key components of mental health, including how well people handle stress and emotions, their relatedness with others, and their comfort with who they are.

Ideally, a college would give students a similar framework for thinking about different aspects of mental health, allow them to decide what would be most restorative for them, and support different ways to meet those varied needs. So a student who's behind on coursework could use the day to

catch up, Meek said. One who's focused on study at the expense of seeing friends or sleeping could socialize — or just take a nap.

A college, then, could provide socially distanced opportunities for students to relax or exercise, Meek said, and make them all optional.

But there's no substitute for listening to students. Ultimately, Meek said, figuring out "what are students asking for, what do they need, and being responsive as an institution to that is going to have a lot bigger chance of success."

Beckie Supiano is a senior reporter who writes about teaching, learning, and the human interactions that shape them for The Chronicle.

Originally published December 10, 2020

From breaking news to key insights to real-world advice, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* is dedicated to serving academic leaders and professionals. Our newsletters, subscriptions, special reports, virtual events, and exclusive data projects provide a comprehensive view of the latest trends and critical issues affecting academe. For more than 50 years, higher-education professionals from around the world have trusted *The Chronicle*'s in-depth reporting and analysis to understand their world and make informed decisions.

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

1255 Twenty-Third Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037
202 466 1000 | Chronicle.com