



## Texas Schools Project and Texas Success Center

### Research Opportunity: Approaches to Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Community College Students

#### Summary

Since the start of the pandemic, increasing numbers of college students report suffering from mental health challenges. Community colleges risk not being able to meet their target completion goals if they are unable to support their students' mental health needs. This qualitative study examines how Texas community colleges are responding to the student mental health crisis by collecting data from surveys and focus groups with college administrative staff. This research aims to provide a better understanding of how Texas community colleges approach supporting student mental health and to pinpoint where more resources are needed to improve student mental wellbeing.

#### Background

Increasing evidence shows that college students, particularly low-income students and students of color, are struggling with mental health (Anderson, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and economic uncertainty have disproportionately affected these student groups, making them more vulnerable to emotional distress and poorer mental health outcomes. Students who exhibit signs of or have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder have a harder time staying in school and perform worse relative to those who do not face mental health challenges (Breslau et al., 2008; Collins and Mowbray, 2005), underscoring the importance of meeting the mental health needs of college students to advance equitable educational opportunities in Texas. Community colleges, where traditionally underserved students are typically overrepresented, are a critical frontline in higher education's effort to mitigate the consequences of poor mental health on college student success.

#### Study Approach

The proposed study, financially supported by the Trellis Foundation and conducted by the University of Texas at Dallas in partnership with the RAND Corporation, will contribute to the current knowledge base on student mental health and equity in higher education. This study will examine how a representative sample of Texas community colleges are meeting student demand for mental health support, particularly among low-income students and students of color, and the extent to which they are implementing approaches deemed promising or effective according to research. In addition, this study will provide useful insight into the constraints and the challenges Texas community colleges face as they grapple with their students' mental health needs and pinpoint opportunities to improve student mental health supports. Finally, this study has the potential to spot and highlight innovative mental health supports implemented in Texas that are absent from the existing research base.

We will begin collecting data starting in Fall 2022. A total of 10 community colleges will be selected to participate in the study based on a random sampling strategy that will allow UTD and RAND to generalize findings to the wider Texas community college sector. Participation in the study will require one college administrator to complete a 15-minute online survey that will gather college-specific information on: (a) programs that support student mental health, (b) efforts to collect student mental health data, and (c) faculty and staff trainings to increase awareness around student mental health issues and identify students in mental distress. In addition, participation will require a select number of college administrators and staff to engage in an online focus group. This focus group will collect data

on how colleges approach addressing student mental health challenges, how they integrate efforts to student mental health with efforts to support student success, and the constraints they encounter that prevent them from meeting their students’ mental health needs.

**Products and Dissemination**

A report and a policy brief documenting study findings and policy implications will be released in Fall 2023. The research team will work with TACC to disseminate findings from the study to Texas college leaders and administrators via an in-person learning session at the Texas Pathways Institute and a recorded webinar. This baseline, Texas-focused study will play a critical role in evidence-based strategy making around student mental health supports by distilling where support and guidance are needed to reverse the decline in student mental health, particularly among students who face disproportionate adversity and barriers in obtaining educational success.

**Timeline**

Table 1 shows the timeline for the remainder of the study, which began in November 2021 and will conclude in Fall 2023. The research team has already developed protocols and recruitment material for the qualitative component of the study and will conduct focus groups with administrators in Fall 2022. A final report will be released in Fall 2023.

**Table 1: Timeline**

	2022		2023		
	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3
Administrator Focus Groups	X	X			
Reporting					Final

**Project Staff**

*Principal Investigator*  
 Dr. Holly Kosiewicz  
 Researcher – [Texas Schools Project](#)  
 School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences  
 The University of Texas at Dallas  
 hkosiewicz@utdallas.edu

*Co-Principal Investigator*  
 Dr. Trey Miller  
 Associate Professor of Economics  
 School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences  
 The University of Texas at Dallas  
 tmiller@utdallas.edu

*Co-Principal Investigator*  
 Dr. Heidi Kane  
 Associate Professor of Psychology  
 School of Brain and Behavioral Sciences  
 The University of Texas at Dallas  
 hsk140330@utdallas.edu

*Co-Principal Investigator*  
 Dr. Lisa Padilla  
 Behavioral and Social Scientist  
 The RAND Corporation  
 lsontang@rand.org