



# Supporting Student Mental Health

## Findings from Texas Community Colleges

**C**ommunity colleges and the broader U.S. higher education system are struggling to respond to rising rates of mental health problems among students. Without adequate mental health supports, students risk a wide variety of serious and lasting consequences.

Confronted with these issues, federal, state, and college officials lack research guidance about the effectiveness of campus- and system-level mental health responses at community colleges—and how such efforts might integrate with schools' other student support services.

In *Understanding How Texas Community College Campuses Are Supporting Student Mental Health*, RAND researchers documented their collaboration with University of Texas, Dallas researchers who led the study of ten Texas community colleges' approaches to supporting student mental health. The research team found that while the schools offer a variety of mental health supports, many of these approaches are not evidence-based, and few target students at higher risk of mental illness (e.g., Black, Indigenous, and other students of color; students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning [LGBTQ]; and first-generation college students). The research team also identified various challenges to supporting student mental health, including schools' limited resources and care capacity and students' low awareness of mental health supports.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Community colleges in the study have applied numerous strategies to support student mental health; however, many of these strategies were not evidence-based and few targeted students at higher risk of mental illness.
- Most of the schools have begun to weave student mental health resources throughout their systems (e.g., cross-department behavioral intervention teams, student programming, course content) and organizational cultures (e.g., shared belief that student mental health is important).
- Colleges reported various challenges to addressing student mental health more effectively, including a lack of student awareness of mental health resources, stigma around help-seeking, schools' limited capacity to meet diverse mental health needs, and a lack of consistent funding.

Drawing on the key findings, the research team offered the following recommendations to community colleges and policymakers in Texas, which may also pertain to the broader U.S. higher education system:

- Develop a formal, comprehensive plan to expand evidence-based supports for student mental health.
- Develop a communication plan that repeatedly disseminates information about college-provided mental health resources to increase student awareness of those supports.
- Develop and formalize agreements with external mental health care providers to ensure that all student mental health needs are met.
- Develop an adequate and sustainable funding model for systemic efforts to support student mental health in the community college setting.

## Research Approach

Between October 2022 and March 2023, the research team conducted interviews with mental health counselors, program implementers, and administrators from a representative sample of ten of Texas's 50 community colleges. The research team analyzed the interview data with the following aims:

- Determine whether Texas community colleges are implementing a public health approach to supporting student mental health.
- Describe what colleges are doing to support student mental health.
- Describe how colleges are integrating these efforts throughout their organizations.
- Identify challenges that these community colleges face in addressing the rising need for student mental health support.

## Study Findings

The report examines each research question in depth, as summarized here.

### To What Extent Are Texas Community Colleges Implementing a Public Health Approach to Supporting Student Mental Health?

Administrators and counselors from most of the sampled colleges struggled to articulate whether or not their schools use a public health approach to support student mental health. Collectively, however, interviewees noted that mental health supports should

- include environments that promote student mental health
- target specific programming and supports for students who are at risk of poor mental health or showing emotional distress
- provide treatment.

On balance, interviewees recognized the complex interplay of individual, interpersonal, organizational, and societal factors that affect mental health. It was clear that the colleges' efforts were guided by holistic approaches to supporting student mental health.

### What Efforts Are Texas Community Colleges Engaging in to Support Student Mental Health?

The colleges in the study implemented a variety of supports to promote student mental health. Most of these supports broadly aimed to

- increase student awareness about campus resources to support their mental health and educate students more generally about their mental health

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It was clear that the colleges' efforts were guided by holistic approaches to supporting student mental health.

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Only a few colleges explicitly mentioned changing organizational policies to improve student mental health.

- destigmatize help-seeking and having mental health challenges
- foster campus inclusivity and belonging.

The colleges' efforts to identify students in need of mental health assistance and connect them to support services fell into two main categories:

- *wraparound services* that combined academic and nonacademic supports
- *counseling and external support services* for students whose needs exceed the capacity of the college (e.g., long-term care, psychiatric care, housing support, LGBTQ resource center).

In terms of offering mental health treatment, all the campuses provided short-term counseling to address mild and moderate challenges. Many invested in making available externally provided telehealth services for students. When students needed access to services that the college could not provide (e.g., intensive outpatient care, crisis care, psychiatric care), students were referred to external health care providers.

### How Are Texas Community Colleges Organizationally Integrating These Efforts?

The research team described three major ways in which community colleges have integrated mental health supports into the broader campus environment: (1) structures and policies, (2) processes, and (3) cultures.

Interviewees' statements reflected the universal belief that faculty, administrators, and staff should share the responsibility of supporting students' emotional well-being. Colleges integrated supports for student mental health throughout the college environment,

including in the classroom (e.g., syllabi, course content delivery), student programming (e.g., psychoeducation), resource allocation, and the use of technology.

As for processes, several colleges reported restructuring the roles and responsibilities of departments and counselors to better meet student mental health needs. For example, several colleges engaged in initiatives requiring cross-departmental collaboration. However, only a few colleges explicitly mentioned changing organizational policies to improve student mental health.

Culturally, all administrators and counselors shared a strong conviction that addressing students' mental health needs was within the schools' purviews. However, few colleges have integrated supports into the physical campus environment (e.g., restrictions to the means for suicide, such as physical obstructions to block access to potentially lethal jumping points) or developed policies that address student mental health challenges (e.g., a mental health leave of absence policy).

### What Are the Challenges Facing Texas Community Colleges as They Grapple with Increased Demand for Student Mental Health Support?

The research team described the most frequently reported challenges to supporting student mental health and what colleges have done to overcome those challenges. Those challenges include student lack of awareness of mental health resources on campus, the stigma attached to seeking care, and schools' limited capacity to meet or slow response to student mental health needs. Lack of consistent mental health funding streams likewise challenged schools' efforts to buttress services to support student mental health.

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Developing and implementing a more strategic, evidence-informed approach is needed to guide investments in new approaches, reduce redundancies, and drive positive results.

## **In-Depth Recommendations**

### **Develop a Formal, Comprehensive Plan to Expand Evidence-Based Supports for Student Mental Health**

Because of the resource constraints that community colleges face, developing and implementing a more strategic, evidence-informed approach is needed to guide investments in new approaches, reduce redundancies, and drive positive results.

Community colleges should consider adopting a formal, comprehensive plan to support student mental health that

- focuses on the prevention of mental illness
- integrates mental health supports into organizational structures, processes, and cultures
- involves multiple college officials and employees in connecting students to a variety of mental health and basic needs supports, which effectively meet a diversity of student mental health needs.

### **Develop a Communication Plan That Repeatedly Disseminates Information About Mental Health Resources to Increase Student Awareness**

To increase awareness of available mental health resources (e.g., counseling, basic needs support, financial aid) among students, the researchers recommend creating a cross-media communication plan using repetition and broad dissemination tactics, such as digital platforms, as well as trusted messengers, such as religious leaders, campus leaders, and community-based organizations. That communication plan should reflect the diversity of students on campus, ensuring

accessible language and culturally relevant programs that reflect the range of student experiences and needs.

### **Develop and Formalize Agreements with External Mental Health Care Providers to Ensure That All Student Mental Health Needs Are Met**

Many colleges provided telehealth services through external vendors (e.g., TimelyCare, Meta Teletherapy, Virtual Care Group), and some referred students to external service providers (e.g., community health clinics). Other colleges should consider establishing formal agreements with external mental health care providers to better meet the mental health needs of all students. However, provider shortages and other barriers might require multiple systemic changes to ensure the success and sustainability of these agreements at scale.

### **Develop an Adequate and Sustainable Funding Model for Systemic Efforts to Support Student Mental Health in the Community College Setting**

Most colleges struggled to find steady funding streams to support student mental health. Community colleges should consider external sources (e.g., grant funding through foundations and government agencies) and Texas's new outcomes-based funding model, House Bill 8. Admittedly, the responsibility to secure and sustain these funds can place a considerable burden on the staff involved. State policymakers could consider engaging local providers, higher education leaders, and researchers to develop a plan for increasing financial support and capacity to support student mental health on community college campuses.

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The report highlights the need for continued investment in scalable solutions to address the ongoing challenges that community colleges face in supporting student mental health.

### **Further Progress**

Although the report offers rich insights, the study findings may not be representative of every Texas community college or reflect the perspectives of students and faculty in general academic departments. Additionally, this study was not designed to determine the *efficacy* of schools' approaches but rather to describe what approaches community colleges are using to address student mental health needs.

With those limitations, the report highlights the need for continued investment in scalable solutions to address the ongoing challenges that community colleges face in supporting student mental health. It also emphasizes the need for future large-scale and rigorous evaluations on system- and campus-level efforts to address the major gaps in the understanding of students' mental health needs and community colleges' efforts to meet those needs.

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This brief describes work done in RAND Education and Labor and documented in *Understanding How Texas Community College Campuses Are Supporting Student Mental Health*, by Holly Kosiewicz, Heidi Kane, Trey Miller, Lisa Sontag-Padilla, and Denise Williams, RR-A2552-2, 2024 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR-A2552-2](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A2552-2)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RBA2552-2](http://www.rand.org/t/RBA2552-2). RAND is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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