

Understanding How Texas Community College Campuses are Supporting Student Mental Health

Dr. Holly Kosiewicz

Dr. Trey Miller

Dr. Heidi Kane

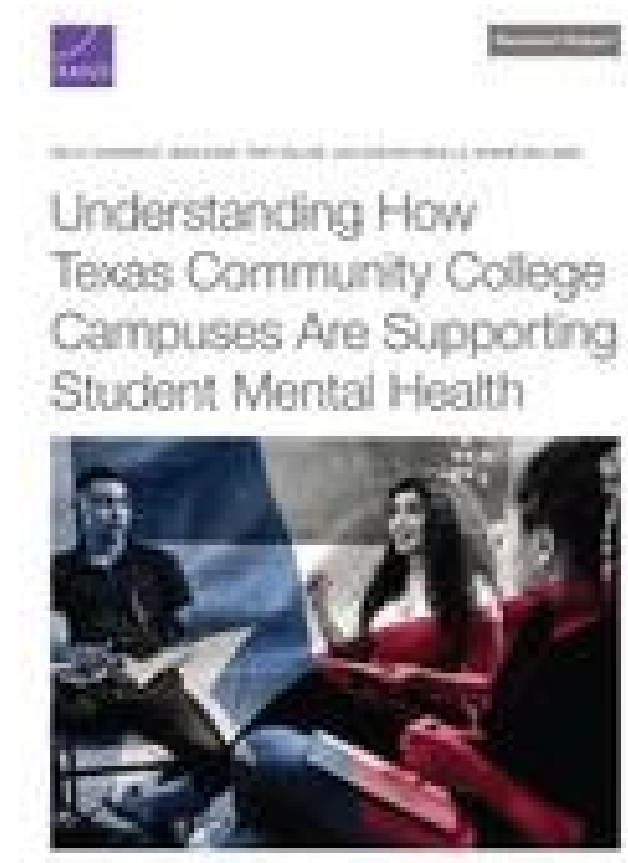
Denise Williams, M.A.

The University of Texas at Dallas

Dr. Lisa Sontag-Padilla – RAND Corporation

Acknowledgements

- Generously funded by the Trellis Foundation
- Supported by an excellent team of research assistants – Arslan Khalid, Genna Campaign, Ariana Plummer and Sami Rishmawi
- Supported by Dr. Kristina Flores and Dr. Christine Bailie who helped with recruitment efforts
- Received insightful feedback by Dr. Michael Dunbar from RAND and Dr. Sara Abelson from Temple University and the Hope Center



Agenda

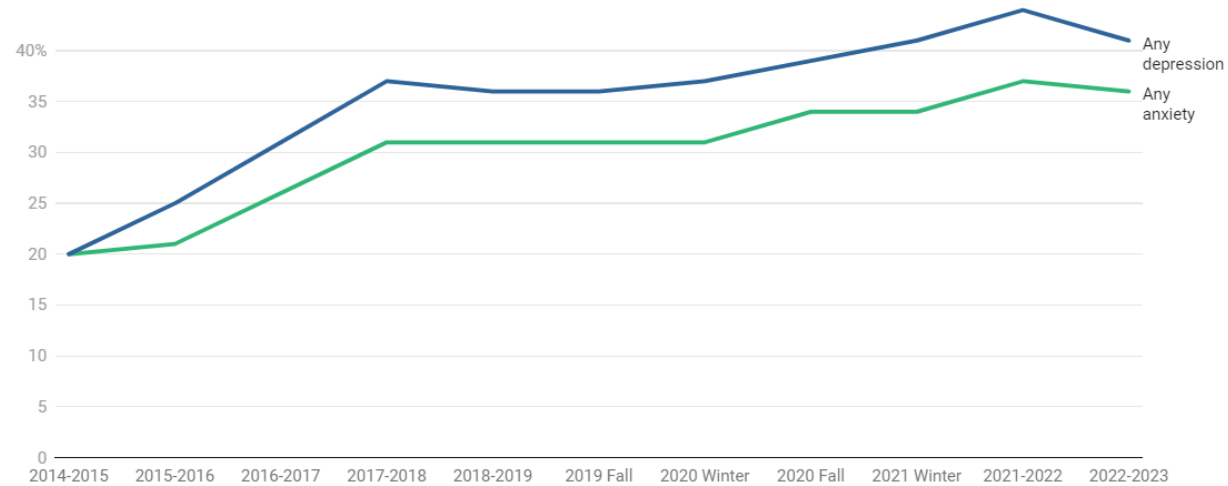
- **Motivation:** Why is it important to research how community colleges support student mental health?
- **The Study:** Key research questions and approach
- **Salient findings**
- **Recommendations:** What can community colleges, state officials, and foundations do to better support their students' mental health?
- **Q&A**



Why is it important to research how
community colleges support student
mental health?

Rising Rates of Students Reporting Mental Health Challenges

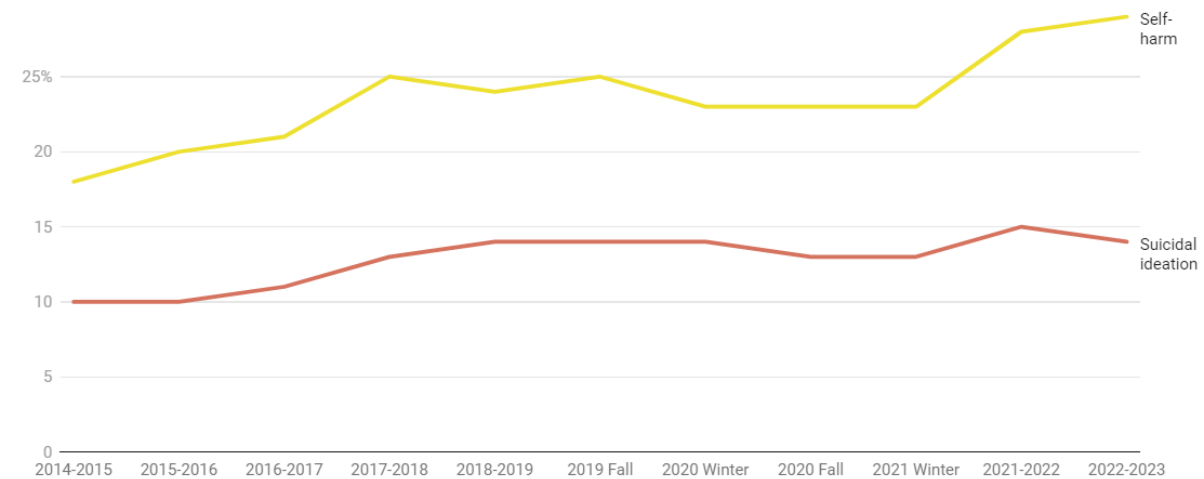
Rising rates of anxiety and depression among U.S. college students



For the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 academic years, annual reports were divided into fall and winter reports.

Chart: Healthy Minds Policy Initiative • Source: [Healthy Minds Network](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Suicidal ideation and self-harm among U.S. college students



For the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 academic years, annual reports were divided into fall and winter reports.

Chart: Healthy Minds Policy Initiative • Source: [Healthy Minds Network](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Prevalence of mental health challenges among community college students is higher

- Relative to four-year students, community college students ages 18–22 years
 - More likely to screen positive for depression, report suicidal ideation, and less likely to utilize therapy (Lipson, et al, 2021)
 - Even higher prevalence rate, even lower therapy use rate for community college students from traditionally underserved populations (Lipson, et. al, 2021)
- Reasons explaining disparities in prevalence rate: Socio-economic status, quality of environmental conditions, access to health care (Allen, et. 2014)
- Reasons explaining disparities in therapy use: financial resources (Lipson, et. al, 2021), mental health-related stigma (Henderson, et. al, 2014), perceptions of need (Eisenberg, et. 2007); awareness of services (Eisenberg, et. 2007)

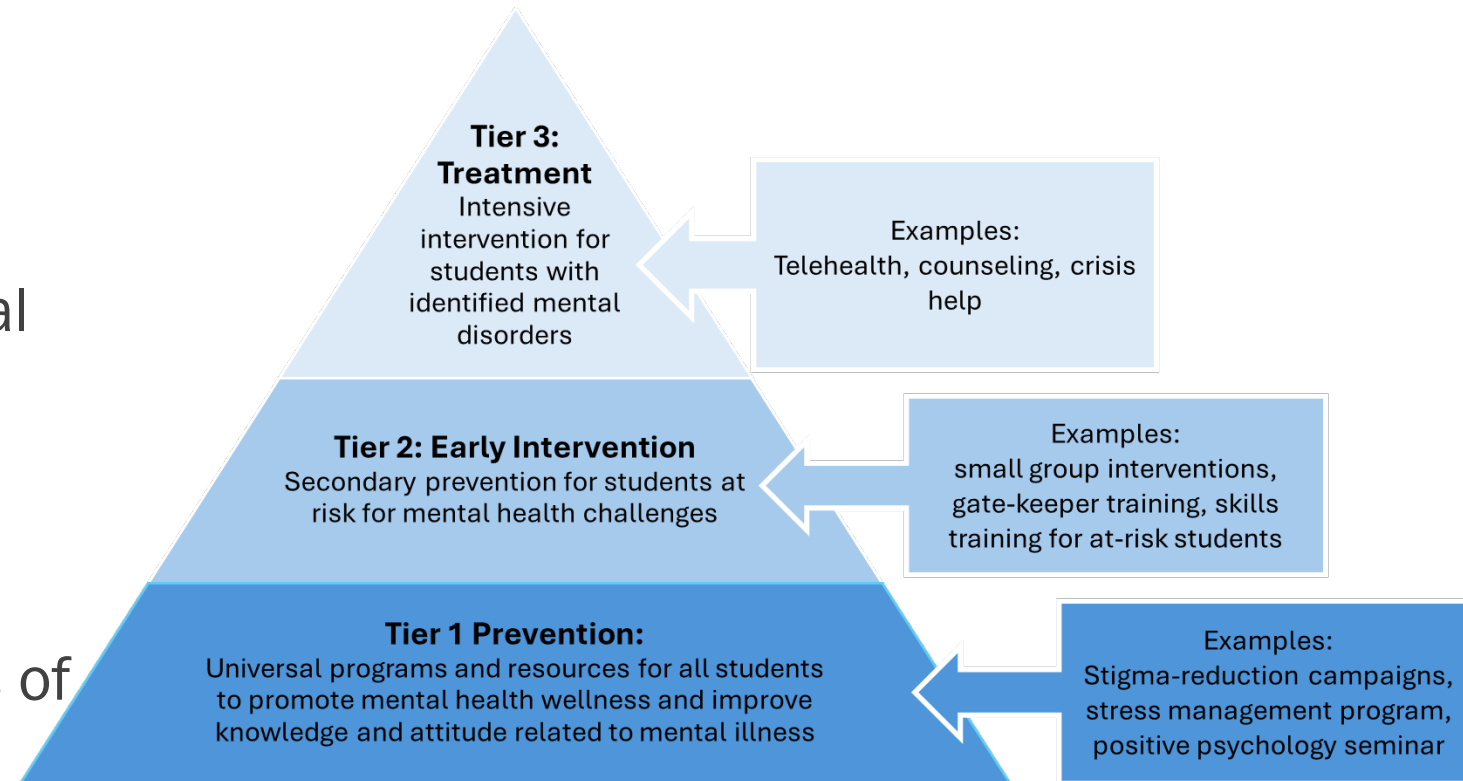
Poor Student Mental Health Negatively Impacts Student Success

- **Mental challenges are correlated with poor academic success:**
 - Lower grades (DeLuca, et al, 2016; Duffy, et al 2020)
 - Lower academic expectations and satisfaction with college (Lipson & Eisenberg, 2017)
 - Higher rates of drop out (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009; Kessler et al., 1995; Hartley, 2010)
- **Several channels through which mental health affects academic success**
 - Use of illegal substance abuse, poor sleep hygiene, lack of exercise, poor coping strategies

A Public Health Approach to Support Mental Health

Key Tenets

- Focused on prevention
- Mental health supports delivered to all students, not just students exhibiting clinical symptoms of distress
- Based on a tiered system of support
- Integrated into the operations of educational institutions



The Study

Guiding Research Questions

1. To what extent are Texas community colleges implementing a public health approach to support student mental health?
2. What efforts are Texas community colleges engaging in to support student mental health?
3. How are Texas community colleges organizationally integrating these efforts?
4. What are the challenges facing Texas community colleges as they grapple with increased demand for student mental health support?

Guiding Research Questions

1. To what extent are Texas community colleges implementing a public health approach to support student mental health?
2. What efforts are Texas community colleges engaging in to support student mental health?
3. How are Texas community colleges organizationally integrating these efforts?
4. What are the challenges facing Texas community colleges as they grapple with increased demand for student mental health support?

Guiding Research Questions

1. To what extent are Texas community colleges implementing a public health approach to support student mental health?
2. What efforts are Texas community colleges engaging in to support student mental health?
- 3. How are Texas community colleges organizationally integrating these efforts?**
4. What are the challenges facing Texas community colleges as they grapple with increased demand for student mental health support?

Guiding Research Questions

1. To what extent are Texas community colleges implementing a public health approach to support student mental health?
2. What efforts are Texas community colleges engaging in to support student mental health?
3. How are Texas community colleges organizationally integrating these efforts?
4. What are the challenges facing Texas community colleges as they grapple with increased demand for student mental health support?

The Study

- **Qualitative study**
 - **Time:** October, 2022 – April, 2023 (predates end of 88th regular session)
 - **Sample:** 10 Texas community colleges that varied by: 1) their location, 2) their size, and 3) the characteristics of their student population
 - **Data:** Group interviews with 21 administrators and 23 mental health counselors



Salient Findings

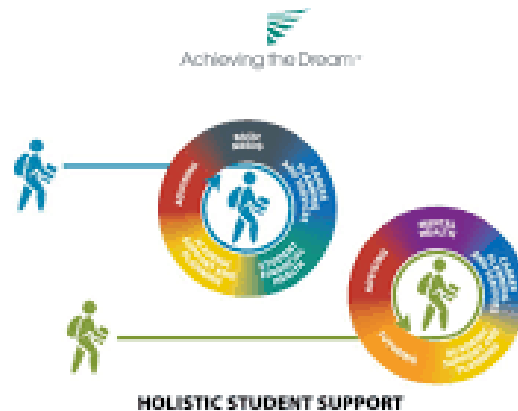
To what extent are Texas community colleges implementing a public health approach to support student mental health?

Most colleges did not have over-arching framework guiding their mental health efforts

- No official plan existed
 - “I don’t know if we have a direct plan.”
- Supported students on a case-by-case basis
 - “It’s really just a matter of identifying really what they’re lacking in.”
- Focused on delivering therapeutic supports
 - “We’re developing treatment plans for, like, a solution-focused approach in which we want to work on just to a small problem.”

However, they did involve multiple stakeholders to support student mental health

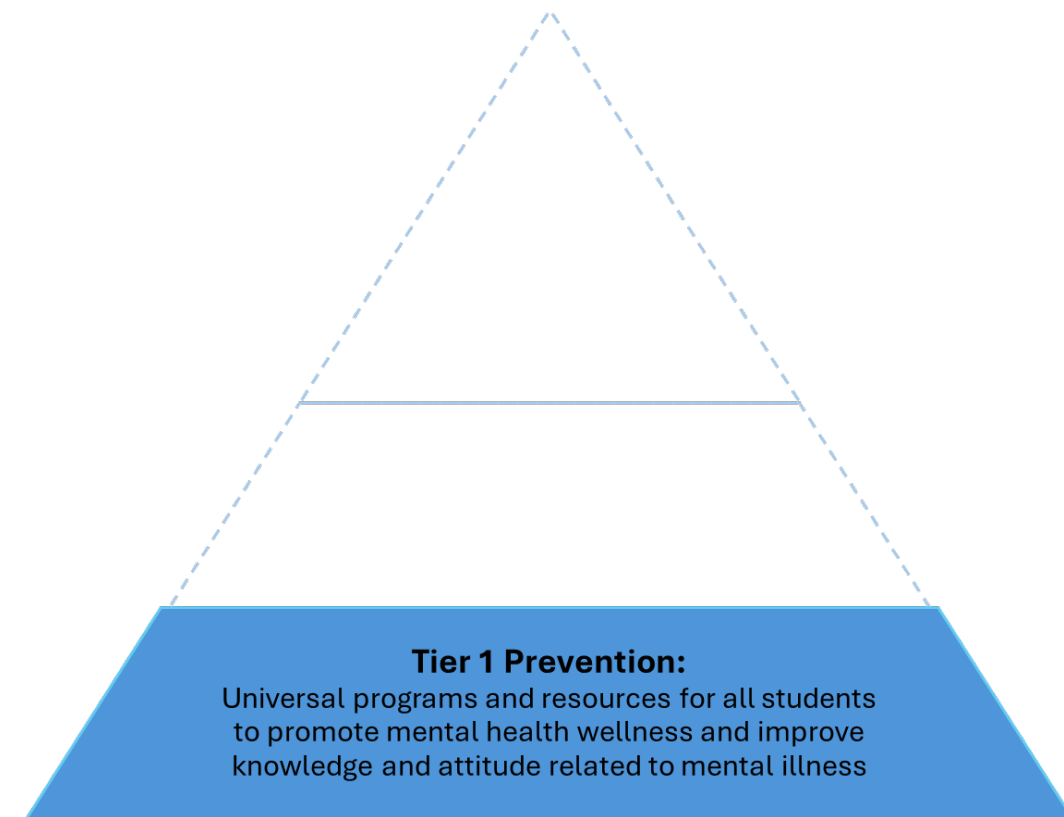
- **“Constant touch”**: Strong adherence to the idea that supporting student mental health should involve a wide array of college employees
 - Gatekeeper and mental health trainings involving faculty and staff
 - Use of early alert systems to help faculty and staff connect students to appropriate supports



What efforts are Texas community colleges engaging in to support student mental health? How are colleges integrating these efforts?

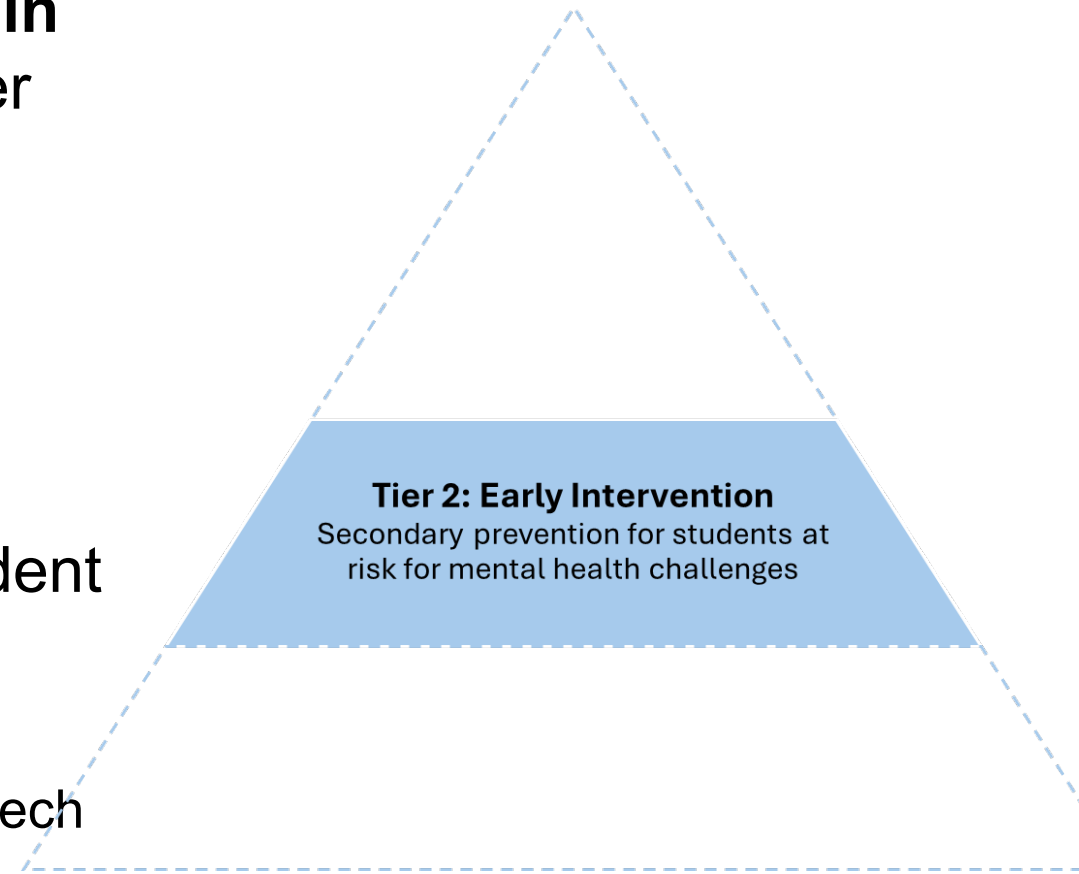
Tier 1 Efforts: Focused on Increasing Student Awareness of Mental Health Resources

- Educating students on how to access counseling services, and external mental health resources
 - Integrated into student programming and course content
- Also, delivered: psycho-educational programming, stigma reduction efforts, and fostering inclusive environments (e.g. “a culture of care” / “a culture of nurturing”)



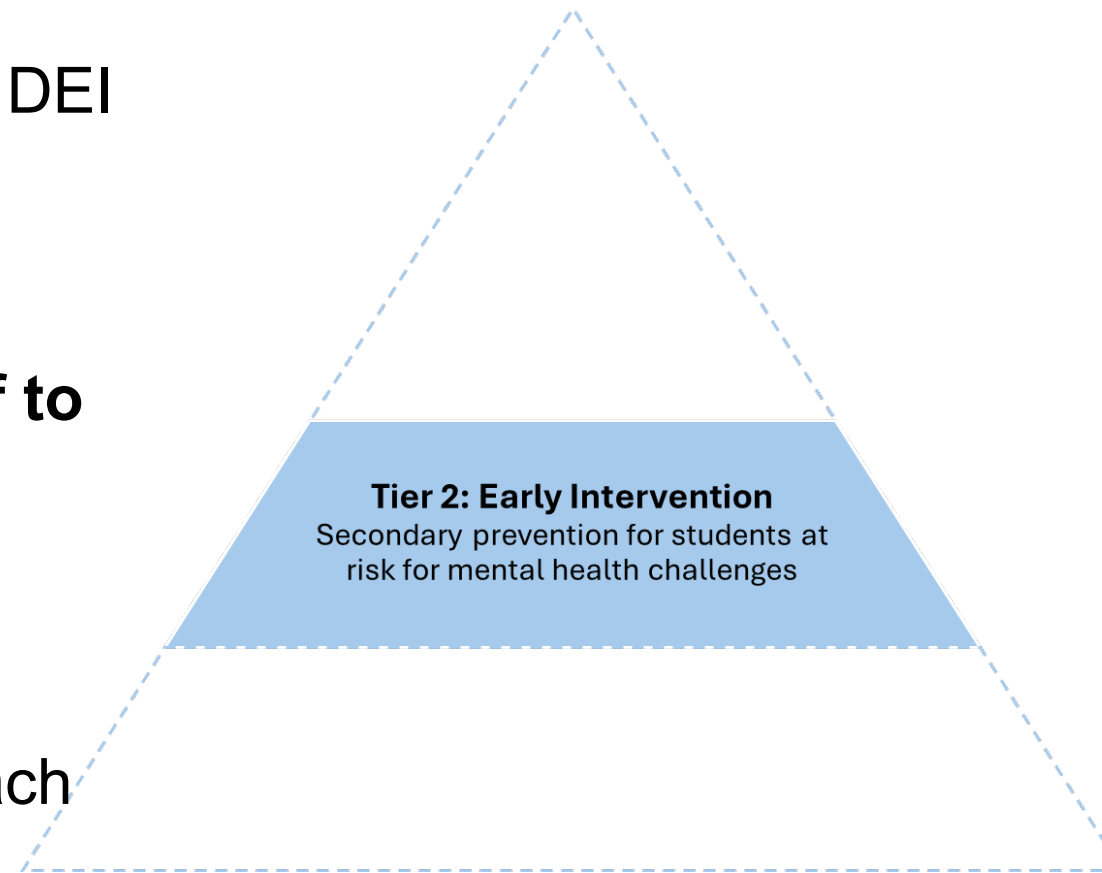
Tier 2 Efforts: Focused on Creating and Implementing Referral Systems

- **Increasing capacity to identify students in need of early intervention:** (a) Gatekeeper and mental health trainings, and (b) mental health screenings
 - Integrated into faculty and staff trainings and student programming
- **Creating mechanisms to connect distressed students to supports:** (a) student success management systems and online reporting tools, (b) triage support
 - Integrated into resource allocation decision, tech use, new support structures (e.g. Behavioral Intervention Team)



Tier 2 Efforts: Provided supports to traditionally underserved students

- **Delivering supports through student programming:** Cross collaborations with DEI offices, financial aid, facilitating student affinity groups
- **Increasing capacity of counseling staff to meet unique student needs:** Student population specialists, therapy specialists
- **Providing training to support various student populations:** 1) learn how to teach to different students, 2) develop cultural competency



Tier 3: Provided short-term treatment for moderate mental health challenges

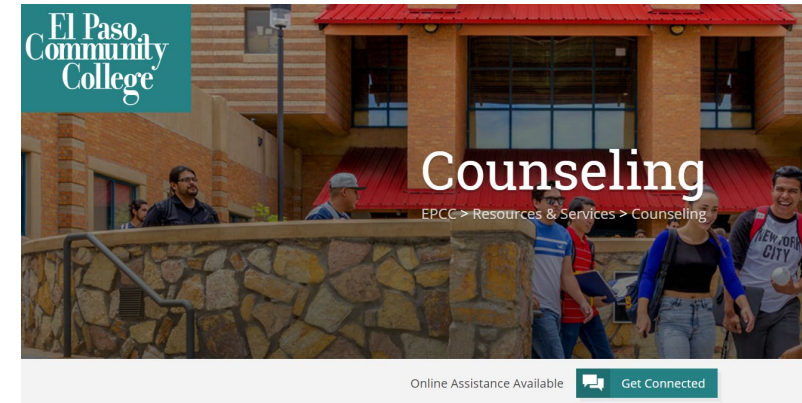
- **Offering in person and online counseling services**
 - Time and stress management, transitional issues, depression, and anxiety
 - Number of sessions limited to 6-8 sessions per semester
 - Allocating resources to hire more counselors, expand hours
- **Providing access to external services support**
 - External telehealth services providers (e.g. Timely Care, Virtual Care Group)
 - Allocating resources to expand services, including access to primary care and psychiatric services
 - Referrals: crisis & psychiatric care, diagnostic services

**Tier 3:
Treatment**
Intensive
intervention for
students with
identified mental
disorders

What are the challenges facing Texas community colleges as they grapple with increased demand for student mental health support?

Students don't know about available mental health resources

- **Students do not know a counseling center exists**
 - Cost of counseling sessions; how to sign up for a counseling session; or how to contact a counselors
- **Problem compounded several factors:**
 - Many students are commuters (“come here for class, they go to class, and [then] they go to work, and they’ve got kids.”)
 - Some faculty and staff do not know about the existence of counseling services
 - Some faculty and staff confuse the terms “advising” and “counseling”



Pervasive stigma associated with seeking mental health care

- **Stigma was reported as a formidable barrier preventing students from seeking help**
- **“Myths” about counseling fueled resistance to seek care**
 - Common misperception that confidential information is shared with instructors, friends, and coaches and reported in student’s academic record



Limited capacity to meet student health needs

- **Colleges struggled to support students with more severe mental health care needs**
 - Not equipped to provide long-term counseling, crisis care, psychiatric care or diagnose students requesting accommodations
- **Some counselors reported feeling overwhelmed**
 - Can't engage in prevention efforts, and have long waitlists, even when external telehealth services were offered



Absence of consistent mental health funding

- **Texas community colleges do not receive state funding to support mental health**
 - Solution: HEERF funds, external funding opportunities, pass on costs to students in form of fees
 - Lack of funding prevented colleges from advancing key priorities: 1) offering competitive pay for LPCs, 2) improving student records systems, 3) sustaining telehealth services and emergency aid



Difficulty translating ideological buy-in into action, and making mental health a priority

- **Several barriers**
 - Faculty and staff are resource constrained and have little experience supporting student mental health
 - “...may be a bit awkward and intimidated”
 - Faculty under the “academic affairs”, not “student affairs”



Recommendations

Community colleges should develop formal, comprehensive plan for student mental health

Plan Characteristics

- Focuses on prevention
- Integrates mental health supports across organizational structures, processes, and cultures
- Involves multiple internal and external stakeholders



Community colleges should develop formal, comprehensive plan for student mental health

Plan Characteristics

- Focuses on prevention
- Integrates mental health supports across organizational structures, processes, and cultures
- Involves multiple internal and external stakeholders



Community colleges should develop formal, comprehensive plan for student mental health

Plan Characteristics

- Focuses on prevention
- Expand evidence-based universal and early intervention supports
 - Training faculty to alter instructional and assessment practices
 - Implementing universal screenings if there is capacity to accommodate increased demand
 - Implementing peer-led support interventions for at-risk student groups (e.g. Lean on Me, Support Network, Active Minds)



Community colleges should develop formal, comprehensive plan for student mental health

Plan Characteristics

- Focuses on prevention
- Integrates mental health supports across organizational structures, processes, and cultures
- Involves multiple internal and external stakeholders



Community colleges should develop formal, comprehensive plan for student mental health

Plan Characteristics

- Integrates mental health supports across organizational structures, processes, and cultures
 - Conduct a mental health audit where further integration can take place
 - Academic instruction and assessment, physical environment, institutional policies?



Community colleges should develop formal, comprehensive plan for student mental health

Plan Characteristics

- Focuses on prevention
- Integrates mental health supports across organizational structures, processes, and cultures
- Involves multiple internal and external stakeholders



Community colleges should develop formal, comprehensive plan for student mental health

Plan Characteristics

- Involves multiple internal and external stakeholders
 - Provide training to faculty, students, and staff to use student referral systems and identify students at elevated risk
 - Remove barriers preventing use of referral systems
 - Develop formal partnerships with external health providers



Work with state to develop sustainable funding for mental health supports

- **HB 3 but for higher education?**
 - HB 3 funds mental health training for public school employees who interact with children
- **Leverage HB 8 to fund mental health efforts**
 - Collect data to determine which mental health efforts improve academic outcomes
- **Apply for federal and foundation grants, participate in foundation initiatives**



Develop a communication plan to disseminate accurate information about mental health resources

- **Plan characteristics** (Merchant, et. al, 2021; Thompson et. al, 2021, Schmidt & Eisend, 2015)
 - Use different mediums (e.g. digital media platforms)
 - Use trusted messengers (e.g. peer educators, community organizers)
 - Send culturally-sensitive messages
 - Send frequent message across mediums



Thank you!

hkosiewicz@utdallas.edu