

BRADFORD WRITES!
Spring 2024

A Needed Awakening on College Campuses

By Curt W. Barner

For centuries, college students have encountered a new way of life and challenges they have never experienced before. Indeed, college students in the past had to adjust and cope to this life change; however, college students in 2024 are met by different circumstances because of stress factors, such as the outbreak of COVID-19, added to their plate. Author Mary Ellen Flannery (2023), announces that among recent young adults, “the majority of college students (more than 60 percent) meet the criteria for at least one mental health problem.” Unfortunately, many of these struggling individuals state they do not strive for the assistance they need because of a lack of resources and the massive stigma surrounding mental health issues, which can explain the appalling spike in suicides and dropouts. Unfortunately, I have been one of the young adults that has fallen victim to the unaccustomed and nerve-wracking change in life. The major life changes, stress of college adaptations, and additional life challenges led me to drop out during the first few weeks of my stay. With that being said, I know precisely how many students feel, and being one with first-hand experience has led me to speak out for myself and countless others. The young adults of 2024 deserve a community that acknowledges this heartbreaking information and recognizes the need for a growth in mental health resources on college campuses. Additionally, this matter is necessary, worthy of funding, and deserving of greater responsibilities from educators. Now is the time to vanquish the stigma and ignorance surrounding mental health issues, especially on college campuses. Now is the time to equip college campuses with an adequate amount of mental health professionals and train educators for providing emergency and necessary care. Now is the time for these advancements, or we will

BRADFORD WRITES!
Spring 2024

continue to see the number of suicides, dropouts, and mental health issues rise among forlorn young adults.

Since colleges have opened, students of this level of education have encountered a massive challenge, and they have been expected to handle this life change with ease. However, this is not the case, and as of the last decade, stress among college students is leading to catastrophes, such as suicide. Considering a survey involving a sense of belonging in one's college environment, authors Costello et al. (2022), discovered "Americans currently aged 18-24 have endorsed 63% increases in their levels of loneliness and depression over the past decade." Additionally, these scholars calculated that "rising symptom levels have been accompanied by a 60% increase in emergency department visits following suicide attempts by individuals in this age range" (Costello et al., 2022). Similarly, authors Afsharnejad et al. (2023), founders of a coping tactic for this age of students called "Talk-to-Me," encountered that "suicide is the leading cause of death among young adults... The rate of suicidal ideation among tertiary students is disproportionately high compared to the general public and remains a major concern for universities." In like manner, the American Psychiatric Association identified "the percentage of students experiencing mental health problems has increased nearly 50% since 2013" (*Fostering college student mental health and resilience*, 2023). To even more dismay, research done by Flannery (2023) gathered "four in ten college students have recently considered withdrawing from college... And the number-one reason why? Emotional stress." To wrap up these devastating findings, a national survey done by the National College Health Assessment unveiled "almost three quarters of students reported moderate or severe psychological distress" (Abrams, 2022). These numbers are groundbreaking, and the uneasiness being seen among the college students of 2024 is screaming for a revolution. Now, one may be asking themselves, how

BRADFORD WRITES!
Spring 2024

did the rates of such agony and distress combust so quickly, and what is causing this sudden spike? Well, the reality is that the college students of 2024 are dealing with more deplorable circumstances than ever before.

Everyone that has been to college or has known someone to go to a university to further their education knows the stresses that come along with the decision. From stepping off the stage of high school graduation, one is expected to know the answers to so many questions that many have never had to consider before. These questions may include, how will I make new friends, am I ready to be away from my family and home, and most importantly, am I ready to be an adult? Of course, incoming college students in previous years feared moving away from home, leaving family members behind, making new friends, adjusting to the academic load, and the dread of upcoming financial debt was just as weighty as compared to today. However, considering the young adults of 2024, additional components on top of the said stress factors have come into play.

Regarding the new and additional stress factors that the college students of 2024 are now dealing with, an article from the American Psychological Association by Zara Abrams, mentions the numerous reasons of college stress, but Abrams includes the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic as a dominant anxiety inducer. As a matter of fact, complementary research backs Abram's claim. A study done by Afsharnejad et al. (2023), found that only 13 to 20% of young adults experienced "psychological distress related to academic and financial pressures, isolation, loneliness, and poor self-care" prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. Adversely, after the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, Afsharnejad et al. (2023) declares the detrimental impact it had on the tertiary students and backfiring into "high levels of social isolation and loss of casual employment, increasing their vulnerability to self-harm and suicide ideation," which is currently the "leading

BRADFORD WRITES!

Spring 2024

cause of death among young adults.” Moreover, considering the surveys done to evaluate a sense of belonging in one’s college environment, Costello et al. (2022), concurs with the impact of COVID-19 on college students’ mental well-being by stating “young adults are the most at-risk for downstream harmful consequences of loneliness associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.” As we all know, life is incredibly difficult, and this dilemma being thrown at young adults has proven to make matters worse. Finally, regarding research done on academic stress and mental well-being in college students, authors Barbayannis et al. (2022), specify “for college students, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significant changes and disruptions in daily life, elevated stress levels, and mental and physical health deterioration.” The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 created a massive obstruction in the positive progression and mental resilience among college students. Four years later, the undesirable effects of this burden have persisted and remained among the young adults of 2024. Sadly, the COVID-19 pandemic is not the only affliction that the college students of today are facing, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are just some of many.

The misery brought in by the COVID-19 pandemic was just an extension to the struggles of the college students of 2024. Aside from the added stress from the pandemic’s uproar, high school students transitioning into college are expected to flip the switch to directly reach the maturity of adulthood. Unquestionably, this expectation is extraordinarily difficult for a young adult to fulfill. Relocating to a completely new environment with new faces, new responsibilities, and separated from one’s family is naturally going to leave the young person downhearted and desolate. As Afsharnejad et al. (2023), point-out, “the assimilation of adult roles and the challenges of balancing work, study and social commitments increase the risk of young adults experiencing mental health challenges.” On that premise, Costello et al. (2022), draws attention

BRADFORD WRITES!
Spring 2024

to “life-long disorders have their first onset by ages 18-24, and so many first arise during a young adult’s college career.” The age frame for college students (18-24) is the choicest time for depression and other mental illnesses to develop; so, why are we not taking the utmost precautions to aid these students? Along with added stress and this time frame being the most ideal for the formation of mental illnesses, many students have other obligations that they must satisfy. As discussed by Flannery (2023), many college students are responsible for “taking care of siblings, working part or full-time jobs, in addition to taking classes.” Undeniably, the years of college are burdensome and tough. With that being said, perhaps we may be thinking that there are numerous outlets for these students seeking the support they need. I and many others are sad to say that the answer to this question is no, there are not enough resources for college students seeking and receiving the help they need.

College universities across the globe are experiencing difficulties with adequately providing resources and forms of help for the massive number of students in need. The massive outbreak of mental health issues steadily rising would make one think that the number of professionals and openheartedness on campuses would progress; yet, this is not the case, and this is where the major problem is seen. According to Costello et al. (2022), “only a small fraction of the students who need psychological treatment receive it.” Presumably, as Afsharnejad et al. (2023) suggests, students do not reach out for help because of “a lack of easily accessible, low threshold supports.” Also, as disgusting as it may be, infamy and ignorance surrounding mental health issues steers students away from getting the help they need. In harmony with this reality, Costello et al. (2022), verifies by stating “college students report that they do not seek support due to public stigma,” and Afsharnejad et al. (2023), agrees by saying “help-seeking behavior is low, likely as a result of the continued stigma surrounding mental health.” On the contrary,

BRADFORD WRITES!
Spring 2024

adjunct professor at Olive-Harvey College, Jim Perez, addresses that the said campus's wellness center is engulfed with students reaching out for assistance, thereby justifying why "wellness centers are understaffed and overwhelmed" (as cited in Flannery, 2023). Disastrously, due to these wellness centers being flooded with desperate students, it "has led to burnout among counselors" (Flannery, 2023). As if it wasn't enough, associate dean of African American Affairs at the University of Virginia (UVA), and a longtime college counselor, Michael Gerald Mason, PhD, confesses "our counseling staff has almost tripled in size, but even if we continue hiring, I don't think we could ever staff our way out of this challenge" (as cited in Abrams, 2022). The words spoken by Mason are undoubtedly scary, but the times may be too early to come to this conclusion.

Although Mason's statement and outlook may seem terrifyingly truthful, please take into consideration the following information provided by Abrams, (2022), regarding the statistics involved with the counselor to student rise in demand. As seen in the studies performed by Abrams, (2022), the author claims that "some centers averaging more than 300 students per counselor." Now, an article provided by Wake Forest University, affirms, "according to the American School Counselor Association, a workable caseload for a school counselor is 250 students. When they exceed this threshold, counselors may struggle to provide adequate support to all students" (*Do we need more counseling in schools?*, 2023). Increasing the number of counselors in a staff by three times its original size is a fantastic start, but the mental health crisis of 2024 is nothing like anything we have ever dealt with before. We are talking about a 50% increase in mental health issues seen among college students since 2013 (*Fostering college student mental health and resilience*, 2023). In all honesty, college campuses may have to experiment and keep adding counseling staff members until improvements are being noticed,

BRADFORD WRITES!
Spring 2024

even if this means accumulating five or ten times more mental health professionals. Increasing the counseling staff and providing educators with a foundation in recognizing signs of mental health is the way to “staff our way out of this challenge.”

It seems that the greatest chances of escaping this mental health plague among college students is to equip educators with more knowledge and training to pinpoint issues among their students and hiring more professionals that these educators can refer the struggling individuals to. Universities are aware of the crisis occurring within their communities, and they are fully capable of providing the funds to invest in educators training. As claimed by Perez, “institutions need to spend the money—and they do have the money—on supporting students and faculty” (as cited in Flannery, 2023). Yes, it is hard for anyone or any organization to put forth a significant amount of money, but what is more important, saving a few bucks or saving countless young and innocent lives? Putting forth the funding is just the first step of this process, and the next step is to require the proper mental health and suicide prevention education that educators need.

Indeed, mental health and suicide prevention requirements are not going to make current educators thrilled; however, this effort and sacrifice is well worth saving countless lives. Even proclaimed by the American Psychiatric Association, “mental health or suicide prevention training should become part of the set of annual trainings required for faculty and staff” (*Fostering college student mental health and resilience*, 2023). Meanwhile, taking into consideration of the understandable discomfort with educators approaching students about their mental health, Mason mentions, “many felt ill-equipped to do so, though, with some wondering if it was even in their scope of practice to approach students about their mental health without specialized training” (as cited in Abrams, 2022). By examining Mason’s choice of words, one can notice that educators are confused on how to take action, but that should encourage educators

BRADFORD WRITES!
Spring 2024

to grasp the training they severely need. How can one sit back, look the other way, and watch that student continue to struggle? Clearly, a professional cannot always be present or available; so, it is time for educators to step up to the plate and confront the calling they have encountered.

Agreeably, current educators should not be expected to engage in vigorous and time-consuming training. Yet, they should receive the basic training and skills to recognize if a student is struggling, and they need to know how to safely deal with the situation that will provide the best outcome for the student. Vice provost for student health and well-being at Johns Hopkins University, Kevin Schollenberger, asserts “faculty aren’t expected to be counselors, just to show a sense of care that they notice something might be going on, and to know where to refer students” (as cited in Abrams, 2022). At the end of the day, educators need to be skilled in detecting the warning signs that are easy to look over. However, educators do not develop their own duties and assignments. If a change is going to be made, administration needs to accept and acknowledge the newly gained responsibility of educators along with every other faculty and staff member on their team. Schollenberger seals the deal by stating, “it really has to be everyone’s responsibility at the university to create a culture of well-being” (as cited in Abrams, 2022). If an educator can notice a student struggling and refer them to a professional, that student will have a chance at making it another day. Perhaps, that student has been waiting for someone to recognize their anguish, and they can finally escape the pits of hell.

Some universities have taken measures to approach this new obstacle and are preparing educators with the qualifications they need. At the University of North Carolina, roughly nine-hundred faculty and staff have received training in “Mental Health First Aid...which provides basic skills for supporting people with mental health and substance abuse disorders” (Abrams, 2022). Also, some universities are utilizing Penn State’s Red Folder Campaign, which “teach

BRADFORD WRITES!

Spring 2024

faculty to ‘recognize, respond, and refer’” (Abrams, 2022). Carrying on with Penn State’s initiative, senior director of the school’s counseling and psychological services, Natalie Hernandez, PhD, announces “staff across campus, including athletic coaches and academic advisors, can also monitor students for signs of distress...at Penn State, eating disorder referrals can even come from staff working in food service” (as cited in Abrams, 2022). Although early, these motions are already making a difference with the wellbeing of the students on campus. In hope, these early initiatives will strike attraction from other universities, and they will begin to put forth their own effort towards helping their students as well. These measures are not incredibly troublesome, and they are more focused on helping everyone in the campus community unite and form a sense of compassion. Unquestionably, these actions need to be done on every campus around the globe. Simple gestures and a sense of care from a peer can make a world of difference to every student.

The rise of mental health issues among college students has reached its peak in the last decade. The fact of the matter is the college students of 2024 have undergone additional stress inducers that are being added to the everyday stressors of college life. First handedly, I have been one of the students that felt such hopelessness and agony to drop-out of school. Due to discovering hope from taking advantage of professional assistance, I have returned and made it a point to publicize the significance of this crisis. College campuses need to be equipped with numerous mental health professionals, and educators need to receive further training to pinpoint a student experiencing tribulation. Now is the time to eradicate the stigma and ignorance surrounding mental health, and now is the time to provide the college students of 2024 with the assistance they need. How many more dropouts, breakdowns, and suicides are we all willing to watch?

References

- Afsharnejad, B., Milbourn, B., Hayden-Evans, M., Baker-Young, E., Black, M. H., Thompson, C., McGarry, S., Grobler, M., Clifford, R., Zimmermann, F., Kacic, V., Hasking, P., Bölte, S., Romanos, M., Machingura, T., & Girdler, S. (2023). The efficacy of the “Talk-to-Me” suicide prevention and mental health education program for tertiary students: A crossover randomized control trial. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 32(12), 2477–2489. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-022-02094-4>
- Barbayannis, G., Bandari, M., Zheng, X., Baquerizo, H., Pecor, K. W., & Ming, X. (2022). Academic stress and mental well-being in college students: Correlations, affected groups, and Covid-19. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.886344>
- Costello, M. A., Nagel, A. G., Hunt, G. L., Rivens, A. J., Hazelwood, O. A., Pettit, C., & Allen, J. P. (2022). Facilitating connection to enhance college student well-being: Evaluation of an experiential group program. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 70(3/4), 314–326. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12601>
- Do we need more counseling in schools?* (2023, May 30). WFU Online Counseling. <https://counseling.online.wfu.edu/blog/do-we-need-more-counseling-in-schools/>
- Flannery, M. E. (2023, March 29). *The mental health crisis on college campuses*. NeaToday. [The Mental Health Crisis on College Campuses | NEA](#)
- Fostering college student mental health and resilience*. (2023). Psychiatry. [Psychiatry.org - Fostering College Student Mental Health and Resilience](#)