

Mental Health: A Brief Discussion

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The most pressing issue facing student affairs professionals in the coming years will be the mental health of college students. Mental health has become an important and visible issue for all phases and segments of American life as a result of a rash of random violence around the country. College students are as affected as everyone else, and this generation of college students is displaying symptoms at an alarming rate (Smith, Fleming, and Dana, 2007). The pressure of the collegiate environment often exacerbates the problems, and institutional resources are under-funded and under-utilized (“Mental Health Means Academic Health,” 2005). Student affairs professionals must find ways to contribute to the resolution of these issues.

The issue of mental health has been brought to the forefront of the public consciousness to stay since the tragedy at Virginia Tech just over a year ago. The United States has seen many incidents of seemingly random violence in the past two decades, with the most famous being Virginia Tech in 2007 and the Columbine High School shooting in 1999. In a span of less than thirty days in 2008, there were three separate incidents of random violence in completely different settings. On February 8th, a student walked into a classroom at Louisiana Technical College and killed two female students before committing suicide. A former student killed six people at Northern Illinois University on February 15, and a sixty-year old man went into a Wendy’s restaurant in Florida and began shooting on March 4. In an article published four days after the Virginia Tech tragedy, Smith, Fleming, and Dana (2007) discussed data from a 2005 survey of approximately 95,000 college students. Nine percent of those surveyed reported seriously contemplating suicide in the past year. Mental health is not only the most pressing issue facing student affairs professionals, it is one of the most pressing issues facing the United States.

In a survey of 277 college students, Soet and Sevig (2006) found that almost a third of them had been in counseling at some point in their lives. Fifteen percent of students surveyed reported being prescribed psychoactive medication at one time or another. Students are coming into college with a great deal of experience with mental health issues, either personally or through friends. The pressures of college life tend to exacerbate those issues.

Students entering college today have had a vastly different experience of growing up than almost any other generation. These students have very high expectations of themselves and their lives. They are used to a great deal of order and structure. They are not happy with tasks that seem to be mundane and repetitive. Multi-tasking has become a normal part of life for many of them (Junco and Mastrodicasa, 2007). Some of these characteristics could be at the root of the mental health problems faced by college students today.

Rubio and Lubin (1986) researched anxiety and depression among college students. They found that students who sought treatment for psychological distress or depression reported many more major life events than a control group. In addition, these life events were more likely

to be characterized as unexpected, requiring a great deal of adjustment, or as an additional source of pressure on the student. Put another way, students who had to make adjustments to unexpected stressors in their lives were less able to cope than those who did not. Though this data was collected over two decades ago, it stands to reason that a generation characterized by its adherence to order and structure will be adversely affected by unexpected events equally or more so than the group researched.

Rubio and Lubin also reported finding that students who sought treatment for psychological distress were generally students who said that they did not identify closely with their fellow students. In other words, they were students who did not have many friends. This finding sheds some light on the issues college students face every day. Students have an intense desire to fit in with groups of other students; this desire can cause a great deal of anxiety. In addition, students are placed under immense academic pressure by professors who believe that a course is not challenging or effective if it is not stressful (Swaner, 2007). Academic pressure also stems from the fact that many students will be unable to stay in school if their grades are not good enough to keep their scholarships.

In summary, students are coming to college with significant mental health histories. They interact with the world differently than previous generations have, but the world is interacting with them in much the same way as it always has. Institutions are combining preexisting conditions with active stressors. This combination is placed in the high-pressure environment of college, and possibly mixed with unexpected life events. It is a recipe for a nervous breakdown.

The current solutions put in place to help students with their mental issues are inadequate. Most colleges and universities offer counseling services in some form. However, these services are often under-funded and understaffed. In 2004, a staff member for the *Crimson*, Harvard University's student newspaper, interviewed 24 students who had recently used Harvard's counseling services. These students detailed several problems with the university's services. Students said they felt the university services took an "assembly line" approach to counseling due to the high demand, with emphasis being placed on getting them in and getting them out. Students are not always able to see the same counselor during each visit, and counselors do not communicate adequately with one another. The students with the most severe problems said they felt that university staff members pushed them to take time away from the university to protect the university from liability in the event of a student suicide. The article also went into detail about suicides on campus, and said that the university police had responded to fourteen suicide attempts between 2000 and 2004 (Kaplan, 2004).

It must be recognized that the problems detailed in this article are only from one university. However, it is disturbing that one of the wealthiest and most prestigious universities in the world has such woefully inadequate services. It is even more troubling that a university whose police department had responded to fourteen suicide attempts in four years would have such services. The article was written in 2004, so there is a good chance that the counseling center has been restructured since then. Still, this article serves to illustrate how neglected counseling services have been over the years.

Student affairs professionals must make the mental health of their students the highest priority. All other goals are superfluous if students cannot function effectively. The ethical challenge for student affairs professionals is implementing effective strategies that balance the needs of the individual student with the good of the group. In a litigious society, one of the primary concerns of all university administrators must be risk management in the event of a worst-case scenario like the one at Virginia Tech. Professionals must ensure that they are as informed as they can possibly be about mental health issues and the individual students who may be experiencing issues in order to make the best decisions. Therefore, the first step that a professional must take is to become educated on the subject matter.

Resources beyond typical student affairs literature should be employed to help the professional become more competent in recognizing and serving students with mental health needs. Institutions could consider providing education on mental health issues as a professional development exercise. Student staff such as resident assistants should also be given similar training so that they can recognize students who may be having trouble and relay the information to professional staff. Student staff members who are given a basic level of training could play a valuable role in helping professionals form a clear picture of the mental state of the campus and to learn about students who may be having trouble.

Mental health education should also be implemented on campus. In order for counseling centers to be as effective as they can be, students must be aware that such services exist, that they are confidential, and that the problems that the students are experiencing are common and nothing to be ashamed of. By educating students, professionals can help to reduce the stigma attached to mental illness and encourage students to talk to somebody about their problems. Orientation or any sort of introduction to college class is an ideal place for a session of this nature.

Finally, professionals must take an active role in the mental health of their students by serving as mentors and confidants. An informed professional can make the difference in the life of a struggling student. Professionals should not try and take on roles that exceed their competence, but mental health is not something that should be regarded as someone else's problem.

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