

Active Minds Position Statement

Recommendations to Empower the Student Voice in Campus Mental Health Decisions

Background

Stronger campus communities result when students are involved in mental health policy decisions and programs that affect them. Research demonstrates that student involvement increases awareness and usage of campus health services;¹ generates new solutions and favorable long-term results;² and increases student academic performance and retention.³ In fact, 85 percent of faculty, staff, and counseling center directors report that student input is very important for the success of campus initiatives, services, and programs.¹

Students know students best. Once involved, their knowledge and readiness to help their peers increases, which is important because 67 percent of students say they would tell a friend they are feeling suicidal before telling anyone else.⁴

Partnerships with students also lead to new solutions and beneficial long-term results. For example, Active Minds and the Student Wellness Advisory Council at Occidental College successfully petitioned their University President to add a case manager to counseling staff, develop a peer counseling program, and provide mandatory first-year education on mental health resources and stress-management.

When administrators involve students in positive change around issues like mental health, the students are more invested, successful, and satisfied with their college experience. Students gain leadership and critical-thinking skills, self-identity, and motivation⁵ that impacts many areas of their student life. Particularly, students with disabilities feel more autonomy and better self-esteem when

included.⁶ Studies also show that stronger academic performance and retention rates² result from student involvement.

As in the example at Occidental College, efforts to improve mental health are often more successful when students are involved. “It’s a constant discussion that’s happening quietly, about advocating for more resources and talking about the needs of students,” said Dr. Matthew Calkins, Director of Psychological Services and Associate Director of Student Wellness Services at Occidental College. “But when a petition, especially one from student groups, is created, it has a lot of power.”⁷

The power of the student voice is at the heart of Active Minds’ approach to changing the conversation about mental health. Each year, more than 15,000 Active Minds students partner with peers, administrators, family, and community leaders to build supportive schools.

Examples of Student-Led Change

In the last two years alone, Active Minds students on more than 40 campuses have successfully advocated for policy changes, including but not limited to:

- Increasing funding for mental health services and staff
- Advocating for mental health training for students, faculty, and staff
- Adding crisis hotline numbers to student ID cards
- Adding mental health accommodation and services to course syllabi
- Integrating mental health into first-year experiences and new student orientations, and
- Creating compassionate leave of absence policies.

There are numerous other examples of how empowering students to inform, create, and implement mental health programs can lead to powerful impacts, including:

- **The University of Dayton, Auburn University, Saint Joseph’s University,** and other campuses have invited students to join campus-wide suicide prevention and mental health committees. At Auburn University, not only do two Active Minds members sit on their Mental Health Taskforce, but the chapter was also invited to meet with and provide recommendations to the University President, all of which were approved. Ultimately, the

taskforce was responsible for adding 11 counselors, 3 psychiatrists, an alcohol and drug specialist, and a performance coach to staff.

- **Lawrence University** students worked with administrators to require that anyone hosting a party on campus complete a training to learn how to prevent sexual assault, which is known to sometimes lead to depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress. After the training, 92% of participants were more likely to notice a safety issue. 83% were more likely to intervene.
- **The School of the Art Institute of Chicago** listened when transgender students spoke up for their needs that impact their mental health, such as a lack of training among staff to adequately support transgender students and insurance coverage for gender-affirming medical care and surgery. The school's health insurance plan now covers gender affirming procedures. Many college counseling and health professionals also use SAIC's award-winning training curriculum on transgender student health.
- **The University of Wisconsin at Madison** surveyed students to learn how high-risk alcohol use among peers affects students of color. Results showed that due to their peers' alcohol use, students of color experience microaggressions and negative academic consequences that are linked to negative mental health outcomes and so they avoid particular campus areas. Campus units are using the information to guide their next steps.

Recommendations for Students

- Feel empowered and take action for change. Know your rights, and speak out about what you know. Your position is important.
- Research your campus. What gaps exist? What structures/coalitions already exist to support mental health and/or suicide prevention on campus? Are students included in these coalitions? Request a seat at the table. (Check out the Active Minds Transform Your Campus program on our website to get you started.)
- Recruit allies, partners, and mentors on campus, such as counseling or wellness services, student government, Active Minds chapters and other student mental health advocacy groups, and faculty in relevant academic departments (psychology, social work, sociology, etc.).

- Research facts and statistics about peer or competing institutions to form thoughtful, strong proposals for policy change.
- Meet and cultivate relationships with campus administrators.
- Learn about funding sources and decision-makers for your proposed initiatives. Insert yourself in the process. Find university allies along the way. A student's well-prepared ask is often more effective than an administrator's lengthy proposal.

Recommendations for Campus Administrators

- Involve students. Include their stories, perspectives, and proposed solutions for student mental health decisions. Invite students who use mental health services, Active Minds chapter members, and student government to join related meetings and coalitions.
- Learn from your students how to better support their mental health needs. Conduct a campus-wide student body survey, such as the national Healthy Minds Study, or lead a town hall meeting.
- Be inclusive. Remember: one viewpoint does not represent all. For example, a student of color cannot represent diverse perspectives and experiences of all students of color. Instead, include a wide, dynamic, and representative range of voices.
- Establish trust, respect, communication, investment, and involvement in your student-staff collaborations.
- Ensure ongoing and sustainable student involvement. Set up a structure or system for student input on a regular basis. Attend student-driven mental health events on campus.
- Partner with students in requests for funding. Students are often the best advocates for funding initiatives. Strong student leaders can also achieve tasks that are politically challenging for administrators. They leverage their student leader network to guide decision-makers in the right direction.
- Consult peer institutions who have successfully included the student voice in their mental health initiatives.

Recommendations for Family

Including but not limited to parents, guardians, spouses, and siblings

- Prepare your student to self-advocate. Listen to and believe in your students. Help them trust their own voice.
- Talk to your students about issues that impact their mental health, including sexual assault and substance use. Ask them important questions, like “How are you doing?” Encourage them to provide an in-depth (versus a short) response.
- Know there are many auxiliary services and student organizations on campus to support your student. They do not need to be in a crisis to speak with a campus or community counselor.
- If your student struggles to navigate campus systems, help them research. Guide them towards actionable solutions. Attend meetings with them if they ask but allow them to share their own story and express what they need.
- Learn with them. If they share information with you, read and discuss it together.
- Family support may be especially important for first-year students, commuter students who live with family, students in crisis, and/or students for whom family serve a critical role in their support system.

Additional Resources from Active Minds

For more information, see these helpful resources on our website at activeminds.org:

- The Active Minds Healthy Campus Award recognizes and honors U.S. colleges and universities that demonstrate excellence in prioritizing and promoting student health and well-being through systematic efforts, with a special investment in mental health.
- The Transform Your Campus program includes free guides to help students create policy change on their campuses.
- *After a Campus Suicide: A Postvention Guide for Student-Led Responses* was created to help students respond to a fellow student’s suicide.

References

- ¹Active Minds. (2017). Active Minds Advisor Survey and Active Minds Counseling Center Director 2017 Surveys. 67 percent of counseling center directors surveyed reported that Active Minds increased help-seeking and utilization of services on campus. 23 percent reported that Active Minds increased administrative interest in mental health and advocated for more mental health resources and/or staff on campus.
- ²Flicker, S., Savan, B. (2006). A Snapshot of CBPR in Canada. Wellesley Institute, Advancing Urban Health. 1-42.
- ³McClenney, K., Marti, C. N., Adkins, C. (2007). Student Engagement and Student Outcomes: Key Findings from CCSSE Validation Research. Community College Survey of Student Engagement. 1-6.
- ⁴Framework for Campus Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention. Presented as part of an invited symposium at the SAMHSA Campus Suicide Prevention Grantee Technical Assistance Meeting, Gaithersburg, MD, January 2007.
- ⁵Alcoff, L. (1992). The Problem of Speaking for Others. University of Minnesota Press, (20), 5-32. Doi: 10.2307/1354221.
- ⁶Duke Center for Child and Family Policy. (2011). Best Practices for Involving Students in Decision Making with DPS. Policy Brief. <https://childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/pdfs/schoolresearch/Kershaw-PolicyBrief.pdf>
- ⁷Flight, Charlotte. "Active Minds petitions to expand mental health services." The Occidental Weekly 01 Jan. 2016: Web. 18 Sept. 2017.
- ⁸Bazon Center for Mental Health Law (2017). <http://www.bazon.org/>

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