

SUPPORTING THE WHOLE STUDENT



Promising Practices for College and University Staff to
Integrate Mental Health Promotion in the First College Year

about

Active Minds is the nation's premier nonprofit organization supporting mental health promotion and education for young adults. Active Minds has a presence on more than 800 college, university, and high school campuses nationwide, and is powered by a robust Chapter Network nationwide.

Active Minds also hosts the nationally acclaimed Healthy Campus Award and produces frequently cited mental health educational resources such as V-A-R for a widespread audience. The organization is dedicated to ending the silence and saving lives by changing the conversation about mental health.

To learn more, visit www.activeminds.org.

The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition serves as the trusted expert, internationally recognized leader, and clearinghouse for scholarship, policy, and best practice for all postsecondary student transitions.

To learn more, visit www.sc.edu/fye.



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introduction

The first year of college is a particularly vulnerable time for students. They are often adjusting to a new way of life in a new environment, sometimes away from family and friends for the first time. Concerningly, student mental health is a growing issue on college and university campuses. National data sources, including the Healthy Minds Study,¹ show a high and rising prevalence of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, suicidality, and other concerns in student populations over the past decade. Approximately one in three students meet criteria for a clinically significant mental health problem. This translates to nearly 7 million students nationwide.

While the causes for the rising prevalence of mental health issues are less clear (researchers are still examining potential contributing factors), promising solutions are known: campus policies and systems that provide comprehensive, campuswide support to students; more resources for wellbeing and mental health; a culture of support and care; and individuals in all corners of the campus community equipped and ready to support struggling students.

To learn more about mental health promotion and education efforts in the first college year, Active Minds and the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition launched a survey in April 2020. Of the 48 colleges and universities that responded, more than half indicated that mental health content had been integrated into first-year experience (FYE) initiatives only slightly or not at all.² Further, when mental health was included, nearly half of those campuses (43%) reported that those particular components were optional.

Other findings point to areas of success: ensuring strong collaborations with counselors and community health providers, sharing information about mental health resources, and empowering student-led programming and discussions. However, many barriers remain, including the amount of time available within the curriculum to address mental health; limited resources, especially in the counseling center; and a lack of training or confidence among staff to teach students about mental health.

This report aims to address these barriers by providing practical approaches for integrating mental health promotion into the first-year experience. To that end, it draws on Active Minds' evidence-based Healthy Campus Framework³ and case studies from campuses that have been recognized for their student mental health efforts with the Active Minds Healthy Campus Award. By putting these recommendations into practice, faculty and staff can contribute to the creation of caring campus communities and productive learning environments that help students thrive and, when needed, seek professional help.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Most mental health issues emerge by age 25.⁴
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students.⁵
- The college years are a critical time to intervene to save lives and reduce the negative effects of mental illness on lifetime educational attainment, social relationships, earnings, and more.⁶⁻¹⁰

recommendations and case studies

#1: TAKE A COLLECTIVE, STRATEGIC APPROACH

Building a strong FYE program that supports the whole student (not just their academic success) requires a comprehensive, strategic approach that ties the wellness curriculum with the mission and values of the college or university and engages a multidisciplinary network of stakeholders from all levels of the institution.³ There are a variety of ways institutions can begin taking a collective approach:

- **Engage a multidisciplinary network of stakeholders.** Common partners in mental health education include counseling services, health and wellness services, health promotion, the dean of students or student activities/student life, nutritionists, and campus suicide prevention programs. However, innovative approaches that meet students where they are — athletic centers, the classroom, the residence halls — with mental health education are highly effective. As such, in addition to typical partners, faculty, academic advisors, athletic coaches, residence life staff, student success coaches, and campus recreation, among others, should be engaged in planning and delivering the mental health curriculum.
- **Address mental health explicitly in the curriculum.** Enlist partners to infuse mental health promotion into related topics, such as stress management, resiliency, goal-setting, sleep and self-care, relationship-building, career development, and finding purpose, among others.
- **Apply a preventative, proactive approach to mental health.** Ensure that mental health conversations go beyond addressing crisis intervention or traditional counseling services to encompass what it looks like to proactively pursue positive mental health and resilience. For example, students can be taught strategies for being more mindful in the first-year seminar, during group advising sessions, or during success coaching appointments (see box, Two-Minute Mindfulness Exercise). FYE programming provides an opportunity to explore mental health as more than just a struggling individual's concern but as a facet of campuswide culture.
- **Measure and report the results to the campus community.** Demonstrate to campus leaders the gains from embedding mental health education into FYE programming and allow the findings to guide future efforts. For example, tracking responses to pre- and post-tests on knowledge and attitudes about mental health and students' confidence and likelihood to seek mental health services when they or their friends need mental health support is a great first step. When possible, it can also be valuable to collaborate with other departments to track the impact of mental health education and promotion efforts in the first college year on the use of services, student persistence, and academic progress.

Two-Minute Mindfulness Exercise:

Ask students to take five slow breaths, inhaling through the nose, then exhaling through the mouth. Alternatively, ask students to think about their favorite place. Ask them to describe it in great detail, using their five senses.

CASE STUDY: A MULTIFACETED APPROACH TO WELLNESS AT DENISON UNIVERSITY *(Healthy Campus Award-Winning Campus)*

DENISON

Denison University is a private, liberal arts institution located in Granville, OH, with approximately 2,300 students. From the time of acceptance, Denison students receive education to support their health and wellbeing. Wellness education, information campaigns, and campus conversations intentionally foster a positive, integrated wellness ecosystem on campus. Orientation curriculum includes early education in positive emotional health and mindfulness. Mindfulness is further embedded into campus life through athletics, library-hosted study breaks, and Greek Week. A unique program for parents candidly presents data on student wellness, particular risks of the first college year, and resources to support students. This work continues during the first year as 80% of new students acclimate to Denison through advising circles, weekly small-group meetings led by a faculty advisor and student peer. The advising circles provide an important support structure and avenue to ask frank questions and learn about myriad resources available on campus.



#2: COMMIT TO SUSTAINABLE, SYSTEMS-LEVEL CHANGES

To fully support the mental health of first-year students, efforts must include thoughtful and deliberate policy, programmatic, environmental, and systems changes focused on identified community priorities with a goal of sustaining the impact of these changes over time.

- **Integrate mental health screenings into pre-admissions onboarding and through self-paced online platforms.** Screening students early can help connect first-year students at risk for mental health issues to the appropriate supports before a crisis. Consider also providing a list of mental health support options for students to access after traditional hours for counseling services and on weekends (i.e., call lines, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and Crisis Text Line; resources lists; and peer support).
- **Expand the integration of mental health concepts beyond first-year seminar curriculum and orientation** to include residence halls, resources packets, FYE websites, advising, parent information, and into campus culture itself.
- **Institutionalize mental health and wellbeing into core aspects of the university (i.e., mission, value, creeds) and introduce them during key FYE initiatives.** This work teaches students that attention to wellbeing is an integral part of college success and also helps make the case for increased resource investment into mental health within FYE.
- **Mandate mental health components of FYE, when possible.** For example, institutions may consider mandating mental health screenings for all incoming students or ensuring that all first-year students complete a mental health course or online module as part of the first-year experience.

TIP: Nationwide, as anxiety and depression continue to rise among young adults, many counseling centers are reenvisioning their structures and systems to adjust to the increase in demand for services. However, there are many free, 24/7 resources for students who may need immediate support after-hours. Add the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255) and Crisis Text Line (Text "BRAVE" to 741741) to student ID cards or encourage students to save the numbers in their phones.

CASE STUDY: WELLNESS GRADUATION REQUIREMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND *(HEALTHY CAMPUS AWARD-WINNING CAMPUS)*



The University of Richmond is a private, liberal arts university in Richmond, VA, with more than 3,000 undergraduate students. In keeping with the University's objective to foster a thriving and inclusive community, the institution has embedded a wellness education requirement, a set of required courses addressing wellbeing and inclusive of mental health, in the first-year experience. It is designed to ensure that every student begins their Richmond experience with an understanding of the full spectrum of health resources available to them. The wellness graduation requirement has been created and designed as a multidimensional collaborative campuswide approach to support student learning, wellbeing, happiness, and success. To select topics, the Health Promotion Department works closely with the Counseling and Psychological Services department to identify the top impediments to academic success and the most common reasons students visit the Counseling Center. Course topics vary each year to address the ever-changing interest and needs of students. It is a genuine campus collaboration with approximately 60 staff and faculty from multiple and diverse departments teaching the courses.

CASE STUDY: THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA'S WELLNESS WHEEL *(HEALTHY CAMPUS AWARD-WINNING CAMPUS)*



The University of South Florida (USF) is a large, public institution in Tampa, FL, with more than 50,000 students. USF's Wellness Wheel paradigm centers on the notion that student success is a function of achieving balance among academic, emotional, physical, social, occupational, financial, and purposeful wellbeing. In collaboration with the College of Engineering, the student wellness team developed the MoBULL interactive wellness app which enables students to self-assess wellness dimensions, explore strategies for improvement, and connect to various USF resources. The app has been incorporated into new student orientation and the first-year seminar to provide another tool to address all dimensions of wellness, thus supporting student success. The university also requires all incoming undergraduate and graduate students to complete life skills modules, inclusive of mental health education.

#3: CREATE EQUITABLE APPROACHES TO MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION

Creating a healthy campus community supportive of all first-year students and their needs means working to address gaps in opportunity that tend to disproportionately and negatively affect certain populations, such as racial/ethnic minorities and those with limited English skills, lower incomes, or holding a marginalized sexual or gender identity.

- **Collaborate with students holding marginalized identities as equal partners and in all stages of planning FYE.** Not all first-year students are the same. As students with marginalized identities are at greater risk for both mental health concerns and a low sense of belonging. As such, it is important to seek their input and learn from their lived experiences in developing mental health promotion and education experiences in the first college year.
- **Direct students holding marginalized identities to supportive communities and affinity groups on campus.** Make it easy for students to learn about and connect with the services, programs, and student organizations that exist to affirm their identities and provide community and support.
- **Train front-line staff involved with FYE in cultural competency.** Campus multicultural or diversity and inclusion staff can help connect FYE staff with cultural competency trainings and programs to better understand the needs of first-year students from historically underrepresented or marginalized populations.
- **Direct students determined to be at higher risk for mental health issues to specialized services.** Many FYE programs now include mental health screenings for entering students and can help identify and support students at risk for mental health concerns early in the process. These screenings should be culturally sensitive to avoid mislabeling experiences among students of marginalized identities. This approach also allows institutions to identify target populations and their unique mental health concerns and to be intentional about addressing those concerns by providing students the opportunity to meet with college and university mental health professionals with similar identities.
- **Work across departments to address intersectional issues for first-year students (i.e., food/housing insecurity, financial literacy, transportation, financial concerns).** Just as student success relies on appropriate resources and support for a host of issues that students may be contending with beyond academics, the same is true for positive student mental health.

TIP: First-year seminars can utilize a guest lecture approach to incorporate topics related to health and wellness. If counseling center staff are not available to deliver content themselves, they may be able to help train peer mentors, peer health educators, or Active Minds leaders as facilitators. They can also review content for first-year seminars and suggest places where mental health can be infused. Campus experts beyond counseling services who can help shape or deliver content related to mental health include health and wellness services, health promotion, the dean of students, campus recreation staff, nutritionists, faculty members with expertise in mental health, and campus suicide prevention programs.

CASE STUDY: THE STUDENT EMERGENCY INTERVENTION PROGRAM AND STUDENT SUPPORT GROUPS AT CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, LONG BEACH *(HEALTHY CAMPUS AWARD-WINNING CAMPUS)*



California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) is a public university in Long Beach, CA, with almost 40,000 students. First-year students at CSULB learn about the Student Emergency Intervention Program, a comprehensive, campuswide commitment that identifies and immediately serves some of CSULB's most at-risk students, including displaced students, food-insecure students, and students experiencing an emergency situation or crisis. The goals are to provide at-risk students with meals, housing, student assistant jobs, emergency funds and counseling — all of which correlate to student success, health, and wellness. They provide a food pantry and mobile app to notify students when there is leftover food available at a campus event. Students also have opportunities to participate in innovative drop-in spaces for social support and connection led by trained counselors, including groups for international students, LGBTQ students, Latina students, Black women, parents, DACA recipients, and first-generation college students.

#4: CHAMPION AND EMPOWER STUDENT VOICES

Students know students. They turn to each other when struggling with health and model their peers' behaviors and attitudes. They are experts in the best programming, strategies, messaging, and approaches to engage students and create a campus culture and climate that fosters mental health, physical health, and wellbeing.

- **Institutionalize a process for receiving feedback and input from students on an ongoing basis regarding FYE.** There are many opportunities for assessing how successful FYE programs are in promoting mental health education, from asking third- and fourth-year students what they wish they had learned about mental health in their first year to assessing knowledge and attitudes about mental health from the participants themselves. Students know best the barriers to accessing mental health education and the ways in which they will best learn the information.
- **Provide meaningful opportunities for students to lead components of FYE.**

A peer-to-peer approach improves mental health outcomes among students. By engaging students in the implementation of mental health promotion, particularly when it comes to leading discussions about self-care, the services available on campus, and supporting someone who may be struggling, peers can normalize help-seeking in powerful ways and demystify what it is like to access services. Students do not need to be experts to lead open, non-threatening educational sessions; however, Active Minds students and peer health educators are often uniquely equipped with resources and insights to be especially effective in this arena.
- **Consider students equal partners in all stages of planning, implementing, and evaluating FYE programs.** FYE programs offer many opportunities for students to gain meaningful leadership development opportunities as they are simultaneously providing an effective peer-led approach to mental health education. By empowering students as equal partners in the work, campuses can unlock critical barriers and solutions for meaningfully infusing mental health into programming.

TIP: Mental health exists on a spectrum. We all have mental health challenges from time to time. We can help normalize mental health issues among students by demonstrating how it may show up for most people in their daily lives and educating and equipping students to be there for struggling friends. We can demystify services by showing students the array of resources that are available to them to support their mental health (both inside and outside of the campus counseling center) and by providing resources for them to have on-hand (i.e., magnets, student ID cards, or pocket guides with counseling call lines) should they need to refer back to them throughout the year.

CASE STUDY: PEER HEALTH EDUCATORS AND PEER MENTORS AT SKIDMORE COLLEGE *(HEALTHY CAMPUS AWARD-WINNING CAMPUS)*

SKIDMORE

C O L L E G E

Skidmore College is a private, liberal arts college in Saratoga Springs, NY, with approximately 2,500 students. Skidmore's FYE seminar program reserves a fourth credit hour for mentoring and co-curricular activities, which often include workshops on mental health and managing stress. Last year, Peer Health Educators provided workshops for each section of the first-year seminar. Additionally, first-year students are matched with Peer Mentors, who receive training on health and wellness campus resources and sharing them with students. One student spoke about the powerful impact of this peer-to-peer approach: "I didn't feel connected to Skidmore at first so I talked to my Peer Mentor. He encouraged me to get involved with student government to meet people and get to know the campus. I did that and felt instantly welcomed and supported. I am still involved with SGA now, and this semester I am a Peer Mentor for one of our FYE classes. In particular, I have enjoyed getting trained in health and wellbeing so that I can help new students. I know from experience that the peer-to-peer messages about wellness are highly effective."



committing to the work

Without a doubt, addressing the mental health of entering college students is critical if students are to make a successful transition to college and realize their personal and educational goals. Yet, responding to the call to take a proactive approach to mental health education and promotion may raise questions among those who deliver FYE initiatives.

Some of the more frequent questions include:

- **Q: How do I advocate for the support and leadership buy-in needed to focus on mental health and wellbeing without undermining the mandate to create a smooth high school-to-college transition and integration into the academic life of the institution?**

If your campus is new to integrating mental health promotion into FYE, take small steps, including those recommended in this guide. Plan to evaluate the impact of mental health initiatives on student participants to help make the case for their value. If possible, loop into existing efforts on your campus to track the impact of health/wellness initiatives on student persistence. If your campus is not yet ready for this work, use national studies of the economic impact of investing in mental health to help make your case.⁹ It is also a good idea to learn about how peer institutions include mental health in their FYE initiatives and to share both your data and peer institution research with your campus leadership.

- **Q: How do we find time to cover mental health within the FYE curriculum?**

Many students report that the first year of college can feel like a blur of guest presentations on time management, campus safety, and alcohol education. They struggle to see how the content has much bearing on their present situation as they struggle to find their way around campus, make new friends, and meet deadlines. Courses that embed mental health content serve students best when topics are focused on the everyday challenges students are facing – such as balancing their coursework with other responsibilities and activities and staying meaningfully connected to each other – and when mental health can be infused into adjacent topics that already exist in the curriculum (i.e., learning how to be there for a friend when discussing roommate or relationship conflict, learning about stress management when discussing academic planning, and learning the differences between homesickness or other painful emotions and depression or anxiety).

- **Q: Our staff and peer leaders don't often have the confidence or level of training they need to help facilitate mental health content. How can we address this barrier?**

You don't have to be an expert to deliver basic mental health information to students. The campus counseling center and other health/wellness partners are great resources for staff training and development. Campuses can also access the content on self-care and how to be there for a struggling friend — meant for non-experts — at www.activeminds.org/VAR.

- **Q: I'm afraid that if we discuss mental health, it will turn into a therapy session. How do we avoid this?**

Avoid overstepping the bounds of the kinds of mental health discussions appropriate for non-clinical faculty and staff by focusing content on everyday mental health challenges (e.g., stress, work-life balance, and being there for a friend, among others) and having resources on hand (e.g., brochures, phone numbers, dates/times of upcoming events hosted by counseling staff) to refer students to as needed. You don't have to be an expert to provide mental health education and resources to students. In fact, you are not expected to be the expert if mental health is not your primary discipline. When in doubt, ask your campus counseling/wellness staff to consult on how to manage these conversations within the context of your typical interactions with students. You can also find ready-to-go discussion guides for non-experts at www.activeminds.org/VAR.

conclusion

During the first year of college, many students experience mental health setbacks for the first time. Depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts are on the rise among college students. More than ever, students need the support of their entire campus community to provide caring, compassionate support so that students can cope with everyday mental health challenges and seek immediate assistance when needed and without embarrassment. As such, the first year of college presents a strategic opportunity to orient new students to the role of positive mental health in overall wellbeing and academic success. Staff seeking to support first-year students through policy and programming do not need to be mental health experts to help. By following the student- and administrator-informed recommendations within this guide, staff leading FYE initiatives can take immediate action to support students' wellbeing and academic success.

additional resources

For information about how colleges and universities of all types and sizes across the country are effectively prioritizing the mental health and wellbeing of both students and faculty, visit www.activeminds.org/award and read about institutions that have received the Healthy Campus Award.

For student-informed content and curriculum regarding self-care and helping a friend navigate everyday mental health challenges, visit www.activeminds.org/VAR.

citations

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