



# Why our students aren't alright – and how to fix it

New tools and thinking to manage campus mental health



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The college experience is inherently wrought with anxiety. Yes, it's a big change for students who leave home and live independently for the first time in their young lives, but it's also a minefield of other life stage challenges. Stress over unfamiliar studies, responsibility for independent scheduling, social concerns about finding friends and fitting into new environments, as well as loneliness and sleep difficulties are all common. In fact, the American College Health Association reports 61.9% of students experience overwhelming anxiety with almost 42% feeling so depressed it is difficult to function. While these numbers among students are cause for concern and action, they also represent reputational and business challenges for higher education organizations. Social and emotional wellbeing doesn't just impact students and their grades. Staff and faculty – the foundation of a vital ecosystem of student support – can also suffer from similar stresses, pressures and challenges to their wellbeing. Left unaddressed, these broader issues can threaten the campus environment, productivity, and in the long term, the institution's reputation and bottom line. As awareness over the social and emotional wellbeing of students, staff and faculty on campus now gains more visibility, particularly post pandemic, new tools and technologies are becoming available to better understand the causes and treat the symptoms. Let's examine what administrators need to know and exactly what's changing.

## Higher ed focus now shifting to a coordinated mental care approach

As in many walks of life, the pandemic exacerbated concerns over mental health in the K-12 educational system. The American Rescue Plan Act passed in March 2021 allocated \$122 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Relief funds, which among other support services, provided funding for counselors, psychologists, social workers and program implementation. Educators received training to recognize student behavior arising from trauma as well as the signs of damage to social and emotional learning abilities and mental health; and Social and Emotional Learning programs were implemented to help students develop self-awareness and self-management. Unfortunately, higher education did not receive the same level of support or focus – but times are changing and colleges and universities are placing a new focus on support and solutions.

The problem to solve is more acute than it might appear. Beyond anxiety and depression, the Association of American Universities reported in a 2018 study by Harvard Medical School that one in five students seriously considered suicide in the past year. Fast forward a few years to today and universities are now recognizing the need for progressive action to support students, staff and faculty experiencing these and other difficulties. As T. Itunu Balogun,

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### T. Itunu Balogun

Deputy Chief of Staff, Office of the President of Kean University

Deputy Chief of Staff, Office of the President of Kean University, says: “Every educational organization has a responsibility to guide and support their students in achieving their academic goals and pursuing their dreams. But it's not just the academic success that educational organizations should strive for; it's also the social and emotional wellbeing of their students that plays a crucial role in shaping their future. By providing the necessary resources, guidance and support, institutions can help their students succeed and make a positive impact in the world. After all, campuses are a community, and by their very nature communities support each other's needs and aspirations.”

Initial action from colleges and universities has taken the form of 1-800 numbers to help students find support and care, with many campuses offering meditation classes and promoting healthy living through gym facilities. But more advanced institutions are now beginning to favor solutions that don't rely so

heavily on students and staff self-diagnosing an issue and proactively seeking help. New approaches seek to use the vast amounts of mental health data on campus to create more connected, intelligence-driven programs and solutions to provide care.



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## Growing need for mental health data and insights to build an effective response

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While momentum is gathering for this kind of change, many universities and colleges still have hurdles to overcome. Data exists that can help build a more effective response, but many, if not most, institutions suffer from issues with legacy platforms and data collection barriers. This of course makes it difficult to understand the true scope and scale of emotional and social wellbeing issues, or prepare a solution, when many university tech platforms remain disconnected. As colleges focus on solutions for improved support, five main challenges need to be addressed:

- 1** Limited data collation – many colleges and universities have limited data sets when it comes to social and emotional wellbeing of their students and staff, with academics and administration remaining a major focus for data. This makes scoping the true scale of emotional and social wellbeing issues challenging.
- 2** Disconnected data systems – data that is collected can be spread across many departments and functions within the institution, making analysis difficult. Information regarding a student's mental health, for instance, may be part of data sets owned by student health services as well as on-campus counseling and residential services to name a few.
- 3** Limited data sharing – faculty members, tutors and college class lecturers often don't have access to the kinds of mental health data that could help them identify the early and ongoing warning signs and symptoms of students in need of help.
- 4** Privacy and confidentiality concerns – institutions must comply with strict regulations regarding student privacy, FERPA, (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), making it challenging to gather comprehensive mental health data.
- 5** Complex data analytics and tracking requirements – most colleges and universities don't have the trained data analytics staff on campus, or the structures required to track data on an ongoing basis, both of which are essential to developing mental and social wellbeing care solutions.



While all of that may sound like a huge obstacle to care, there is a transition now underway as many institutions migrate to the cloud. And this is creating a watershed moment for colleges and universities to embrace the benefits of cloud-enabled solutions and crucial insights.

## Adopting data-driven strategies for better care frameworks

Beyond the disconnected nature of mental health data on most campuses, there's a large volume of metrics and quantifiable data points that could be put to use to create better care frameworks. In fact, according to Educause, the nonprofit focused on advancing higher education through data and technology, an average university or college with 10,000 students can generate as much as several terabytes of data per day. This can include data from student information systems, faculty learning management platforms, email communications, and campus-wide network traffic and administration, most of which lives in separate silos. Tasha Youngblood Brown, Managing Director and US-East Higher Education leader for Ernst & Young LLP, agrees on the data imperative that colleges and universities must embrace, saying: "If your campus isn't developing data-driven social and emotional wellness support strategies today, it must do so soon – to support students, staff and faculty, as well as to enable the critical decisions for long-term success and the bottom line."

To help institutions begin the journey to a more coordinated, connected and data-driven future for care, an EY team has developed the EY People Experience Platform, a new tool to help colleges and universities better understand the social and

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**Managing Director and US-East Higher Education leader  
Ernst & Young LLP**

emotional wellbeing of students and staff. Once implemented on campus, the platform collates attendance data and collates with student, staff and faculty data from health services, as well as data sets from mental health services to begin building a more comprehensive, cross-silo picture of student, staff and faculty emotional and social wellbeing. Once combined in this way, it's possible for colleges and universities to more effectively identify students who may need more intervention or support – those with sharply declining attendance, for instance – matched with health services data. Other examples include the ability to help students exhibiting disengagement behavior patterns to receive help with registration and optimized class scheduling to help them connect with peers and form class friendships.

Data modeling can also help universities and colleges conduct pattern recognition exercises that can help identify under- or over-resourced campus services

and make better, data-driven decisions more quickly. Ultimately that can mean things like staying ahead of emerging trends, especially related to health and mental health services and protecting the vitality of staff, faculty and the student body. But as Frank Giampietro, EY Americas Chief Wellbeing Officer notes, the role of data goes beyond providing better support for students and can make an impact today on their futures: "Ultimately, data and insights are critical to ensure that colleges and universities are designing the right interventions for the right populations. Adopting a data-informed approach allows these institutions to make the investments that will have the highest impact for those who need it the most. We are excited to partner with Kean University on this innovative approach and witness firsthand how this work can change lives. Outcomes can include a significant level of impact at the university level, but just as importantly, a longer-lasting impact for students that they then carry forward as they enter their future workplaces and the world."



## Future happening now

As many institutions continue with the journey to cloud-enabled solutions, other strategies can help put better foundational support services in place.

- ▶ Consider creating a chief wellness officer role with responsibilities including big picture oversight into the factors and conditions that impact social and emotional wellbeing on campus.
- ▶ Integrate technology and new tools into the fabric of care for students and staff, making proactive outreach easier to check on at-risk students or staff as well as more effective monitoring of care and support going forward.
- ▶ Place an emphasis on data analytics to ensure your institution has the tools, technologies or partners in place to understand newly available data sets and build informed strategies that can impact everything from student recruitment to graduation rates and faculty workplace satisfaction.
- ▶ Proactively integrate diversity, equity and inclusion into how your institution plans for and implements social and emotional support services, recognizing and including all communities and their particular personal wellness needs.

# Summary

It should be every university's imperative to provide an environment where each member of the campus feels and experiences psychological safety and wellness in mind, body and spirit. Mental health data must play a pivotal and central role in campus care going forward. Putting the right tools, practices and processes into place can create better outcomes for students and staff. It can also provide insights for more predictive mental care and support, while helping institutions better monitor developing macro trends to help with adjustments to services provided.

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