Chapter 1

Introduction: Mental Health and Well-Being of College Students

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ABSTRACT

As educators, the authors have all witnessed students cope with academic, social, financial, and familial struggles. However, there seems to be a growing trend whereby they are witnessing students who are feeling an increasing sense of hopeless and inability to persist. Students appear to lack competence, grit, or resilience to work through adversity. This chapter helps readers contextualize the challenges students are facing and how faculty members are gaining the knowledge and skills to learn and understand mental illness, mental health, and well-being in order to improve their ability to serve, support, and educate.

INTRODUCTION

As educators, we have all witnessed students cope with academic, social, financial, and familial struggles. However, there seems to be a growing trend whereby we are witnessing students who are feeling an increasing sense of hopeless and inability to persist. Students appear to lack competence, grit, or resilience to work through adversity. Our students frequently express to us how difficult it is: to simply get out of bed in the morning to face the day; focus on school work; cope with the stresses of family; maintain (or leave) relationships; eat; sleep; exercise; enjoy the things they once loved. In the words of one student (who shall remain anonymous for obvious reasons), “I am unsure of my future and that scares me. I am lethargic, unmotivated and very comfortable. Real talk, my grades are dropping because of these things. Okay, so how am I going to change myself, my habits?” These comments and experiences of our students have led us to take a deep dive into the research to better understand the trends, influences, needs, mindsets, strategies for success, campus-wide initiatives, and supports for postsecondary students with mental health concerns.

As faculty members we serve as instructors, advisors, mentors, and confidants. One of the real challenges we face is effectively identifying and supporting students who are struggling with negative mental health. The college students who may be in the greatest need of supports or connectedness may well be those students who are not showing up socially or emotionally prepared to engage within the college community. It is sometimes extremely difficult know who these students are, they often are able to present themselves very well, even though there are struggles deep within. Frequently, our first warning signs include students missing classes, advisement, or other scheduled events (and not notifying someone), or students who were once active become withdrawn or isolate themselves from peers or activities they love, or when students are physically present but not active participants. Typically, students do not immediately self-disclose their struggles for fear of being judged or other possible negative stigmas they may perceive.

When we are fortunate enough to have students self-disclose, we frequently feel underprepared to support them. Due in large part because our professional preparation does not explicitly address the role we have assumed as a potential first responder to a students’ mental health or well-being. As faculty, our typical responses include to listen, refer students to on-campus or community health care or academic support services, provide extended
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