

Degrees of Distress

How Higher Education Institutions
Hurt and Help Student Mental Health

By Dr. Sam Museus and Dr. Lindsay Pérez Huber

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**COLLEGE
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FOUNDATION

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Thriving California*

FOREWORD

At College Futures Foundation, we center learners on the path to achieving their postsecondary educational goals in California. For many years, college students—especially students of color and those facing outsized financial barriers—have shared their fears and concerns with us: questioning whether they really belong in college; struggling to make ends meet while juggling classes, jobs, and caring for their families; and overall anxiety about what their futures hold.

While we know that higher education institutions cannot entirely remove these pressures from learners' lives, we at College Futures believe higher education institutions are responsible for supporting their students' success, and that student success is inextricably linked to student well-being.

Since the onset of the pandemic, student well-being—including mental health—has been the focus of increased attention on campuses and in the national media. In response, many colleges have expanded counseling services; yet expanded services alone cannot fully meet the needs of students, nor do these services address the persistent distress that higher education institutions provoke within their students, far preceding the pandemic. What is truly needed, beyond ad hoc responses to individual crises, is for higher education leaders to recognize their responsibility for perpetuating campus cultures and institutional practices that hurt students' mental health—and to proactively structure systems that support student wellness.

College Futures commissioned this report to identify the systemic ways in which higher education institutions directly impact student mental health and well-being, with the goal of shining light on practices and policies that are within an institution's locus of control. The report spans and synthesizes two distinct bodies of literature—higher education

and psychology—and brings a critical equity lens to both, revealing new insights about ways that institutions positively and negatively shape the psychological experiences of their students.

Some of the themes in this report may be familiar, such as belonging and racial microaggressions, but perhaps not in the context of mental health. As a reader, we hope that this report expands your notion of what college student mental health and well-being entails. If you are a researcher, we invite you to see this review of existing literature as a blueprint for new research to fill in the gaps of our knowledge, as well as an opportunity to help shift paradigms that can inform practices, policies, and funding streams. If you are an institutional leader or practitioner, we invite you to draw connections between the findings and your daily work, and to commit to doing more of what helps students' mental health and less of what harms it.

As a philanthropic funder, I believe part of my professional responsibility is to amplify learners' aspirations and needs within the noisy higher education ecosystem of competing priorities. College students, at the core, are boldly calling to be seen and valued—not as enrollment or degree completion metrics—but as humans deserving of care. My hope is that this report encourages a collective envisioning of what it means for students to make it to and through college while thriving, and inspires us all to act on their behalf.

April Yee, Ph.D.
Senior Program Officer
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A MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHORS

We write this report as interdisciplinary education scholars whose research agendas draw from critical theories and concepts across disciplines to understand, analyze, and address systemic inequities. We approach our work knowing that broader historical, social, political, and economic processes shape the educational inequities that students of color and other marginalized student populations face. Our collective work also highlights how institutional policies, processes, and practices are implicitly and explicitly designed to sustain educational inequities through marginalizing and excluding our most vulnerable students, their families, and their communities. Our efforts also often aim to spark new ways of thinking about education and how to foster more humanized, empowering, and equitable higher education systems. This work is grounded in the assumption that knowledge about how campuses both perpetuate systemic problems and can address them is necessary to cultivate higher education systems that promote the flourishing of the students, communities, and society they claim to serve.

In recent years, we have also come to recognize mental health as a vital element of conversations about both providing quality education and achieving educational equity. We also believe that the impact of college campuses on mental health is one of the most underdeveloped and urgent areas of research and practice across the higher education system. Most experts would agree that when colleges and universities fail to provide the conditions necessary for students to be healthy, they find it difficult or impossible to ensure those students can reach their full potential. In addition, as increasing national data and rapidly multiplying stories in our own networks underscore how systemic pressures are fueling and exacerbating mental health challenges, we have come to question whether institutions can ever make substantial progress toward equity if they perpetuate systems that harm the mental health of college students more than they nourish it. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have also been deeply disturbed by many higher education institutions' reluctance and failure to reconsider their priorities and re-envision healthier colleges and universities where all people can thrive emotionally, socially, spiritually, and physically. Unfortunately, we have seen

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those always most committed to students' well-being and equity shoulder much of this burden with inadequate institutional support. And, we have felt and been deeply affected by these realities ourselves. As a result, many of us have become more overextended and burned out than ever before.

Throughout our careers, we have called upon researchers, policymakers, leaders, and educators who perpetuate and exacerbate educational inequities—through policy decisions, everyday practices, or complacency and complicity—to do better. The reality that their actions have wide-ranging effects on the well-being of students and the communities from which they come is undeniable. As such, we often underscore the vital importance of these decision-makers assuming a moral responsibility to do what is necessary for all of their students to holistically thrive. Aligned with our life's work, this report is a call to action. It is a call for higher education institutions to recognize the psychological and physiological harm that schooling can cause college students along their journeys. We believe that this recognition is necessary for such institutions to provide equal opportunity for all, effectively serve their respective students, and improve the lives of people from all backgrounds.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	5
Should Higher Education Institutions Embrace Responsibility to Address Student Mental Health?.....	7
Purpose and Scope of This Report	8
Setting the Context	10
How Higher Education Institutions Contribute to College Student Mental Health Challenges	15
How Higher Education Institutions Promote Positive College Student Mental Health.....	23
Insights and Implications for Future Research.....	32
Conclusion	36
References.....	37



INTRODUCTION

Mental health has grown significantly as a topic of public discourse over the last few years.¹ Today, few experts would deny that mental health challenges have become a pressing concern across the United States. Such issues are believed to be associated with violent crime, increased suicide rates, and over \$100 billion in lost productivity annually, to name just a few negative consequences (Bimpong, 2017; Lamberti, 2016).² Recent years have witnessed widespread coverage of mental health issues in mainstream media, increased government investment to address mental health concerns, and President Biden making mental health a central focus of his bipartisan Unity Agenda (Adedoyin, 2022; Krislov, 2022; The White House, 2022). It is clear that mental health challenges are at the forefront of many people's minds, and for good reason.

60%

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National Healthy Minds Study

Research and data on mental health challenges in the U.S. paint a somewhat bleak picture. This evidence shows that such problems are widespread, and this is also true among college students specifically. For example, the National Healthy Minds Study analyzed data from over 350,000 college students across the nation and noted that over 60% of them report experiencing one or more mental health challenges in 2021 (Lipson et al., 2022). This study also shows that the mental health crisis in higher education has progressively gotten worse over the last decade. For example, between 2013 and 2021, college students exhibited a 135% increase in positive screens for depression and a 110% increase in positive screens for anxiety (Lipson et al., 2022).

The prevalence of mental health challenges is not uniform across groups, and evidence suggests that systemic issues contribute to increased prevalence of mental health problems among historically underserved and marginalized populations. For example, the frequency of mental health challenges experienced among community college students, who are disproportionately under-resourced, is higher than those enrolled at four-year institutions (Broton et al., 2022; Lipson et al., 2022; McSpadden, 2022). In addition, heightened systemic problems contribute to racially minoritized and other underserved students exhibiting higher rates of mental health issues than their peers (Barry et al., 2017; Billings, 2021; Budge et al., 2020; Dong et al., 2020; Dunbar et al., 2017; Koo et al., 2021; Leath et al., 2021; McSpadden, 2022; Shalka & Leal, 2022; Tausen et al., 2020; Timmerman & Volpe, 2021). Unfortunately, students from historically underserved and marginalized communities are also less likely to use mental health services on campus than their peers (The Healthy Minds Study, 2021). It is therefore important to consider how social and education systems might disproportionately impact the mental health of these populations.

¹ This report employs the U.S. [government's definition](#) of mental health, which involves emotional, psychological, and social well-being.

² Although some mental health conditions are associated with increased likelihood of committing a violent crime, it is important to note that on average, people with mental illnesses are more likely to be victims of crimes than perpetrators (Ghiasi et al., 2022).

Given these realities, it is probably not surprising that national survey data from college presidents reveal that these leaders commonly identify mental health as a priority on their campuses (Chessman & Taylor, 2019). National data also show that many student affairs professionals working directly with college students spend a significant amount of their time addressing these students' mental health challenges (Jaschik & Ledermen, 2020). In sum, existing data indicate that higher education institutions are critical sites with respect to the ongoing mental health crisis, many college leaders and educators already acknowledge the gravity of these challenges, and campuses do have the capacity to help address these issues.



SHOULD HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS EMBRACE RESPONSIBILITY TO ADDRESS STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH?

We argue that there are several reasons that higher education institutions should embrace their responsibility to promote positive mental health among their students. We underscore three of them here.

First, it has been a common, long-held belief that institutions of higher education have a responsibility to ensure the safety of students, even though the nature of this responsibility has been a source of contentious debate over the last century (White, 2007). During the first half of the 20th century, the legal doctrine of *in loco parentis* or “in place of the parent” governed higher education institutions and gave them much control over students’ lives (Bickel & Lake, 1999). While student movements and resulting litigation of the mid-20th century reversed laws about institutional control over students’ lives in order to protect their free speech and other civil liberties, substantial increases in crime on college campuses led the courts to begin reasserting higher education institutions’ liabilities for their students’ safety around the turn of the 21st century (Hirshberg, 1994). Despite the shifting views about institutional oversight over students’ lives, higher education institutions have generally assumed some responsibility to promote safety and positive health among their students. This makes sense, given that students spend a large portion of their time or sometimes even live on their campuses.

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Second, both research and common sense suggest that positive mental health is a precondition to thriving in academic pursuits. Maslow’s (1958) Hierarchy of Needs is one of the most frequently cited and commonly used frameworks related to societal and individual needs. It suggests that people’s fundamental physiological needs (for example, breathing, sleeping, etc.) and safety needs (for example, financial security, shelter, health, and wellness) must be met before they can cultivate healthy relationships that fulfill love, acceptance, and belonging needs. The hierarchy also suggests that all of these needs must be met before individuals can focus on achieving their optimal personal growth and fulfilling their potential. This assertion should not be surprising, as most experts would agree that people need to be safe, secure, and relatively healthy in order to focus on realizing their talents and advancing their academic pursuits.

Finally, institutions of higher education often espouse an explicit commitment to serving broader society. This commitment implies that college campuses have a responsibility to contribute to the well-being of students and their surrounding communities (Kezar et al., 2015). Perpetuating systems that psychologically harm students who are members of these communities is antithetical to this commitment. In other words, if institutions desire to ethically claim a commitment to the public, they must operate accordingly and act in the best interest of the health of both the students and communities they serve.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THIS REPORT

This report synthesizes relevant scholarly literature to better understand the role higher education institutions play in shaping college student mental health. In doing so, it is designed to spark more expansive conversations about how higher education institutions can address collective mental health challenges and promote greater well-being on their campuses. The report realizes these goals through the execution of three specific interconnected tasks.

First, we integrate previously disconnected bodies of literature from higher education studies and the field of psychology to understanding the intersection between higher education institutions and their students' mental health. It is important to move beyond this fragmentation, which can limit insight into how higher education institutions might address mental health challenges and the role that mental wellness plays in college outcomes.

For example, as we demonstrate in the following sections, higher education theories that have historically dominated discussions about college success have largely ignored or minimized the role of mental health in students' experiences and outcomes (e.g., Tinto, 1975). At the same time, there is a growing body of research on college student mental health in the field of psychology (Ribeiro et al., 2018; Sharp & Theiler, 2018). This research sheds important light on the range of mental health problems that exist, factors that influence mental health challenges, and barriers to accessing mental health support on college campuses. However, this research often appears in psychology and health journals, and has continued to be relatively disconnected from larger conversations around college success. In practice, this disconnect can inhibit important discussions about the fundamental role of mental health in students' trajectories and broader conversations about the ways in which the environments and pressures surrounding student matriculation and performance might exacerbate mental health challenges in college.

Second, through the research integration described above, we provide one of the most comprehensive overviews of literature on key institutional factors that shape mental health experiences among college students. Specifically, we synthesize literature on the ways higher education institutions can create, perpetuate, and exacerbate mental health challenges. We also review the ways that such institutions can promote more positive mental health among their students. In doing so, we aim to bring together research communities in higher education and mental health arenas for a more targeted conversation about the role that higher education institutions can and do play in both negatively and positively shaping mental health among students.

REPORT AIMS

- 1 **Integrate mental health research from higher education and psychology domains**
- 2 **Support cross-sector dialogue on how higher education institutions can shape student mental health**
- 3 **Inform policy, practice, and narrative change for a national postsecondary mental health movement**

Third, we provide some insights into potential future directions for research that we believe can guide policymakers and practitioners in creating institutional environments that allow college students to flourish and better support their mental health. It is our view that while there are many valuable ongoing efforts to promote conditions for positive mental health on college campuses, there is much room to develop and advance a more comprehensive national movement to address the mental health crisis in higher education. While our recommendations are not a panacea, we believe they can inform such a movement and more constructive conversations about mental health across the higher education sector.



SETTING THE CONTEXT

Understanding the causes of mental health challenges is a complex endeavor. A great deal of attention has been given to individual causes of mental health issues. In contrast, despite widespread recognition that systems and institutions shape mental health, much less attention has been given to these institutional influences. In this report, we focus on the institutional causes of mental health challenges, assuming that such knowledge is essential to holistically comprehending and addressing the current mental health crisis.

Before focusing on institutions, it is important to acknowledge the larger societal contexts that students are navigating, which can have implications for their mental health. Several large-scale trends provide fertile ground for the worsening mental health crisis across the U.S. We discuss a few of the most salient contextual realities in this section before turning attention to the ways in which college campuses specifically shape mental health among their students.

Recognizing these larger societal challenges does not exonerate colleges and universities from the responsibility to create conditions for student mental health. This context is particularly important to the conversation because it permeates the walls of higher education institutions and influences the environment within them. Therefore, awareness of these larger societal problems can help college campuses avoid reinforcing—and inform their efforts to address—these challenges.

INCREASINGLY HOSTILE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENTS

In November of 2016, Donald J. Trump won the presidential election. The Southern Poverty Law Center (2016) collected data on the proliferation of hate crimes immediately following the victory, which they called the “Trump effect.” These data found dramatic increases in hate crimes, with anti-immigrant acts most prevalent. In January 2021, after Trump lost the 2020 presidential election, his supporters descended on the capital in Washington, D.C. to stage a coup. This horrific event brought the violence that white supremacy and systemic racism perpetuate to centerstage and was televised live and streamed on social media across the globe.

Mirroring this broader sociopolitical climate, students in schools and universities also experienced the effects of racist rhetoric. Following the 2016 election, K–12 administrators and teachers across the U.S. reported that their schools transformed into toxic environments and that their students experienced an increase in “racially charged hate speech” and racial assaults (Rogers & Ishimoto, 2021, p. 49). Teachers reported an alarming level of fear and anxiety among children of color in particular, with many students worried about being targeted by bullying, harassment, and intimidation in schools and concerned that they and their families would possibly be deported (Huang & Cornell, 2019; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016).

Awareness of these larger societal problems can help college campuses avoid reinforcing—and inform their efforts to address—these challenges.

Similar realities emerged at colleges and universities. College students across the nation entered their campuses after the 2016 elections to find hostile racial climates where Asian and Asian American, Black, Latinx, Muslim, immigrant, and undocumented students were targeted. College students reported an increase in racist incidents on their campuses (Pérez Huber & Muñoz, 2021).³ These forms of hostility were associated with negative mental health outcomes, such as increased stress, anxiety, depression, and fear (Pérez Huber & Muñoz, 2021; Solomon et al., 2021).

The aftermath of the 2016 election was especially concerning for a number of reasons. While systemic oppression and violence have always been a part of U.S. society, conversations about colonialism, racism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression have only relatively recently made their way into mainstream America. Unfortunately, the majority of society have ignored these problems for so long that the masses are underprepared to constructively engage in conversations about systemic inequities. There also has been backlash from those who feel threatened by such discussions (Solomon et al., 2021; Yancy, 2018). Politicians have further exploited this fear and anger, using anti-immigrant and anti-Asian rhetoric to scapegoat minoritized populations for society's challenges in order to garner support for their own campaigns and causes (Albright & Hurd, 2021; Albright & Hurd, 2020; Finley & Esposito, 2020; Gover et al., 2020). All of this adds up to increasingly hostile environments. Many would argue that this spike in xenophobia, hate, and violence has affected the nation's collective mental health over the last decade (Albright & Hurd, 2020).

STATE VIOLENCE AND SOCIETY'S RACIAL CONFLICT

In the summer of 2020, the nation responded to the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Jacob Blake.⁴ Mass protests erupted throughout the nation denouncing the killing of unarmed Black people. Data show that mental health among college-age students was negatively impacted by these events, with reports of higher distress about police brutality, increased stress, and worry (Howard et al., 2022).

The uprising prompted educational institutions, major corporations, and other organizations to make public statements in support of Black Lives Matter and against anti-Blackness and systemic racism. Three years later, we see institutions of higher education continue to grapple with these issues, and scholarship has found that many campuses have refused or struggled to move racial equity from an espoused institutional value to meaningful structural change (Kiang & Tsai, 2022; Meikle & Morris, 2022).⁵ Some scholars have called this confluence of events the “racism pandemic” (Pérez Huber

³ The first chapter of this book explains the historical context of this phenomenon, particularly, its relationship to earlier white supremacist movements.

⁴ Ahmaud Arbery was a 25-year-old Black man gunned down by two white male assailants while jogging in his neighborhood near Brunswick, Georgia, on February 23, 2020. The assailants were not arrested or charged until May 2020, after a video of Arbery's murder went viral. Breonna Taylor was a 26-year-old Black woman killed on March 13, 2020, by plainclothes police officers who entered her home with a “no-knock” search warrant in Louisville, Kentucky, looking for the wrong person. George Floyd was a 46-year-old Black man killed May 25, 2020, by a white police officer for suspicion of using a counterfeit \$20 bill. Floyd was held in a neck hold for nearly nine minutes while he pleaded for his life, unable to breathe. Bystanders filmed the murder, which went viral. Jacob Blake was a 29-year-old Black man who was shot in the back seven times during an altercation with police in Kenosha, Wisconsin, while his three young sons watched from Blake's car. National protests began in late spring and continued through the summer of 2020.

⁵ See also the Cops off Campus Coalition (<https://copsoffcampuscoalition.com>), an abolition network demanding for the removal of all law enforcement agencies from school, college, and university campuses.

& Muñoz, 2021).⁶ Higher education students and institutions alike continue to experience, navigate, and be shaped by this fraught sociopolitical context today.

GROWING WEALTH DISPARITIES AND INCREASED POVERTY

Another important contextual factor with significant implications for college student mental health is society's economic inequality. Over the last half century, wealth inequality has gotten progressively worse in the United States. Gaps between the rich and poor are the largest they have ever been in the nation's history. The Pew Research Center has used national data to demonstrate that an increasing portion of the nation's wealth is owned by the most affluent 5% of the population. They note that in 1998, families in the wealthiest 5% of the population had an average net worth of \$2.5 million, while those in the second quintile of earnings (the quintile above the poorest 20%) had an average net worth of \$27,700.⁷ By 2016, the average net worth for families in the richest 5% of the population was \$4.8 million, while the average net worth of families in the second quintile had decreased to \$19,500. In other words, the gap between the richest 5% and working-class families more than doubled between 1998 and 2016 (Pew Research Center, 2020).

In addition, the cost of a college education relative to average individual income in the United States has increased steadily since mid-20th century. In 1985, the average individual income was \$15,900 (Social Security Administration, 2022), and the average cost of attending a postsecondary institution (including tuition, fees, room, and board) was approximately \$4,563 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). In 2020, the average annual individual income was \$53,383 (Social Security Administration, 2022), while the average cost of attendance in higher education was roughly \$25,910 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). In other words, in less than four decades, the average cost of an individual student to attend a college or university went from approximately 29% to 49% of the average annual individual income in the United States.

This growing wealth gap and increased cost of college means that more college students are entering higher education with

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⁶ American Psychological Association President Dr. Sandra L. Shullman used this term in a statement regarding the mental health consequences of high-profile violence targeting African Americans (www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2020/05/racism-pandemic), while others have used the term to describe the systemic racism causing inequitable health outcomes in the COVID-19 pandemic (<http://theconversation.com/weve-been-facing-a-pandemic-of-racism-how-can-we-stop-it-140284>).

⁷ Wealth figures are adjusted and expressed in 2018 dollars.

unmet basic food security and housing needs (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2019; Fry & Ciluffo, 2019). The American Psychological Association reported that more than one-third of U.S. college students experience food and housing insecurity, negatively impacting their ability to perform well in school (American Psychological Association, 2019). At the community college level, food and housing insecurity are even more prevalent (Goldrick-Rab & Cochrane, 2019).

These trends are potentially destructive for college students' mental health. Research demonstrates that financial insecurity is associated with more significant mental health challenges, such as higher levels of anxiety and depression (Hari, 2018; Kopasker, 2018). In addition, students from under-resourced communities are more likely to face excessive pressures to work long hours while keeping up with their peers, which can make it difficult to sleep and can increase rates of depression (Peltz et al., 2021). In sum, society's failure to address income inequalities and financial insecurity creates fertile ground for mental health challenges among college students, especially those from under-resourced backgrounds.

THE COVID PANDEMIC AND GLOBAL HEALTH CRISIS

Another important contextual influence on our collective mental health is the ever-present threat of global health crises. Diseases and viruses have always been a part of human history, and when the most recent novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic arrived in 2020, it escalated stress and isolation throughout society. On a global level, many people had to reorganize their lives to adapt to the conditions of the pandemic. In higher education, the vast majority of college students stopped congregating on campus and took classes virtually (Fruehwirth et al., 2021). They were required to stay on track to complete their college careers in relative isolation, while also dealing with additional severe stressors such as taking care of immunocompromised family members and dealing with the loss of loved ones to the virus. Moreover, the virus brought widespread fears and anxieties that fueled a movement, which turned violent in some cases, to resist mandates designed to ensure people wore masks to reduce spread of the deadly illness in public places (Grunawalt, 2021). Given all of these realities and the unfortunate fact that another pandemic could emerge at any time, it is not surprising that college students reported increased stress and anxiety, mental exhaustion and loneliness, and depression and disappointment after the onset of the pandemic (Lipson et al., 2022).

The U.S. Department of Education (2022) has confirmed that there have been drastic declines in reading and math achievement scores for elementary school students since the pandemic, negatively affecting their path to preparation for higher levels of schooling and college. These findings are especially concerning, given that research has found decreased academic performance to negatively impact college student mental health, and vice versa (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Jeffries & Salzer, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic also exacerbated existing social inequities in health, wealth, and education, resulting in disproportionate negative effects on underserved communities throughout the nation. Those hit particularly hard were students with preexisting mental health problems (Jafari et al., 2021) and those from low socioeconomic (Soria et al., 2022), racially minoritized (Chen et al., 2021; Haft & Zhou, 2021; Rascoe, 2022; Trammell et al.,

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2021; Zhou et al., 2021), gender and sexual minority (Hoyt et al., 2021), rural (Dasinger & Gilson, 2022), and undocumented (Goodman et al., 2020) communities.

It is important to note that, despite the profound impact that the pandemic had on society's collective well-being, mental health challenges were widespread and becoming progressively worse prior to the pandemic. COVID-19 is far from the sole cause of society's deteriorating collective mental health, and it is therefore reasonable to assume these challenges will persist as society learns to deal with the pandemic more effectively.

Of course, this is not an exhaustive list of contextual influences. Other systemic realities, such as society's increasing gun violence and dependence on social media, can also be cited as potential contributors to the current collective mental health crisis (McHugh et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2020). And, although these contextual realities cannot be addressed by higher education institutions alone, campus leaders have the ability to push for transformative national and state policy agendas around mental health, and higher education institutions have substantial agency to shape other conditions that might have a significant impact on their students' well-being. For example, institutions cannot eradicate systemic racism completely, but college presidents and chancellors *can* advocate for increased federal and state funding for culturally relevant mental health programming, while college campuses can maximize the opportunities for students to engage in efforts to heal from the harm that results from systemic racial violence. In the following sections, we discuss how campuses can and often do perpetuate conditions that fuel mental health challenges, as well as how they sometimes foster environments where students can holistically thrive.



HOW HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS **CONTRIBUTE TO COLLEGE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES**



Our review of the literature reveals several ways institutions can create and exacerbate students' mental health challenges. We argue that these institutional effects on mental well-being can inhibit college students' abilities to intellectually engage, maximize their potential, and survive or thrive in higher education and society. As such, they might also provide insight into how institutions can intervene to reduce or buffer students from societal stressors they will encounter and cultivate environments that are more likely to promote student flourishing.

COLLEGES PROMOTE SOCIAL ISOLATION

In 1951, Sociologist Emile Durkheim analyzed the ways in which capitalist societies promoted increased individualism, which diminished social cohesion and increased the likelihood of social isolation throughout their populations. Durkheim argued that this isolation was a major factor in the elevated suicide rates observed in increasingly capitalist societies. A plethora of research now supports the notion that diminished social connections are one cause of anxiety, depression, and suicide risk among people in general (Hari, 2018; You et al., 2011).

What has arguably been the most discussed and deployed theory of college student success emerged in the 1970s and was partly grounded in Durkheim's work (Tinto, 1975). Vincent Tinto built on Durkheim's work to argue that students must become academically and socially "integrated" into their campus cultures to persist and succeed in their college careers. He asserted that students' failures to integrate would lead to social isolation and decisions to leave before earning a credential. Even though the connection that Durkheim made between the erosion of social cohesion and suicide was integral to the foundation of Tinto's theory, the thousands of researchers and practitioners who have utilized it to advance conversations about student success over the last 50 years have largely ignored the role of increasingly individualized cultures and mental health in students' trajectories.

Campus cultures and climates can function to marginalize students from minoritized backgrounds and lead to their social isolation from their campus communities.

While all students can become disconnected from their institutions, evidence suggests that it is especially common for students from marginalized backgrounds to report facing challenges in cultivating a sense of social cohesion within their campus communities (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus & Maramba, 2011). Two common forces can erode important connections and contribute to such isolation and its negative impact on mental health. First, campus cultures and climates can function to marginalize students from minoritized backgrounds and lead to their social isolation from their campus communities (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Lewis & Shah, 2021). Higher education was originally established to support affluent white cisgender heterosexual Christian men in preparing one another for leadership positions throughout society. Over time, administrators, faculty, and students who come from these privileged backgrounds have shaped the cultures of most college and university campuses across the nation (Wilder, 2013). As a result, college students from historically marginalized and underserved communities face unique challenges fostering strong connections to and finding membership within the cultures of their respective campuses (Museus & Quaye, 2009).

It is important to note that those who attend commuter colleges and community colleges could also be at greater risk of social isolation during their time in higher education (Deil-Amen, 2011). These types of institutions often offer less robust co-curricular opportunities for social connection outside of the curriculum and, where educators do not view meaningful relationships as necessary for student learning, they might not see classrooms as spaces that should facilitate such connections. In addition, students who attend these campuses are more likely to come from historically subjugated and economically under-resourced communities, work longer hours in jobs, and have less time to engage in social activities outside of the classroom (Sólorzano et al., 2005).

Second, the culture of higher education institutions can function to isolate students from their communities of origin. Students from historically marginalized and underserved communities often face a conundrum, as they feel pressured to sever ties with their cultural heritage in order to successfully assimilate into the dominant cultures of their campuses (Deyhle, 1995; Museus & Quaye, 2009). As a result, students can feel forced to choose between becoming more disconnected from their home communities or being isolated on their campuses.

COLLEGES SUSTAIN HOSTILE CLIMATES

Historical and sociopolitical issues that exist more broadly in U.S. society also shape climates *within* colleges and universities (Hurtado, 1992). Early scholars defined institutions' campus climates as the current attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of their members (Peterson & Spencer, 1990). Hostile climates are those that leave students feeling unwelcome, marginalized, and targeted by differential treatment (Hall & Sandler, 1982). Most often, people who experience this hostility are students of color, queer and trans students, undocumented students, and other historically marginalized groups (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). When an institution refuses to acknowledge and address its hostile climate, it becomes complicit in the harm this climate causes for students. As mentioned, while hostile climates existed throughout higher education prior to 2016, the racist rhetoric embraced by the prior presidential administration and propagated across the country exacerbated the hostility in campus climates, promoting increased violence toward groups with minoritized racial, religious, socioeconomic, and immigrant backgrounds (Pérez Huber & Muñoz, 2021).



In addition to experiencing overt physical violence and racial slurs, underserved and marginalized college students also consistently encounter more subtle but pervasive acts that invalidate them and their communities. In 1970, Dr. Chester Pierce, a Black medical doctor and psychiatrist, introduced the concept of *racial microaggression* to describe the “subtle and stunning” forms of everyday racism that continue to be significant in the lives of people of color. He also acknowledged the cumulative effects of these experiences, with their negative consequences for physical and mental health over a person’s lifetime (Pierce, 1995). Pérez Huber and Solórzano (2015) explain some defining characteristics of racial microaggressions as:

(1) verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward people of color, often carried out in subtle, automatic, or unconscious forms; (2) layered assaults, based on race and its intersections with gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and (3) cumulative assaults that take a psychological, physiological, and academic toll on people of color (p. 302).

In higher education, scholars have found that Black, Latinx, and Asian American college students consistently experience racial microaggressions when their academic abilities are questioned, their presence is ignored, their comments are dismissed in a classroom, they are assumed to be enrolled as the result of affirmative action policies, and they are targeted by campus police harassment (Solórzano et al., 2002). While much of the microaggressions scholarship has focused on race, it is important to note that ableism, genderism, sexism, and other forms of systemic oppression can also manifest in such everyday slights, insults, and invalidations (Sue, 2010). The microaggressions that students experience often lead them to feel unwelcome and unwanted.

Research has found that hostile climates can bear “emotional costs” for marginalized students, such as lower levels of psychological well-being, as well as mental distress and academic burnout (Jensen & Deemer, 2019; Koo, 2021). For example, William Smith has studied the long-term effects of everyday racism on college students of color and coined the term “racial battle fatigue” to denote the “accumulative stress” of racial microaggressions that people of color experience over time. Smith and co-authors (2007) explain that “the stress of racial microaggressions can be lethal when the accumulation of physiological symptoms of racial battle fatigue are untreated, unnoticed, misdiagnosed, or personally dismissed” (p. 301). Smith and others (Robinson-Perez, 2021; Smith et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2016) have found that Black male undergraduates on predominately white campuses often encounter racial microaggressions that further racist stereotypes of Black men and boys as threatening, violence prone, and academically inferior. As a result, these students experienced anger, frustration, disgust, heightened stress, and a low sense of belonging. Over time, these feelings can lead to decreased mental and physiological well-being and lowered academic achievement (Watson, 2019).⁸ Studies have also examined the experiences of Latinx college students with racial battle fatigue, finding similar results. Likewise, national data show that increased psychological (e.g., frustration, irritability, mood change, agitation), physiological (e.g., muscle pain, inability to sleep, loss of appetite), and behavioral (e.g., lower academic performance) stress responses have been found to be prevalent among Latinx students who experience racial microaggressions on their campuses (Hernandez & Villodas, 2020).

⁸ See also Kenjus Watson’s (2020) short film, “If These Cells Could Talk” at <https://vimeo.com/469867415>.

Indeed, numerous other studies have found negative psychological and physiological effects of racial microaggressions. Racial microaggressions have been found to adversely affect self-esteem (Nadal et al., 2014), cause emotional and psychological distress (Choi et al., 2022; O'Keefe & Greenfield, 2019; Robinson-Perez et al., 2020) and lead to psychosomatic symptoms and depression (Torres-Harding et al., 2020) among students of color. It is clear that racial microaggressions and negative campus racial climates have significant and potentially detrimental effects on college students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities.

INSTITUTIONS PERPETUATE EXCESSIVELY COMPETITIVE CULTURES

Given a climate of scarce resources and the emphasis on a college degree's return on investment, it is not surprising that many researchers underscore the presence of increasingly competitive cultures throughout the higher education system. While campus cultures exist on a spectrum from individualistic to collectivist, many argue that the dominant orientation of U.S. higher education institutions is individualistic in nature (Guiffrida et al., 2012). Such claims are reflected in key college milestones. For example, students gain access to colleges and universities through assessment of their individual performance and standardized examination scores. Once enrolled, students are typically rewarded through individual grades that determine their degree of access to fellowships and other opportunities while in school, as well as selective graduate programs and lucrative jobs after college.

These individualistic cultures and metrics fuel constant competition among students. Across the nation, many high school students seek admission to elite research universities that will provide them with access to the most well-resourced networks in society (Alon, 2009; Bound et al., 2009). For example, in California, admission to public four-year institutions has become extremely competitive, as many institutions simply do not have the capacity for the thousands of students across the state who are eligible for admission under the California Master Plan (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021).⁹ Even though more students are eligible for admission to the most competitive University of California (UC) system than ever before, only 8% of those who apply will be accepted and enroll at these institutions (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021).¹⁰ Given the limited number of slots at these most sought-after institutions, a large segment of the population will never be able to gain access, no matter how hard they try.

In California, admission to public four-year institutions has become extremely competitive, as many institutions simply do not have the capacity for the thousands of students across the state who are eligible for admission.

⁹ The 1960 California Master Plan of Higher Education established a three-tier system of public higher education in the state, where the top 12.5 percent of California high school graduates are eligible for the University of California (UC) system, the top 33.3 percent are eligible for the California State University (CSU) system, and the California Community College (CCC) system has an open admissions policy. Although this policy was intended to create more equitable access to California public higher education, it led to greater equity gaps, wherein large numbers of high school students of color, first-generation college-goers, and immigrant students are diverted to the community college sector (Pérez Huber et al., 2006). The master plan created a hierarchy of systems, where students are left to compete in a highly selective and competitive admissions process for a spot at the UC and now, CSU systems as well (College Futures Foundation, 2020).

¹⁰ In the UC system, only students who have met the minimum UC eligibility requirements are considered for admission. However, UC does not guarantee admission to all those eligible.

The pressure to compete for slots at the most prestigious institutions can contribute to heightened stress, anxiety, and depression among students (Cooper et al., 2020; Yikealo, 2018). Once in college, students compete with one another to transfer to better schools, access more prestigious graduate schools, and get better jobs. Such competition has been linked to negative mental health outcomes, such as anxiety and depression, among college students (Posselt & Lipson, 2016). These pressures also perpetuate misleading assumptions that students are not capable or did not work hard enough if they fail to secure a place at more prestigious campuses, even though they might face greater systemic barriers than their peers.

What's more, when people become increasingly focused on their own individual progress, they might invest less energy in cultivating stronger community networks built on authentic relationships and trust. As mentioned, such diminished social cohesion is related to increased mental health challenges. These dynamics could be especially problematic for students from historically underserved communities, such as first-generation college students and students of color, who tend to be more collectivist and often see sustaining cohesive communities as necessary to survive in a system where they face significant systemic violence (Guiffrida et al., 2012).



INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES AND STRUCTURES EXACERBATE STUDENTS' FINANCIALLY PRECARIOUS CONDITIONS

The last half century has seen an increased privatization of higher education and a widespread view that college education and credentials are primarily a private rather than public good (Museus & LePeau, 2019). At the same time, federal and state governments have shifted the burden of funding a college education to families and individual students.

As a result, pursuing higher education has become associated with growing financial stressors. Many college students are uncertain whether they will have the resources to fund their entire college career (Huerta et al., 2018). Students are forced to navigate complicated financial aid forms and other complex bureaucratic processes to secure funding to pursue a postsecondary degree, preventing many of them from accessing the resources they need (Billings et al., 2022). Those with less wealth bear the brunt of these bureaucratic burdens. For example, the community college system operates as an open access point, where many first-generation students, students of color, immigrant students, and low-income students could begin their higher education journeys—many of whom enter academically underprepared (Lin et al., 2022; Solórzano et al., 2013). Rather than finding the resources and supports they need to be successful, many of these students encounter complex policies, confusing academic requirements, and unclear and inaccurate information (Hart, 2019). Now, even many better resourced four-year college students rely on non-institutional assistance as they navigate college, such as parents who have a college degree and peer networks (Hamilton, 2016).

As mentioned, increasing numbers of students lack food and housing security (Broton, 2020; Nazmi et al., 2019). Many students, especially those from underserved communities, also work long hours in jobs they need to make ends meet while attending college, forcing them to balance family life, professional responsibilities, and pressures to perform academically (House et al., 2020). Moreover, large numbers of students accumulate increasingly significant amounts of debt to afford college as they move through the system (Houle & Addo, 2019). Nationally, student loan debt totals approximately \$1.7 trillion, and the average borrower owes roughly \$40,000 when they graduate (DiFurio, 2022). Those who drop out also carry this debt burden, but without the financial benefits of a college degree (Xiao et al., 2020).

Not only do these financial stressors constitute barriers to advancing in the educational pipeline, but evidence suggests that they have significant psychological consequences as well. A significant amount of research indicates that economic scarcity and the resulting state of financial precarity can fuel increased stress, anxiety, and depression (House et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2018). In addition, higher education debt has been found to be harmful for college student mental health, particularly for students of color and others from marginalized groups (Jackson & Mustaffa, 2022). In sum, when students' lives are characterized by financial scarcity and precarity, they might lack the foundations for health and success at home or on their education journeys.

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Economic scarcity and the resulting state of financial precarity can fuel stress, anxiety, and depression.

COLLEGES CREATE AND PERPETUATE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Facing a formidable lineup of stressors, many college students are unable to access mental health support on or beyond campus. Research has shown that college counseling centers across the nation are struggling to keep up with increasing demand for mental health services with limited resources (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2018; Kodish et al., 2022). Such institutional challenges are further compounded by disparities in mental health treatment and service utilization. For instance, studies have demonstrated that racially minoritized, first-generation, and community college students are less likely to seek treatment for mental health (Lipson et al., 2021; Rovitto, 2021). There are several barriers to accessing support, and we highlight a few of the most salient.

First, many colleges and universities have complex bureaucracies that make it difficult for students to find the resources they need (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012). This bureaucratic complexity can also converge with what scholars have called the “If we offer it, they will come” assumption—that campus offices have the responsibility to make support available, but it is the students’ responsibility to find that support (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012). Unfortunately, however, many students might not know what supports are available, understand how and trust that those services can help them, or feel entitled to reach out for the support (Cadigan et al., 2022; Lipson et al., 2021; Museus, 2014; Rovitto, 2021).

With limited resources, college counseling centers are struggling to keep up with increased demand for mental health service, and many do not offer culturally relevant care.

Second, finding and reaching out for mental health support is complicated for students from historically marginalized populations. For example, campus counseling and psychological services sometimes do not include culturally relevant and sensitive interventions and care (Busby et al., 2021). Accordingly, students might not believe that the mental health professionals available have experienced relevant cultural conflict in their own lives or are fully equipped to provide effective support in navigating these issues (Kam et al., 2019). The absence of diverse mental health professionals and culturally relevant mental health counseling can make some marginalized students more apprehensive about seeking help (Taylor & Kuo, 2019).



HOW HIGHER
EDUCATION
INSTITUTIONS
**PROMOTE POSITIVE
COLLEGE STUDENT
MENTAL HEALTH**



In this section, we outline the conditions that research suggests can be vital in promoting positive mental health among college students. This research can be parsed into two separate but interconnected categories. First, scholarship reveals many of the ways that educators can and sometimes do embed important relevant approaches into their practice. Specifically, this research demonstrates how educators can and do care about, connect, affirm, and empower students. Second, existing literature reveals the types of institutional structures that are important in promoting positive mental health. It is important to note that these structures often house the educators who are most intentional about embedding care, connection, affirmation, and empowerment in their work with students. We discuss each major theme in greater detail.

COLLEGES CENTER CARE IN SERVING STUDENTS

Discourse around mental health care often concentrates on the psychologists, counselors, and other mental health professionals providing formal support for students suffering from mental health challenges. Few would argue that these professional roles and the interventions they offer are important in addressing the current mental health crisis and supporting people facing such challenges. However, it is also important to consider broader and deeper notions of “care.”

As the mental health crisis throughout society and on college campuses has become progressively apparent in recent years, the concept of *self-care* has also become a popular topic of discussion (Moses et al., 2016). Many programs and initiatives promote engaging in self-care practices (McGuinness & Nordstokke, 2021; Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019). Existing research underscores how self-care practices can reduce a host of negative mental health outcomes, such as stress, psychological distress, and depression (Brett et al., 2020; Feng et al., 2019; White et al., 2019). Self-care can focus on:

- **Good sleep hygiene.** Heightened levels of stress in college can contribute to poor sleep quality, such as increased disruptions in sleep (Verlander et al., 1999). In contrast, positive sleep habits have been linked to increased happiness and reduced depressive symptoms (Moses et al., 2016).
- **Healthy food habits.** Research demonstrates that times of stress lead students to engage in unhealthy eating habits (Kandiah et al., 2006). However, eating healthier has been linked to decreased anxiety and depression (Jacka et al., 2012; Weng et al., 2012).
- **Regular physical exercise.** Getting regular physical exercise can help college students regulate mood (Chase & Hutchinson, 2015), decrease fatigue (deVries et al., 2016), reduce academic stress (Slade & Kies, 2015), and improve sleep (deVries et al., 2016).



At the same time, scholars note that self-care conversations tend to be individualistic in nature (Patton Davis, 2016). They argue for a greater focus on collective care in higher education communities (Museus & Sasaki, 2022). These less individualistic self-care practices might also have implications for community connections and well-being:

- **Spirituality.** Research shows that spiritual practice has been linked to more positive mental health (Anye et al., 2013; McCann et al., 2020). Spirituality may provide people with tools to cope with life stressors and navigate challenging conditions, and it also often involves connection to a spiritual community or developing a greater appreciation for one's connectedness to the larger world, such as to other people and to nature.
- **Mindfulness.** Often related to spirituality, mindfulness practices have become increasingly valued in health circles. The concept of mindfulness is complex, and it often involves creating mental space to focus on one's deeper connections to the universe and developing greater compassion for oneself and others. Mindfulness has been associated with positive mental health outcomes, such as reduced anxiety, lower levels of stress, fewer depressive symptoms, and greater self-compassion (Bamber & Morpeth, 2019; Flett et al., 2019; Huberty et al., 2019; Myers et al., 2012).
- **Gratitude.** Gratitude refers to appreciation for positive things in the world and for the benefits received from them. Having opportunities to reflect on and express gratitude through letter writing (e.g., to community leaders and family members) has been linked to decreased psychological distress, lower suicide risk, and positive overall mental health among students in higher education (Geier & Morris, 2022; Kaniuka et al., 2021; Renshaw & Hindman, 2017).

Despite these promising research findings, self-care is not a cure-all and may not always be an equitable way to address mental health. For instance, research has found that those who suffer from chronic illness find it much more difficult to engage in self-care practices (Puig Llobet et al., 2020). Thus, placing too much emphasis on self-care might disadvantage those who need care and support the most.

Institutions can proactively address these potential inequities by embedding self-care into (co-) curricular structures and cultivating networks of collective care. Regarding the former, college faculty and staff can issue student assignments to promote the creation and utilization of self-care strategies. This way, it is built into the structures that students already navigate. In one study, for example, researchers embedded a self-care assignment into an undergraduate course and found that this was correlated with students' increased knowledge of self-care and capacity to manage stress (Jenkins et al., 2019). Therefore, integrating these forms of care throughout the curriculum might have the potential to positively shift mental health conditions across college campuses.

Although collective care might be one mechanism to mobilize campus communities to address mental health issues, it has not been sufficiently studied in higher education contexts. Data that do exist suggest that collective care might be important in cultivating environments conducive to positive mental health. For example, research within the field of higher education demonstrates that campus environments characterized

Integrating forms of care throughout the curriculum might have the potential to positively shift mental health conditions across college campuses.



by educators who care about undergraduates and are committed to their success are associated with increased sense of belonging among these students (Museus, 2014; Museus & Chang, 2021; Museus et al., 2017). Colleges that nurture cultures of care can enable mutual aid to support student mental health. Mutual aid refers to the formation and maintenance of communities or networks that prioritize caring for one another, socially and economically. While the impact of such networks on mental health has not been studied on college campuses specifically and research in other areas is mixed, the most methodologically rigorous randomized controlled trials examining the impact of mutual aid groups indicate that these networks significantly help reduce chronic mental illness, depression, anxiety, and bereavement (Pistrang et al., 2008). In times of crisis, such as after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers have also linked the practice of mutual aid to decreased depression and anxiety (Bowe et al., 2022).

COLLEGES PROMOTE DEEP CONNECTIONS TO FOSTER STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING

Closely related to the concept of collective care is in the reality that institutions have the capacity to maximize students' meaningful connections in college, which can help students experience a greater sense of belonging. A sense of belonging can be defined as a sense of social cohesion within the campus community and how students feel connected to and welcomed by their institutions (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hussain & Jones, 2021).

A strong sense of social cohesion can minimize the likelihood of social isolation and the potential detrimental effects of it (Durkheim, 1951). Several empirical studies have linked greater sense of belonging to decreased anxiety and depression (Choi et al., 2021; Dutcher et al., 2022; Gummadam et al., 2016; Hatchel et al., 2018; McFayden et al., 2022). However, research also suggests that the role of belonging in shaping mental health conditions might be complex. For example, there is some evidence that belonging might alleviate the negative effects of other stressors, such as financial hardship, on mental health (Sims, Ginette et al., 2020). The scholarship also underscores that existing mental health conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, might be associated with lower levels of belonging (Shalka & Leal, 2022). If this is true, then students with mental health conditions can find themselves in a vicious cycle, whereby their psychological challenges and disconnection from the campus community mutually reinforce one another.

At least two types of positive connections can contribute to students developing a healthy sense belonging: positive connections to their campus communities and connections to their communities of

origin. With regard to campus connections, researchers have long acknowledged the importance of students connecting with faculty, staff, and peers on campus (Anistranski & Brown, 2021; Apriceno et al., 2020; Lau et al., 2019). However, it is important to acknowledge that faculty, peers, and mentors can engage in actions that negatively influence mental health. For example, if educators on campus consistently make prejudicial or discriminatory comments toward students of color, this can adversely affect students' sense of belonging (Allen & Solórzano, 2000; Levin et al., 2006; Nuñez, 2009; Solórzano et al., 2002). Therefore, connections with peers, faculty, advisors, or other campus agents do not inherently result in a positive influence. Arguably the *nature and quality* of such connections are highly important.

Regarding community of origin connections, research indicates that culture-based programs, courses, and organizations in higher education can allow students to maintain important connections to their home communities while also fostering meaningful connections with people on campus (Museus & Maramba, 2011). When institutions reflect and engage the cultural values and identities of students and their families, students experience more inclusive environments that lead to an increased sense of belonging (Gonzales, 2019; Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021; Tachine et al., 2017). Research reveals several types of connections that likely increase a sense of belonging because they are particularly conducive to students maintaining ties with their cultural heritage while cultivating stronger connections with their campuses:

- ***Making learning relevant to students' communities and identities.*** College campuses can incorporate knowledge, voices, and perspectives from students' cultural communities into campus curricula and programs, thereby ensuring that their learning environments reflect the histories, realities, and issues affecting students' lives (Gonzales, 2019; Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021; Tachine et al., 2017). Such curricula and programs integrate campuses and cultural communities, allowing students to see themselves as belonging to both.
- ***Empowering students to give back to their communities.*** Institutions can also provide ample opportunities for students to engage in research and service projects that allow them to give back to their cultural communities (Museus, Yi et al., 2017, 2018). Such experiences can also be important in students developing the capacities and the dispositions to be leaders in their communities throughout their lives. If these opportunities are framed in anti-deficit ways that acknowledge undergraduates' communities' valuable knowledge and resources, then they can also strengthen students' affinity for their campus.
- ***Sustaining system that provide high-impact support.*** Higher education institutions can also offer support programs that take students' backgrounds into account in the design and delivery of support services (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; Museus, 2010; Museus et al., 2018). These programs are often funded by federal and state governments, as in the case of minority-serving institution initiatives and equal opportunity programs. They often offer co-curricular programming tailored to the cultures and identities of underserved populations and cultivate strong collectivist communities of support on campus. They also often provide humanized, holistic, and proactive support that strengthens students' connections to their campus and its associated resource networks (Museus, 2014).


Culture-based programs, courses, and organizations in higher education can allow students to maintain important connections to their home communities while also fostering meaningful connections with people on campus.

COLLEGES CREATE STRUCTURES AND SPACES THAT AFFIRM STUDENTS

Colleges can create learning environments where students feel affirmed or validated. Doing so is vital to cultivating campuses conducive to students leading healthier lives. On a broad scale, campus cultures and structures can facilitate the affirmation of students. On a smaller scale, microaffirmations, or everyday forms of recognition and validation, can be leveraged to acknowledge students' strengths and make them feel valued and acknowledged in a campus community (Rowe, 2008). Even brief affirmation exercises, such as writing an essay affirming one's values, have been linked to positive outcomes such as reduced psychological distress (Rapa et al., 2020). Experimental research has also linked such affirmation to increased likelihood of seeking out mental health information and support (Lannin et al., 2019; Seidman et al., 2018).

Scholars note that microaffirmations can validate a wide range of student backgrounds and identities (including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and international status), underscoring their versatility and value (Koch et al., 2020; Solórzano and Pérez Huber, 2020). Several qualitative and quantitative studies have linked affirmation of cultural, racial, gender, and class backgrounds and identities with positive mental health outcomes, including reduced psychological distress, anxiety, and depression (Brittian et al., 2013; Glynn et al., 2016; Hurd et al., 2018; Pérez Huber et al., 2021).

Scholarly research on racial microaffirmations might provide clues as to why cultural and identity-based affirmations positively influence mental health outcomes. For example, scholars have explored how communities of color experience racial microaffirmations, which are “moments of shared cultural intimacy” among people of color that affirm their dignity, integrity, and shared humanity (Solórzano & Pérez Huber, 2020). Institutional programs, such as Ethnic Studies programs, that directly reflect the histories and cultures of students of color can facilitate a wide range of everyday racial microaffirmations, such as taking a class with or being mentored by a supportive professor of color. Scholars note that racial microaffirmations might serve as protective factors against the psychological effects of racial microaggressions and help repair the harm they cause (Pérez Huber, et al., 2021). Thus, microaffirmations might alleviate the systemic violence experienced among those from marginalized communities.



Even brief affirmation exercises, such as writing an essay affirming one's cultural values, has been linked to positive psychological outcomes such as reduced psychological distress.

Existing research also sheds light on some college campus structures that help affirm college students:

- **Culturally relevant programs and curricula.** Programs and curricula that center the experiences and histories of communities of color can be empowering for students, and serve as an effective conduit for racial and other microaffirmations (Kiang et al., 2023; Museus et al., 2012; Solórzano & Pérez Huber, 2020; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015; Valdez, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). By doing so, such programs and curricula make these communities and the students from them central to the learning experience. We discuss the role of Ethnic Studies—one high-impact model for culturally relevant learning systems—in promoting positive student well-being more thoroughly in the next section.
- **Counterspaces.** According to Grier-Reed (2010), these are spaces that diverge from the dominant culture of the campus, providing a place where minoritized students engage and can find meaningful dialogue, interpersonal connections, and support. Typical manifestations of such counterspaces include culture- and identity-based student organizations (Museus, 2008; Museus et al., 2016), cultural resource centers (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020; Patton et al., 2019), and celebrations (Gildersleeve & Sifuentez, 2017; Tichavakunda, 2021, 2022). Such spaces have been found to be an important source of racial microaffirmations for students of color and bring them joy (Pérez Huber et al., 2021; Pérez Huber et al., 2023; Tichavakunda, 2021, 2022).
- **Visual and performing arts.** When people of color are positively represented in visual and performing arts, they can also affirm the cultures, identities, and experiences of students who share these identities (Najera-Ramírez, 2009; Parks, 2010; Vega Rodriguez, 2019; Willis, 1994). Such arts can signal that the people from these communities are valued in the campus community.

These structures and spaces can facilitate everyday microaffirmations of students' diverse cultural backgrounds (Pérez Huber et al., 2021). Curricula that centers the well-being of diverse communities and culturally relevant mental health programming are especially important because they are intentionally designed and delivered to provide curricular and support systems that can promote holistic well-being among diverse populations on college campuses. In the remainder of this section, we discuss these types of campus programs more thoroughly.

COLLEGES BUILD AND BOLSTER CURRICULA THAT PRIORITIZE THE WELL-BEING OF DIVERSE COMMUNITIES


In previous sections, we note the importance of culturally relevant curricula that are explicitly linked to the communities, identities, and realities of diverse student communities. Such curricular opportunities can be embedded in learning environments across disciplines and fields. In reality, Ethnic Studies programs often bear the brunt of the burden to provide such opportunities. As such, they arguably provide the most robust model of culturally relevant curricular learning environments available, so we discuss them in more detail in this section. Our goal is not to suggest that these programs and the educators within them should shoulder the responsibility of supporting diverse student populations, but to center them as a source of rich knowledge about how to do so.

Much research on the impact of Ethnic Studies programs has been conducted at the K–12 level and provides evidence that these programs promote a host of positive outcomes, such as increased

student engagement, graduation rates, college-going rates, and academic achievement (Bonilla et al., 2021; Cabrera et al., 2012; Dee & Penner, 2017; Romero, 2010; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). While less research had been produced on Ethnic Studies in higher education, what does exist highlights how these programs can promote a sense of belonging, fuel a sense of empowerment, and affirm students' cultures and identities (Kiang, 2009; Kiang et al., 2023; Museus et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2021). Ethnic Studies courses are inclusive of diverse historical narratives, provide opportunities for students to feel “seen” in the curriculum, allow them to learn about social and psychological issues within their communities, and empower them to collectively address problems affecting their communities.

Unfortunately, despite what we know about the positive effects of Ethnic Studies training on diverse groups of college students, Ethnic Studies departments and programs are underfunded and undervalued on most college and university campuses. While the future of Ethnic Studies in higher education seems bleak in some states, California has championed key legislation to ensure students in K–12 and higher education have the opportunity to take Ethnic Studies as part of their high school and college graduation requirements. In 2020, the California State University (CSU) Board of Trustees approved an amendment to the California Code of Regulations to include Ethnic Studies and Social Justice on the list of required courses all incoming freshmen will take across the 23-campus system. This requirement takes effect beginning in the 2023–2024 academic year for all new students. In 2021, Governor Gavin Newsom also signed Assembly Bill 101 into law, making California the first state to require all high school students to complete a semester-long Ethnic Studies course to earn their high school diploma (Fensterwald, 2021). All public high schools in the state must begin offering courses in the 2025–2026 school year to ensure all students meet this requirement to graduate by 2029–2030.

The institutionalization of Ethnic Studies in California public schools and the CSU system is an important model for K–12 schools and higher education institutions and systems more broadly. Increasing the number of students who have the opportunity to take Ethnic Studies in California



Despite what we know about the positive effects of Ethnic Studies training, such departments and programs are underfunded, undervalued, and facing new political threats.

means that the state's diverse college student populations will feel seen in their undergraduate careers, leading to empowerment and belonging, factors that we know positively influence both academic success and mental health (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Shalka & Leal, 2022). However, some Ethnic Studies programs and courses are under attack by conservative political leaders who are implementing state legislation to mandate that schools and universities restrict teaching about race and systemic oppression, and to end institutional diversity efforts (Cantwell & Taylor, 2022; Harris & Alter, 2023; Hartocollis & Fawcett, 2023; UCLA School of Law Critical Race Studies Program, 2021). This movement is currently unfolding across the nation and raises questions about the future of Ethnic Studies in higher education.

COLLEGES PROVIDE CULTURALLY RELEVANT MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMMING

Embedding culturally relevant knowledge and perspective into mental health programming and support also can lead to more positive mental health experiences for diverse college students. For example, culturally relevant psychoeducation interventions leverage an understanding of students' cultural backgrounds and identities to tailor conversations about mental health to students' cultural and experiential realities (Kim et al., 2021; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011; Shin, 2004). Such interventions can be designed to expand awareness of mental health challenges, facilitate open dialogue to normalize discussion about them, and develop strategies to collectively navigate and cope with potential or existing mental health challenges (Anandavalli, 2021; Parra-Cardona et al., 2019; Gameon & Skewes, 2020). Such interventions can disrupt the stigma of accessing mental health supports present in some communities of color and encourage more consistent utilization of services (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011).

With regard to continuous support, research has also shown that practitioners need to have adequate training and skills in order to provide effective culturally relevant mental health services to communities of color (Williams et al., 2019). In higher education, there is an urgent need for practitioners with these skills and for more mental health practitioners of color in particular (Jean, 2020). Many counseling centers on college campuses do not employ sufficient numbers of counselors from marginalized communities, making it difficult for students from these groups to find healthcare providers who they trust to understand them.

In addition, many higher education institutions are moving away from sustaining tenure-track counseling positions and toward part-time and full-time counseling practitioners. While non-tenure-track practitioners can certainly be qualified to provide mental health services, the institutional disinvestment from long-term permanent counseling faculty who can cultivate deep, long-standing relationships with people across their campuses is concerning (Issacs & Sabella, 2013). Short-term employment contracts do not offer the long-term job security that incentivizes counselors to remain at the institution for the duration of their careers and to build relationships with students and the broader campus community.

INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our analysis reveals important insights about how institutions of higher education influence the mental health of their students. These include lessons regarding how institutions contribute to mental health challenges, as well as mechanisms they can and sometimes do deploy to promote more positive mental health among their students. The review of literature relevant to this analysis also generated important conclusions regarding the state of research and discourse on higher education institutions and mental health. We highlight three of the most important observations in this final section of the current report.

THE NEED FOR A MORE HOLISTIC AND COHERENT NATIONAL CONVERSATION

There is a clear need to mobilize a community of scholars to more aggressively advance research and discourse regarding how institutions of higher education impact student mental health. While we hope that this report drives home the value of such work and honors the research that has already been done to better understand this relationship, we also believe that it highlights the lack of a holistic and cogent agenda in this arena.

In conducting this analysis, it was impossible to ignore the fragmented nature of separate conversations about college student experiences and mental health. Where researchers study college student experiences and outcomes, there appear to be many missed opportunities to engage and understand the role of mental health in shaping these phenomena. Similarly, where researchers have studied mental health among college students, they have often neglected to meaningfully examine the potentially wide range of institutional structures and processes that negatively or positively influence mental health. There remain many gaps in knowledge about the role of higher education institutions in shaping college student mental health. Important, unanswered questions include:

- What **institutional policies** can help effectively address mental health challenges on college campuses? What are the most significant barriers to implementing such policies and how can they be overcome?
- In what ways can educators integrate equitable **pedagogical practices** that promote holistic student thriving across disciplines and fields?
- What is the impact of **training faculty and staff** to approach their work with students in ways that might better promote positive mental health?
- How can institutions support scaling **Ethnic Studies** to create more caring and affirming spaces for students?
- What configurations of **counseling and psychological services** are most effective at reaching and serving those most in need?
- How can colleges and universities construct a robust ecosystem of **culturally relevant psychoeducation interventions** across their campuses?

- How can campuses **empower students** to develop and implement their own solutions to mental health issues in their communities and on their campuses?
- How might the impact of various programs and practices outlined herein **vary across different student groups and identities**?

These are just some of the questions that emerged throughout the process of conducting this review. In sum, existing knowledge falls short of providing a holistic understanding of how institutions can fully address mental health challenges on their campuses.

The growing mental health crisis has already caught the attention of people throughout the nation. Given the gravity of this challenge, we believe it is vital that policymakers and philanthropic organizations invest the necessary resources in research that can help excavate answers to some of the most pressing questions about institutional impact on mental health and help spark a more widespread national movement to do so. This would likely require bringing together a coalition of experts in systemic inequities, higher education, organizational psychology, mental health, and other relevant fields to collectively generate a strategic vision and advance this knowledge. While outlining such a vision is beyond the scope of this report, two additional lessons that emerged from this process can and should inform such an effort.



THE NEED TO REFRAME THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS AS A SYSTEMIC PROBLEM

Any collective research agenda focused on understanding the relationship between higher education institutions and mental health should intentionally and accurately frame the mental health crisis as a systemic and collective problem rather than an individual one. Such an agenda should be grounded in the evidence-based assumption that systemic forces have fueled the mental health crisis and those with power and influence have a responsibility to help address it.

This collective focus deviates from traditional ways of framing and discussing mental health issues. Higher education research rarely highlights the role of college campuses in contributing to the mental health crisis, and psychological research often focuses on understanding the factors that cause and alleviate individual mental health challenges and symptoms. However, scholars have argued that mental health challenges are not simply individual encounters, and that societal and community mental health is inextricably intertwined with individual well-being (Marsella & Yamada, 2000). They suggest that societal and community mental health shape the prevalence and severity of individual mental health problems across the national population, as well as individual capacities to address mental health challenges.

Given that the mental health crisis is a systemic issue, we stress the need for a greater focus on the institutional causes and solutions to this problem. To know that our social institutions have contributed to the mental health crisis and expect the individuals most harmed by this crisis to fix the problem themselves would be ineffective at best and immoral at worst. More fruitful conversations would focus on how institutions with the power and resources to promote significant changes can most effectively support solutions, as well as how such efforts can be informed by the ways in which communities are already collectively addressing mental health issues in their own spaces.

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THE NEED TO UNDERSTAND MENTAL HEALTH AS INTEGRAL TO STUDENT SUCCESS

Over the last 25 years, some scholars have gone beyond making minor connections between college student success and mental health to more thoroughly center this intersection in student success discourse (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendón, 1994; Schreiner, 2010). In 1997, Sylvia Hurtado and Deborah Carter revisited the psychological foundations of the student integration theory mentioned earlier in this report, and proposed *sense of belonging* as an alternative concept, which underscores the important role of campus environments in shaping students' psychological sense of social cohesion on their campuses (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). While Hurtado and Carter did not explicitly center mental health challenges in their analysis, they did effectively move discourse around student success from its focus on student behaviors back toward the psychological foundations of Durkheim's work.

In 2010, Laurie Schreiner introduced the *student thriving quotient* to provide a more comprehensive framing of student success conversations that takes psychological considerations into account. Drawing from work on positive psychology and human flourishing (Fredrickson et al., 2005), the concept of student thriving acknowledges that intellectual, interpersonal, and intrapersonal thriving are all important during college. This work defines thriving college students as those who are able



to achieve a level of intellectual, social, and psychological well-being (Schreiner, 2010). Schreiner highlights that engaged learning, psychological engagement in learning processes, having a positive outlook on life, valuing differences and a desire to contribute to society, and being socially connected are all key components of thriving in college. Schreiner's work has done the higher education field a great service in sparking a more holistic conversation around student thriving. In this way, she and other scholars have begun to lay an important foundation for more comprehensive conversations about cultivating environments that are conducive to positive holistic health on college campuses.

Much like the literature on positive psychology and human flourishing, the concept of student thriving arguably centers individual behaviors and dispositions, while focusing less attention on institutional responsibility.

The outer edges of these bodies of knowledge can also inform future research agendas. For example, while research on belonging made great contributions to student success discourse and is increasingly adopted in the study of campus environments and college outcomes, it does not explicitly and comprehensively discuss the range of factors that might shape mental health challenges among college students or comprehensively explain the role of other aspects of mental health in students' trajectories. Moreover, much like the literature on positive psychology and human flourishing, the concept of student thriving arguably centers individual behaviors and dispositions, while focusing less attention on institutional responsibility and how campuses can and do foster particular types of environments necessary for their increasingly diverse students to thrive. We hope this report's integration of college success and mental health knowledge bases can address some of these limitations. Perhaps most importantly, we hope this report can help catalyze an era of much-needed interdisciplinary and integrated discussions about mental health among today's students.

CONCLUSION

We recognize that academic researchers and higher education institutions have no shortage of problems to address in the present day, ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic to climate change. Nevertheless, similar to these other issues, the mental health crisis is literally a matter of life and death for many people. Given these realities, we believe it is imperative that academic researchers envision new ways to advance a research agenda on the systemic causes of mental health challenges among college students. Perhaps such an agenda will also encourage college and university presidents and chancellors to not only recognize the urgent need to address mental health issues on their campuses but invest the necessary resources to do so.



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