

Increased Need for Counseling Services

According to the American Counseling Association, “Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education and career goals.” Over the years, the use of university/college counseling centers has significantly increased. The Center for Collegiate Mental Health (2017) annual report stated that over the past six years (until 2016) there was a 28 percent increase in the services used by students at counseling centers and there has been 7.6 percent lesser hour devoted to providing ongoing counseling services. However, according to the Steve Fund (2015), students of color do not seek counseling services at the same rate as White students. As counselors we need to advocate for an increased number of counselors in the college and university setting to increase their ability to provide counseling services to all students.

University/college counseling centers engage in both crisis and ongoing counseling sessions with students for a variety of reasons. The annual report provided by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (2017) brought the following facts to light:

1. A number of students engage in two to five counseling sessions, which decreases after six sessions. Additionally, the data collection also provided information that a large group of students received more than 20 appointments.
2. After four years of data collection, the two most common presenting problems for students were anxiety (#1) and depression (#2). Other presenting problems were relationship problems (#3), stress (#4), family (#5), interpersonal functioning (#6), academic problems (#7), grief/loss (#8), mood instability (#9), adjustment to the new environment (#10), self-esteem/confidence (#11), and alcohol (#12).
3. There is a relationship between the average length of treatment and the presenting problem. For example, students with presenting problems such as anxiety and depression generally attend the average number of counseling sessions, even though these issues are highest on the list. Students with less common presenting problems, like gender identity exploration or self-injury, generally attend sessions for a longer period of time.

The data provided by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (2017) provides us with additional information about the counseling needs of students. Counselors working in college counseling centers must often face conflict between their responsibility to the students and to the institution. While providing individual counseling sessions is one of the requirements of counselors, some of the other responsibilities can include outreach activities such as sexual assault awareness, depression awareness, and classroom awareness, amongst others.

A few counseling centers at universities/colleges report having one or two counselors serving a large student population, which may be less than the International Association of Counseling Services, Inc.’s (IACS; 2016) recommendation of one full-time practitioner (excluding trainees) for every 1,000 to 1,500 students. The Association of University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD, 2017) report stated that there is an average of 1.70 full- and part-time practitioners for universities that have under 1,501 students. In universities/colleges (91) that have 2,501 to 5,000 enrolled students, the average full- and part-time practitioners are 3.01 (AUCCCD, 2017). Especially for counseling centers with a staff to student ratio below IACS’ recommendation, these counselors may have difficulty figuring out how to balance the workload

of meeting the needs of all students and the institution. With a high workload, and conflict between institutional and student responsibility, there are times when the waitlists for counseling services are high and students have to wait longer to be seen by a counselor.

The AUCCCD (2017) reported waitlists for student services at counseling centers can range anywhere from 1 to 5 weeks to over 35 weeks depending on the number of students at the Universities. Additionally, the average wait days for waitlisted students at counseling centers is about 17.3 days for first appointments.

As the number of students of color increase on college campuses, there is an increased need for outreach and counselors who are trained and experienced with working with these students. In addition, there continues to be an increased need for certain types of expertise in counseling diverse student populations such as international students or student-athletes.

The above numbers indicate that there are a lower number of counselors serving a higher number of students whose needs to seek counseling services has been increasing over time. In 2016, universities/colleges increased the number of mental health professionals to meet the needs of their students. For instance, the University of Iowa hired 8 additional counselors, Skidmore College in New York hired additional counselors and added a 24-hour crisis line, Willamette University added a 24-hour hotline service, and Amherst College added a hotline service (News, 2017).

Even though these changes have been made and are helpful in providing more counseling services to students, there is still a long way to go. As counselors, we, support efforts to increase staffing in college counseling centers with policy makers, and for legislators to provide additional funding for counseling services to meet the needs of today's college students.