



# **10 Best Practices for Supporting College Students' Mental Health**



## Executive Summary

A recent nationwide survey found nearly 60% of Gen Z college students have received mental health care before arriving on campus – during their K-12 years. This alarming statistic underscores the urgency of warnings from the CDC to the U.S. Surgeon General to increase awareness and action around a youth mental health crisis. Not only has mental health become a pressing public health issue, but it's also the number one reason students drop out of college, with 69% of four-year students and 55% of two-year students who have considered withdrawing citing emotional distress as their primary reason.

While the campus mental health crisis for students of all ages and demographics is gaining a growing amount of attention from educators, government leaders, and clinicians, it was an issue long before COVID acted as an accelerant. Many college and university leaders already have made significant investments in creating a connected system of care that improves student outcomes by supporting student mental health. According to an annual survey by *Inside Higher Ed*, about two-thirds of presidents (65%) indicate that they plan to increase their institution's capacity to meet the mental health needs of students, staff, and faculty members. A recent survey by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and P3•EDU found colleges' interest in private partnerships for health and telehealth services has steadily increased.

While available resources vary from campus to campus, the following best practices are common threads among colleges and universities that comprehensively address student mental health challenges as part of their institutional efforts to support student well-being and success.

## #1 Normalize and Destigmatize Mental Health Support

[Four out of five students](#) say there is a mental health crisis on college campuses. Creating a culture of care that normalizes mental health conversations and encourages support-seeking steps is a critical part of addressing students' needs.

Having a comprehensive strategy in place to support student health and well-being can also be an important preventative measure to reduce stigma, and to promote the health and safety of the entire campus community. Elon University recently [launched HealthEU](#), a broad-based effort to connect students, faculty, and staff with necessary resources to support their health and well-being that includes a partnership with TimelyCare.

By thoughtfully adopting a framework that promotes positive physical and mental health, we are prioritizing the whole-student experience and emphasizing an environment of emotional balance, creating community and purpose, and supporting financial, physical, and social well-being," said Elon's Vice President for Student Life Jon Dooley. "We want

to create a campus culture of resilience, and demonstrate our commitment to student success by empowering students to take actionable steps forward in their journey to wellness."

At Virginia Tech, students don't have to trek too far to find a welcoming space where they can openly share their mental health struggles. From [embedded mental health counselors](#) living in residence halls to the presence of four furry friends who give unconditional therapeutic love, Hokies can find support from people and pets alike. Derek, Wagner, Josie, and Epcot are the famous all-star pups that make up Virginia Tech's Cook Counseling Center therapy dog team.

“Stigma around mental health issues is still a huge challenge for college students to overcome and campus counseling centers nationwide have been working to mitigate the effects of stigma. Our animal-assisted therapy dogs are our ambassadors for mental health and they have been a huge asset to our team – and our most popular campus counselors!

**Ellie Sturgis**

*Director of Cook Counseling Center  
Virginia Tech*



TimelyCare's Mark Hoyt and Abby Waldron pose with Josie, one of four therapy dogs at Virginia Tech, during a recent campus visit.

Now five years into its partnership with TimelyCare, Abilene Christian University has found that improved student mental health leads to improved student success outcomes.

"One of the things we know from student life is that when a student is engaged in the campus community, the student is more likely to retain and graduate. One of the best ways to keep a student engaged in the campus community is to keep them healthy," said Kevin Campbell, Senior Vice President for Operations at Abilene Christian University.





## #2 Consider Students' Diverse Backgrounds, Identities, and Lived Experiences

Historically underrepresented groups, including racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities, often experience [poor mental health outcomes](#) due to a lack of access to high-quality mental health care services, poor representation among available providers, discrimination, and cultural stigma about emotional health.

Despite their best efforts and continual improvement, recruiting and retaining a diverse team of therapists that represents students' identities, backgrounds, and lived experiences has long been a challenge for college counseling centers. [According to the latest data from the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors \(AUCCCD\)](#), the majority of college counseling center directors are white (59%) and female (70%).

Ensuring a diverse and inclusive provider network can be a challenge for minority-serving institutions (MSIs), including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Tribal Colleges and Universities. Tierra Parsons, Director of Counseling Services at Johnson C. Smith University, an HBCU in Charlotte, N.C., said it's important students have the opportunity to see themselves in the therapists they have available to them.

"We have requested that there are some therapists of color that look like our students so that it could help to address the stigma around mental health and make our students a little bit more comfortable with accessing and utilizing the services," Parsons told [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#). "Even down to the marketing — we specifically requested that the images and promotion have persons of color to represent different cultures.... And so we are just happy that we're able to meet their needs in this way, especially on an HBCU campus."

In keeping with its [commitment to inclusion](#), TimelyCare's diverse and culturally responsive provider network reflects and is proud to serve students who embody diversity in race, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, age, religion and worldview, language, health, ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic and immigration status, and more. More than half of mental health providers identify as people of color. With [cultural competency upskilling by Violet](#), the TimelyCare platform also offers professionals who identify as LGBTQIA+, speak multiple languages, and translation services to support more than 240 languages. Students scheduling services can choose to meet with a specific provider or select the first available.

“To be able to go on this app, self-identify, say what's going on with me, and then being able to find a queer man of color to talk to, that is so rare, and that is the second person I clicked on. That isn't available to me here and that wouldn't be available to me without Timely.

**Max Cartagena**  
Student  
Cal Poly Humboldt



### #3 Recognize that Mental Health is a Basic Need

Surveys from 2021 by [The Hope Center at Temple University](#) and [TimelyCare](#) found that nearly 60% of community college students experienced basic needs insecurity, and more than 70% experienced emotional stress as a result.

At Amarillo College, President Russell Lowery-Hart is known for his student-centered commitment to “loving students to success” – which the college defines as “a dedication to not just supporting students’ basic needs but their academic needs too.” In April, [Amarillo College was named co-recipient of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence](#), the nation’s top honor of high achievement and performance among America’s more than 1,000 community colleges, for its commitment to improving student outcomes.

On a recent episode of “[In the Know](#),” a podcast from the [Association of Community College Trustees \(ACCT\)](#), Jerrod Hinders, Counseling Center Coordinator at Amarillo College, talked about the correlation between mental health and other factors such as food, housing, and financial insecurity facing many of their students.

“We have to have a holistic approach to meeting these students’ needs, especially post-pandemic in which our world got really turned upside down. There was a lot of question if those basic needs were going to be met and that security, which inevitably has an effect on mental health. In order for us to be effective, we need to make sure we’re looking at the whole student, we’re looking at the whole situation and identifying how we can help with each of those pieces. The more pieces we can put into place the better we can be able to support them.

**Jerrod Hinders**  
Counseling Center Coordinator  
Amarillo College



## #4 Address Mental Health Provider Shortage Areas



Currently, 163 million Americans live in a federally designated [mental health provider shortage area](#), with rural areas being disproportionately impacted. For rural colleges and universities, provider shortages often create exceptionally long wait times – often up to four or five weeks – because it can be difficult to recruit and retain therapists for campus counseling centers and community-based resources.

Ensuring 24/7 access to a diverse provider network is especially important when it may be several hours to a large city, or where people may feel isolated at times because of their remote surroundings – both of which are the case at Western Colorado University.

“As a rural community in Colorado, TimelyCare can really help students connect with someone to help them talk through their problems or a mental health crisis where some physical service in the Valley may not be available to them,” said Sam Micka, Assistant Professor of Computer Science, CIS Faculty Member/Faculty Senate, Western Colorado University.

“Whether that’s because their health insurance doesn’t provide coverage for that provider, or if it’s because there just isn’t appointment availability because there’s a lot of people trying to see the very limited counselors in this Valley, or if they just can’t even get in touch with a family member, if they’re working through something and they need to talk to someone in confidence about a problem they’re experiencing, having that resource available is critical. And being able to connect any time of the day, at the click of a button, is truly incredible.”

“Mental health is a big deal here in the Valley. We have a lot of cold months here and you can get the winter blues as we call it. You can get cabin fever really easily. Having telehealth and TimelyCare has made a huge, significant difference on campus.

**Precious Allen,**  
*Student*  
Western Colorado University



## #5 Address Student Health and Well-Being as an Entire System

State systems of higher education have accelerated their investments in student health and well-being to ensure students at each institution within their system have equitable access to mental health resources. With Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) grants ending in 2023, two-year community colleges and four-year public colleges and universities increasingly are advocating for state legislators to assist in funding for mental health resources.

For example, California's Budget Act of 2021 included \$30 million in ongoing local assistance funds to support expanding the availability of mental health services available to California community college students. The combination of this funding allocation and a partnership with [The Foundation for California Community Colleges \(FoundationCCC\)](#) and the CollegeBuys group purchasing division means that one-third of California's Community College students have equitable access to on-demand care anytime, anywhere.

System-wide agreements and system-enabling agreements provide opportunities for student services at scale, while enabling each institution to keep their autonomy to tailor to the unique needs of their campus communities. One in every four college students in the state of Texas now has access to expanded mental health support through TimelyCare thanks to recent investments by the [Texas State University System](#) and [University of Texas System](#). When [Indiana University](#)

[made its announcement](#) about partnering with TimelyCare, President Pamela Whitten's message was clear: "The health and well-being of our students is a top priority for me and our university as a whole."

The Virginia Higher Education Procurement Consortium (VHEPC) manages \$350 million in cooperative contract spending across the state, and Director Ryan Balber ensures that their agreements not only benefit VHEPC member institutions, but also other colleges and universities whenever possible. When [Virginia Tech](#), [Virginia Commonwealth University](#), [James Madison University](#), and [Virginia's Community Colleges](#) identified the need for a collaborative agreement for virtual mental health services, they decided that Virginia Tech would be the ideal lead agency and the other schools agreed to go in together, making it easy for public and private schools across the state to adopt the same terms and seamlessly add services. Today, about a dozen schools outside the state – including the [University of Delaware](#), [University of South Florida](#), and several member institutions of the Illinois Public Higher Education Cooperative – also have leveraged the cooperative buying agreement to reduce procurement red tape and expand access to care quickly and easily.



They know if we've done the contract that it's going to be done well and they're going to benefit from the pricing.

**Ryan Balber**  
*Director*

Virginia Higher Education Procurement Consortium



## #6 Support the Mental Health of Faculty and Staff

Research by the College and University Professional Association of Human Resources (CUPA-HR) in 2022 found that nearly 60% of higher education employees were likely to seek new employment in the next year. A [2020 survey](#) from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and Fidelity Investments found that two-thirds of faculty respondents felt “extremely” or “very” stressed, compared to just one-third of respondents who reported similar feelings the year before.

Three years later only, about a third of respondents in [Inside Higher Ed's 2023 survey](#) of college presidents felt their institutions had sufficient capacity to address the mental health needs of staff (37%) and faculty (36%). Employee assistance programs – always limited – now seem insufficient to deal with the daily stressors faculty and staff face. The last few years have been challenging for most people, and faculty and staff don't check their authentic selves at the door when they get to work. That's why many colleges and universities have expanded TimelyCare access to employees so that they can get the help they need, uphold the quality of the academic experience, bolster student academic performance, and better support student outcomes.

“Had we not partnered with TimelyCare, we'd have lost a tremendous amount of students, faculty, and staff at the university. I believe my staff would have probably told me, 'This is too much. I just can't deal with it.' I don't think I could have held on to my staff at all, and so I am happy I had some other services such as TimelyCare to provide for them.”

**Leroy Durant**

*Vice President for Student Development & Services*  
Claflin University

Burnout among care providers – physicians, nurses, counselors, and others in a caregiving role – became more commonplace and also contributed to the Great Resignation across higher education. In addition to helping them provide better care to students, providing faculty and staff with additional support services can help stem the tide and improve retention of employees.

“A year ago, retention of counselors was huge, a huge problem. We were losing six to seven counselors a year. Having access to TimelyCare to help what we're doing, our ability to retain our counselors has improved significantly,” said Ellie Sturgis, Director of Cook Counseling Center at Virginia Tech, who added the only resignations I know of for next year are people who are retiring or whose families are relocating. “But it has really helped us with retention, and it's really helped morale.”



## #7 Provide Resources to Reach the Silent Sufferers



According to the [Healthy Minds Network](#), 78% of college students report needing support for a mental or emotional health problem. But according to the [AUCCCD](#), only about 10% of four-year students are using campus mental health resources. Bridging that gap and reaching out to the silent sufferers – or students who otherwise might not step forward and proactively seek the support they want or need – has never been more important.

Johns Hopkins University is five years into a [university-wide effort to bolster student mental health resources](#), staffing, training, and programming based on recommendations from its Task Force on Student Mental Health and Well-Being made in 2018. Under the leadership of Vice Provost for Student Health and Well-being Kevin Shollenberger and a team that recognizes there is no one-size-fits-all approach, Hopkins has developed a national model to comprehensively address the diverse needs of its learners.

With emotional and mental health resources designed to help students cope effectively with life and create satisfying relationships, Hopkins has creatively and systematically addressed everything from sleep through a program called [Yawns Hopkins](#), to [motivational interviews](#) that coach students to make healthy changes pertaining to substance use and misuse.

In April 2020, like many colleges and universities, Johns Hopkins trusted TimelyCare (then TimelyMD) to provide 24/7 access to mental health counseling to students in the pandemic's early stages when varied state licensure regulations limited care to students unless they were physically located in the same state as their campus counselors.

“It helps us in reaching a broader group of students that we might not be reaching through our traditional counseling services. We have been surveying students to get a sense of their experience ... I've been struck by the number of students who said if we didn't have [TimelyCare] in place, they wouldn't have reached out.”

**Kevin Shollenberger**

*Vice Provost for Student Health and Well-being  
Johns Hopkins University  
[Inside Higher Ed](#)*

What Johns Hopkins found was that a significant number of TimelyCare visits occurred on nights and weekends, signaling the platform provided much-needed support to students who otherwise would not have gotten it.

TimelyCare's Peer Community and expanded self-care resources empower students to take ownership of their physical and emotional well-being without the need for a provider visit – improving health agency and literacy at a seminal time in their lives. Given that about half of students who have used Peer Community or self-care resources have not had a provider visit in the last three months, it's clear that easy and self-guided on-ramps for support reach students who might not otherwise seek out a therapist.



## #8 Empower Students to Take the Lead

[Peer support programs](#) are not new, but they are gaining momentum on campuses across the country as a friendly and less formal way to support students in need. A [2022 TimelyCare survey](#) found peer support topped the ways students would cope with stress and anxiety that semester.

Another [survey](#) by the [Born This Way Foundation](#) and the Mary Christie Institute found that one in five college students already benefit from peer counseling, with rates significantly higher among Black, transgender, and first-generation students.

Students at Northwestern University have a variety of peer advocacy groups that destigmatize mental health issues, raise awareness for campus resources, and support other students who may be struggling, including [We Are SAATH](#) (which focuses on the South Asian Community) and Active Minds. [Active Minds](#) is the nation's premier nonprofit organization supporting mental health awareness and education for young adults, and its partnership with TimelyCare aims to broaden the conversation about mental health and create lasting change in the way mental health is talked about, cared for, and valued on campuses where both organizations have a shared presence, including Northwestern.

“One of Active Minds' core tenants in working to improve the mental health outlook for students and young adults nationwide is connection. Our partnership with TimelyCare leans into connection – providing users with the ability to get quality, real-time support from peers in a safe, digital setting. We believe that this Active Minds and TimelyCare partnership will help evolve the conversation around mental health from stigma to solutions.

**Markie Pasternak**  
*Senior Manager for Higher Education*  
Active Minds

Jillian Allen, an Active Minds student leader at the University of Virginia, says many students feel more comfortable with self-guided and peer support resources they can use on their own time and in their own space.

“Having the more informal ability to share what you're going through without it being an appointment with a counselor is huge,” Allen said. “With the Peer Community feature, I think people enjoy getting stuff off of their chest and sharing it anonymously. Reading and responding to the posts, even giving little responses like, ‘you're not alone,’ helps me in my own life and feeling comfortable to say, ‘I think I'm ready to talk with someone.’ Whether they take that next step or not is up to them, and they know the option is always available through TimelyCare.”



## #9 Champion Student-Athlete Mental Health

Mental health support can no longer wait on the sidelines for student-athletes. A recent [NCAA-led survey](#) found more than 80% of head, assistant, and associate coaches across all three divisions are spending more time discussing mental health with student-athletes than they did before the pandemic. In a [2022 TimelyCare survey](#), 70% of student-athletes reported experiencing mental health issues, and they were more likely to seek emotional support (78%) than other students (71%).

Many campuses, athletic departments, and coaches are partnering with organizations such as [The Hidden Opponent](#), a non-profit and advocacy group that raises awareness for student-athlete mental health and addresses the stigma within sports culture, or [Sidelined USA](#), a non-profit that exists to reunite permanently-sidelined athletes with their passions and inspire them to find a meaningful way forward.

When colleges and universities team up with TimelyCare, they gain access to licensed providers in all 50 states who are specially trained in delivering mental health support that embraces and reflects the unique needs of student-athletes.

"There is no greater priority than the health and safety of our students and we recognize the additional pressures our student-athletes face in addition to their academic workloads," said Morehead State University Director of Athletics Dr. Jaime Gordon in an [announcement about making 24/7 equitable access to expanded mental health resources available to student-athletes](#).

“TimelyCare’s ease of use, convenience, and immediacy make it easier than ever for our students to get on-demand support.

**Dr. Jaime Gordon**  
*Director of Athletics*  
Morehead State University



TimelyCare Client Success Manager Courtney Sanchez met with the Louisiana Christian University softball team to promote TimelyCare as a free mental health resource available to them anytime, anywhere.

## #10 Prepare for and Respond to Crises With a Culture of Caring

According to the CDC, [suicide is the third leading cause of death among college-age Americans](#). A recent nationwide survey of more than 1,200 students found mass shootings were in their top-five sources of stress and anxiety. Every instance of violence – self-inflicted or otherwise – has a ripple effect that transcends the boundaries of campus, and it takes an all-hands-on-deck approach to support the entire community.

On the night of a tragic shooting that killed three University of Virginia football players, UVA Director of Counseling Nicole Ruzek called TimelyCare Director of Mental Health Operations Seli Fakorzi to ensure additional counselors would be available to support students experiencing grief, trauma, and loss. How to [support partner schools in times of crisis](#) is an unfortunate but necessary component of TimelyCare's role as a virtual expansion of campus resources.

Additionally, how campuses prepare for and respond to traumatic events can reduce risk, save lives, and prevent suicide contagion, or the concept that when one person dies by suicide that others in a community may be at higher risk.

[The Jed Foundation \(JED\)](#), a leading non-profit focused on protecting emotional health and preventing suicide for our nation's teens and young adults and TimelyCare partner, operates the JED Campus program that guides schools through a collaborative process of comprehensive systems, programs, and policy development with customized support to build upon existing student mental health, substance use, and suicide prevention efforts.

Case Western Reserve University, a JED Campus and TimelyCare partner in Cleveland, Ohio, has put thorough prevention and postvention plans into place to help its campus community respond to crises in a calm, consistent, and caring manner.



“Prevention is worth every bit of upfront work that you can manage on your campus, which includes having a comprehensive toolbox of resources for students to support their own mental health, which will inevitably turn into students supporting each other. Being understood in a crisis is so significant – it is critical to prepare, which includes knowing your campus, knowing what your students' needs are, and responding to current events accordingly.

**Hillary Jones**

*Director of Acute Mental Health Care,  
Crisis Response, and Care Management  
Case Western Reserve University*



## Turning Best Practices into Action Plans

Whether students are on or off campus, developing a comprehensive approach to student health and well-being requires meeting students where they are with resources to improve their mental health whenever, wherever, and however they need support. Connect with TimelyCare to learn how a student-centered approach to mental health today can improve student success outcomes tomorrow.

## About TimelyCare

TimelyCare is higher education's most trusted virtual health and well-being provider, serving more than two million students at 300 campuses nationwide. Founded in 2017, TimelyCare pioneered the first telehealth solution built exclusively for higher education, with a mission to improve the health and well-being of college students by making virtual medical and mental health care accessible anytime, anywhere. Today its comprehensive suite of services – including mental health counseling, on-demand emotional support, medical care, psychiatric care, health coaching, basic needs assistance, faculty and staff guidance, peer support and self-guided wellness tools – expands the breadth of campus resources and empowers students to be well and thrive.

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