

Mental Health Challenges facing Students in Higher Education During COVID
The pandemic might be a “black swan” moment for mental health care— “an unforeseen event that changes everything.” Heleen Riper

Dr. Roslin Growe, Ed.D.

Professor
College of Education
Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership
Cecil J. Picard Center for Child Development and Lifelong Learning
The University of Louisiana at Lafayette
Lafayette, LA 70506

Sherry Bachus, Ph.D., LPC

Associate Professor
CDFS Chair/Director
Child Development and Family Studies
College of Education & Human Development Building
Southern University at New Orleans
New Orleans, LA 70126

Suzanne Mynette Mayo, Ph.D.

Lecturer, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences
Grambling State University
Washington Complex - 100
GSU Nursery School
Grambling, LA 71245

Abstract

Colleges and universities are recording an upsurge in the number of cases involving students and mental health challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This investigation explores complex issues pertaining to mental health among low-income, LGBTQ+, and international students. Recognizing the urgency and current impact on students seeking support and mental health services, digital technologies, web-based and computer-delivered interventions are being considered as ways to improve students' mental health. The findings reveal that innovative strategies and comprehensive policies have given rise to expanding support to students with increased mental health issues not only now but post-COVID-19-pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic; Student Mental Health; Mental Health of Low-Income Students; Mental Health of International Students; Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Students

1. Introduction

Students in higher education face innumerable challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhai & Du, 2020). Unexpected and intrusive, leaders in higher education continue to struggle with the operational nuances of merely existing in the unknown world of COVID (Kelly & Columbus, 2020). The pre-pandemic way of functioning as an institution has been disrupted (d'Orville, 2020). What once was constituted as normal is irrevocably and dramatically questioned or considered non-existent. The unforeseen shift from face to face to a remote platform has spurred conversations about the future of higher education in the United States (UNESCO, 2020a).

2.0 Problem Statement

While discussions on campuses are underway about long-term implications of the virus on college student experiences, Bradley and Tugade (2020) stated that the number of college and university students reporting mental health disorders has risen exponentially. Continuing their discourse, while an increased frequency of reported mental health disorders and the expectations by students and parents for available treatments, institutions of higher education have been scrambling to provide more services with limited mental health staff, time, and resources (Bradey & Tugade, 2020).

2.1 Mental Health Challenges Facing Students Pre-COVID

A mental health crisis is facing our nation's campuses. Mental disorders are prevalent among college students and appear to be increasing in number and severity (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Long before the pandemic, Congress aggressively worked to respond to the opioid epidemic. What initially were considered health emergencies brought on by the opioid crisis, have been exacerbated by COVID which is now considered a public health emergency (Lundquist, 2020).

Henriques (2014) reported the rate of anxiety and depression skyrocketing in the last few decades. In a 2013 survey of college students, Henriques (2014) found 57% of women and 40% of men reporting episodes of overwhelming anxiety while 33% of women and 27% of men reported feeling depressed and finding it difficult to function.

Undergraduate students are most likely to experience depression, academic difficulties, and substance abuse symptoms (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2018). Unfortunately, one of the most dangerous aspects of depression and mental health concerns is suicide. Suicide is a leading cause of death among college students and approximately 1,100 college students die each year by suicide in the United States (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2018). Others have suicidal thoughts and attempt suicide.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, students who receive counseling services on campuses no longer can access these services which has worsened their psychological symptoms and increased some students' risk for suicide and substance abuse (Zhai & Du, 2020). Mental health should be a priority during and throughout the pandemic because of isolation and other life altering practices which makes it imperative for new interventions and prevention regulations to be set in place (Lundquist, 2020).

2.2 COVID-19 and Mental Health Impact on College Students

Prior to the pandemic, there was an increase in mental health concerns among college students. This population is in greater need for mental health services (Ciechalski, Walters, & Kaufman, 2020). Approximately one in five adults (47 million) in the United States noted a mental illness prior to the Covid-19 pandemic (Panchal, et al., 2020). In fact, Ciechalski et al. (2020) stated that the pandemic has a negative effect on college students' mental health. Based on a survey of 2,086 college students conducted by Active Minds (2020), 91% of students reported that COVID-19 increased their levels of stress and anxiety, 81% expressed the pandemic has caused them to experience sadness, and 80% experienced loneliness or isolation. In addition, college students expressed their mental health worsening significantly under Covid-19. Shelter-at-home orders due to the COVID-19 pandemic is one of the many difficult challenge's students face with staying focused on coursework (Ciechalski, et al., 2020).

2.3 LGBTQ+ Students and Mental Health

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning+ (LGBTQ+) student population within the community are experiencing extreme stress and mental health challenges during the pandemic. LGBTQ+ students experience unique stressors such as difficulty accessing health services (Gibilisco, 2020). Daily news reports, social media messages, press conferences, and other sources provide information and opinions about the coronavirus pandemic that has swept across the world (Gibilisco, 2020). However, unlike natural disasters, the virus also called COVID-

19 caused by the novel virus, knows no boundaries and at this writing, neither a vaccine nor therapy has been developed to control the virus.

As with the rest of the population, the majority of LGBTQ+ individuals (72%) are concerned with the effect contracting Coronavirus will have on them, their health, and others because of their vulnerable partners and friends (Wareham, 2020). Wareham (2020) found no evidence that LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to contract COVID-19 than the general population. However, the LGBTQ+ community will face a unique set of circumstances that will disproportionately affect them socially (Wareham, 2020).

The Trevor Project (2020) is a United States LGBTQ+ charity. The Project's suicide hotlines have experienced an increase in crisis contact volume from LGBTQ+ youth reaching out for support (Wareham, 2020). Amit Paley, CEO and Executive Director of the Trevor Project expressed that LGBTQ+ youth already face increased risk of anxiety, suicide, disproportionate rates of unemployment, and unstable housing (Wareham, 2020). The [Trevor Project \(2020\) COVID-19 research](#) shows that young people will be facing more difficult mental health strains due to extra economic isolation and housing instability.

The need to protect LGBTQ+ students from this virus is not necessarily overridden by their need to be with others. Recognizing and discussing with the LGBTQ+ community COVID related mental health issues are essential in providing support over the coming weeks and months (Wareham, 2020).

2.4 Low-Income Students and Mental Health

According to C.M. Brown of the Seattle Times (2020), the fear of attracting scrutiny and the stigma attached to mental health often cause students to avoid the various college campus counseling centers. Brown (2020) reported that in mid-March 2020, the U.S. public health professionals strongly recommended practices to protect students from COVID-19 across various college and university campuses throughout the world. Students are adopting new social behaviors in particular social distancing, which can have harmful adverse mental ailments such as depression, anxiety, isolation, and the lack of socializing may deepen depression and anxiety (Brown, 2020).

Part of a preventative measure involving a bipartisan group of lawmakers on the Senate Health and Education Committee led by Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, calls for the Education Department and Department of Health and Human services to help equip schools and colleges with information on how to use federal funds to address unique mental health challenges students are facing due to COVID-19 (Zwara, n.d.). Lawmakers sent a letter dated September 16, 2020 to Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos stating that K-12 and college students have experienced some of the worst and severe effects of the COVID-19 virus and the negative impact on their mental health is already becoming apparent (Zwara, n.d.). Better use of federal funds to support the mental health needs of students should be in part to focus on helping low-income students (Zwara, n.d.).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), (2020) collected data showing nearly three quarters of 18-24-year olds reported at least one mental or behavioral health symptom during the pandemic. More than a quarter had seriously considered suicide within the past thirty days (CDC, 2020).

2.5 Equity in Mental Health Treatment of International Students

International students are facing even more obstacles in maintaining their mental health under the COVID pandemic than ever before (Wan, 2020). Under ordinary circumstances, these students are susceptible to mental disorders like depression, becoming disenchanted with the local medical system, and less inspired to seek psychological service than their local peers (Alharbi and Smith, 2018; Brunsting et al., 2018). Crawford, et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020; Yu, 2020 found that the pandemic may have caused more isolation with less access to public resources due to limited monies, information, language, and/or cultural barriers. As a minority on college campuses, specific needs of international students are often neglected by the countries accommodating them. As Crawford, et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020; Yu, 2020 concluded, some campuses were closed without considering that many international students do not have a residence outside of those campuses, do not have accessibility to a safe return to their home countries due to closed borders, experience reduced number of international flights, and face potential exposure to COVID-19 during their travel.

April Yu (2020) expressed in her blog that since its onset in late January, international students had been living with the daily reality of the COVID pandemic. These students could not stop watching news reports about the COVID virus. In March 2020, as the virus became widespread in the United States, international students began placing more attention on their own health, constantly evaluating themselves for symptoms. Yu (2020) goes on to describe the discrimination and fears the pandemic brought out in others. International students were perceived as an

outgroup facing discrimination, microaggression, and feeling marginalized from within the United States and from their native country especially those of Asian origins (Mackolil & Mackolil 2020; Tandon, 2020).

International university students residing in the United States suffer an abundance of unmet psychological needs and psychosocial problems based on society's responses to the COVID pandemic (Mackolil & Mackolil, 2020; Tandon, 2020). Considering the psychosocial impact of the pandemic, they are stuck between two regulatory regimes—those of their homeland and the United States by which neither is fully protecting them (Hayes & Al'Abri, 2020). Psychologically, these students are concerned about contracting COVID-19; compounded by the disruption of having to leave accommodations; the need for additional financial support; difficulty accessing health and mental care; and worry about their families at home (Hayes & Al'Abri, 2020).

Universities in regions where resources have been virtually depleted by the COVID pandemic may consider mobilizing available resources at a worldwide scope to support international students (Navarro et al., 2020). This proves to be a caring approach which would mean giving international students fair and equitable access to mental health services, social and economic benefits, and practical assistance in times of crisis (Hayes & Al'Abri, 2020). These authors also call for a plan of action by which universities will take the initiative to reach out to international students and attend to their needs in a culturally sensitive way. Stephan et al. (2016) indicated that given the fact that perceived threats breed discrimination, tailored measures are urgently required for local governments to target schools and communities willing to create a more inclusive environment for international students during and after the pandemic.

2.6 Technological and Digital Interventions

Depression and anxiety are common mental health concerns experienced by university students and can impair academic and social functioning (Davies, Morriss, Grazebrook, 2014). Digital technologies, web-based, and computer-delivered interventions could be used to improve students' mental health with little effort since students are already accustomed to the world of technology and own or have access to technological devices (Nieman, 2020).

A substantial number of universities have limited resources available to support student mental health. With technology advancement being the centerpiece of almost every aspect of life, technology-based interventions are expected to play a significant role in assisting the university student populations (Nieman, 2020).

A study was conducted by Farrer and others (2013) with the objective of systematically reviewing published randomized trials of tech-based interventions evaluated in a university setting for disorders other than substance use and eating disorders. Using the PubMed, PsycInfo and Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials databases which formed their methodological approach, 1618 abstracts were retrieved for examination. The criteria consisted of five components: a randomized trial or a randomized controlled trial; the sample composed of students attending a tertiary institution; intervention delivered or accessed using a technological device or process; the age range of the sample between 18 and 25 years; and the intervention designed to improve, reduce, or change symptoms relating to a mental disorder. Findings of this analysis indicated that technological interventions targeting certain mental health and related problems offer promise for students in university settings (Farrer et al. 2013).

Along the same lines, Davies, Morriss, and Glazebrook (2014) conducted a study intended to systematically examine and analyze trials of web-based and computer-delivered interventions to improve depression, anxiety, psychological distress and stress in university students. The study aimed to improve symptoms relating to depression, anxiety, psychological distress; involved computer-delivered or web-based interventions accessed via computer, laptop, or tablet; a randomized controlled trial; and trialed on higher education students. Findings of the study suggested web-based and computer-delivered interventions can be effective in improving students' depression, anxiety, and depression outcomes when compared to inactive controls with certain cautions (Davies, Morriss, and Glazebrook, 2014).

With the current COVID-19 pandemic resulting in school and university closures, social distancing and remote learning have exacerbated the mental health crisis in the United States among youths and young adults (Nieman, 2020). Nieman goes on to say that educational institutions are becoming proactive in the demands and challenges of students' mental health concerns and are bolstering student mental health ranging from prevention, to treatment, to crisis support. Colleges and universities have shown a willingness to adopt digital tools at increasing rates and are looking for the right tools to meet the mental health needs of young adults in scalable and affordable ways (Nieman, 2020).

While impacts of the COVID pandemic on collegiate mental health are daunting, Telemental health has been found effective in treating anxiety and depressive symptoms (Brenes et al., 2015). Implementing Telemental health will facilitate the delivery of counseling services in addressing pressing mental health concerns of students (Dorsey and Topol, 2020). Warren and Smalley (2020) contend that Telemental health offers a critical avenue to not only sustain mental and behavioral health services, but to expand them during and post-pandemic.

Technology has the capability to intervene in youth and young adult mental health in significant ways:

Prevention: Mental wellness tools offering resilience training, meditation exercises, social-emotional skill building and more. These tools help in building positive mental health habits. They can serve all youth and young adults, not only those with identified mental health concerns.

Protection and detection: Digital safety tools that protect individuals from abuse, harassment and cyberbullying, or provide alerts for potential mental health issues including self-harm or harm to others. Tools in this category focus on mobile and online content monitoring. They alert parents, teachers and/or school administrators of questionable content or interaction. They can also passively detect and flag signals of depression or anxiety.

Treatment: Digital and virtual therapy options, as well as technologies that scale access to in-person clinician reach, like teletherapy and crisis lines. Many technologies integrate ongoing clinical assessments, including new ways to deploy “Patient Health Questionnaires” (e.g. PHQ-9 for depression) (Nieman, 2020).

Conclusions

The mental health crisis affecting our nation's college campuses is a matter of priority. Institutions of higher education remain ill-equipped and grapple with how to proactively attend to the mental well-being of students devastated by the pandemic. A core principle is to develop strategies and best practices in mental health along with digital and technological interventions in addressing this crisis impacting university communities. Since this phenomenon is so new and seemingly on the rise, continued research is recommended in order to determine how to best serve these populations of students.

References

- Active Minds* (2020). COVID-19 Impacted College Students' Mental Health Hardest, According to Nationwide Survey of Students. Retrieved from web: <https://www.activeminds.org/studentsurvey/>.
- Alharbi E.S., Smith A.P. Review of the literature on stress and wellbeing of international students in English-speaking countries (2018). *International Education Studies*. 2018;11:22. doi: 10.5539/ies.11(6)22.
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention* (2018). Retrieved from web: <https://afsp.org/suicide-statistics/>.
- American Psychological Association* (2013). College students' mental health is a growing concern, survey finds. Vol 44, No. 6. Retrieved from web: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2013/06/college-students>.
- Bradley, Elizabeth H. and Tugade, Michele M.(2020). Mental Health in Higher Education: Can a Digital Strategy Help? *EDUCAUSE Review*. 55, (2).
- Brenes G.A., Danhauer S.C., Lyles M.F., Hogan P.E., Miller M.E. (2015), Telephone-delivered cognitive behavioral therapy and telephone-delivered nondirective supportive therapy for rural older adults with generalized anxiety disorder: a randomized clinical trial. *JAMA Psychiatry*. doi: 10.1001/jamapsychiatry.1154.
- Brown C. M. (2020, April 5). Social distancing is a class privilege. *Seattle Times*. <https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/social-distancing-is-a-class-privilege>.
- Brunsting N.C., Zachry C., Takeuchi R. (2018). Predictors of undergraduate international student psychosocial adjustment to US universities: a systematic review from 2009-2018. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. 66:22–33. doi: 10.1016/j.ijintrel.2018.06.002.
- CDC. (2020, February 11). *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>.
- Chen, J. H., Li, Y., Wu, A., & Tong, K. K. (2020). The overlooked minority: Mental health of International students worldwide under the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. *Asian journal of psychiatry*, 54, 102333. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102333>.

- Farrer L., Gulliver A., Chan J.K, Batterham P.J, Reynolds J., Calear A, Tait R, Bennett K, Griffiths K.M (2013). Technology-Based Interventions for Mental Health in Tertiary Students: Systematic Review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*. 15(5):e101. DOI: 10.2196/jmir.2639.
- Davies E.B, Morriss R, Glazebrook C. (2014). Computer-Delivered and Web-Based Interventions to Improve Depression, Anxiety, and Psychological Well-Being of University Students: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*. 16(5):e130. DOI: 10.2196/jmir.3142.
- Dorsey E.R., Topol E.J. (2020). Telemedicine 2020 and the next decade. *Lancet*. doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30424-4.
- d’Orville, H. (2020). COVID-19 causes unprecedented educational disruption: Is there a road toward a new normal? *Prospects*, 1-5. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09475-0>
- Gibilisco, A. (2020, June 1, 2020). The Mental Health Impact of COVID-19 on the LGBTQ Community / University Office for Diversity and Inclusion. (n.d.). Diversity.Unc.Edu. Retrieved September 30, 2020, from <https://diversity.unc.edu/2020/06/the-mental-health-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-lgbtq-community/>.
- Hayes, A. and, K. (2020, May 09). Focus on current international students in pandemic crisis. University World News, Higher Education Web Publishing Ltd.
- Henriques, G. (2014). The College Student Mental Health Crisis. *Psychology Today* [Electronic]. Retrieved from web: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/theory-knowledge/201402/the-college-student-mental-health-crisis>.
- Hodgkinson, S., Godoy, L., Beers, L. S., & Lewin, A. (2016). Improving Mental Health Access for Low-Income Children and Families in the Primary Care Setting. *Pediatrics*, 139(1), e20151175. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-1175>.
- Hunt, J. and Eisenberg, D. (2010). Mental Health Problems and Help-Seeking Behavior Among College Students. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Volume 46, Issue 1, Pages 3–10 [Electronic]. Retrieved from web: [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(09\)00340-1/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(09)00340-1/fulltext).
- Johanna Soet, J. and Sevig, T. (2006). Mental Health Issues Facing a Diverse Sample of College Students: Results from the College Student Mental Health Survey. *NASPA Journal*, 2006, Vol. 43, no. 3 [Electronic]. Retrieved from web: http://www-personal.umich.edu/~daneis/symposium/2010/ARTICLES/soet_sevig_2006.pdf.
- Kaiser Family Foundation (KKF). Retrieved from web: <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>.
- Kelly A. and Columbus, R. (2020). College in the time of coronavirus: Challenges facing American higher education. American Enterprise Institute, Report, July 7, 2020). <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/college-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-challenges-facing-american-higher-education/>
- Lundquist, P. (2020). *Schrier*. The Hill. Retrieved from web: <https://thehill.com/people/kimberly-kim-schrier>.
- Mackolil, J., and Mackolil, J. (2020). Addressing psychosocial problems associated with the COVID-19 lockdown. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*.51:102156. doi: 10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102156.
- National Institute of Mental Health (2018). Mental Health Information Statistics Retrieved from web: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml>.
- National Institute of Mental Health – National Survey on COVID-19. September 30, 2020. <https://www.nih.gov/>.
- Navarro J.C., Arrivillaga-Henríquez J., Salazar-Loor J., Rodríguez-Morales A.J. (2020). COVID-19 and dengue, co-epidemics in Ecuador and other countries in Latin America: pushing strained health care systems over the edge. *Travel Medicine and Infectious Disease*. doi: 10.1016/j.tmaid.2020.101656.
- The Mental Health Impact of COVID-19 on the LGBTQ Community | University Office for Diversity and Inclusion*. (n.d.). Diversity.Unc.Edu. <https://diversity.unc.edu/2020/06/the-mental-health-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-lgbtq-community/>.
- Nieman, S. (2020, July 10). Technology innovations tackling the youth, young adult mental health crisis. MobiHealthNews (blog). <https://www.mobihealthnews.com/news/technology-innovations-tackling-youth-young-adult-mental-health-crisis>
- Panchal, N., Kamal, R., Orgera, K., Cox, C. Garfield, R. Hamel, L., Muñana, C., and Priya Chidambaram, P. (2020). The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use. Kaiser Family Foundation (KKF). Retrieved from web: <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>.

- Sahu P. (2020). Closure of Universities Due to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Impact on Education and Mental Health of Students and Academic Staff. *Cureus* 12(4): e7541. doi:10.7759/cureus.7541.
- Stephan W.G., Ybarra O., Rios K. Intergroup threat theory (2016). In: Nelson T.D., editor. *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination*. Psychology Press; New York, NY: pp. 255–278.
- Tandon R. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, personal reflections on editorial responsibility. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*. 50:102100. doi: 10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102100.
- UNESCO (2020a). *COVID-19 educational disruption and response*. Paris: UNESCO. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>.
- Wan, W. (May 21, 2020). The coronavirus pandemic is pushing America into a mental health crisis. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/05/04/mental-health-coronavirus/>
- Wareham, J. (2020, September 30). *Unique Impact Of Coronavirus On LGBT+ Community 'Will Disproportionally Affect Us.'* *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamiewareham/2020/03/24/the-unique-impact-of-coronavirus-on-uk-lgbt-community-will-disproportionally-affect-them/#7a8999e5b401>.
- Warren, J.C. and K. Bryant Smalley (2020, June 18). Using Telehealth to meet mental health needs during the COVID-19 crisis. *To the Point (blog)*, Commonwealth Fund. <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/blog/2020/using-telehealth-meet-mental-health-needs-during-covid-19-crisis>.
- Wind, T.R., Rijkeboer, M., Anderson, G., and Riper, H. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic: The black swan' for mental health care and a turning point for e-health. *Internet Interventions*. 20, 100317. doi: 10.1016/j.invent.2020.100317.
- Yu, A. (2020, April 21). Mental health impacts and supports for international students in COVI-19. MAZE Partners, Inc. (blog). <https://www.mhanational.org/blog/mental-health-impacts-and-support-international-students-covid-19>.
- Zhai, Y., & Du, X. (2020). Addressing Collegiate Mental Health Amid COVID-19 Pandemic. *Psychiatry Research*, 113003. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113003>
- Zwara, J. (n.d.). *Updated September 10 | Federal Education Policy Response to COVID-19*. NACSA. <https://www.qualitycharters.org/2020/09/updates-on-federal-response-to-covid-19/>.