

The Cries on Campus

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The challenge of supporting students' mental health

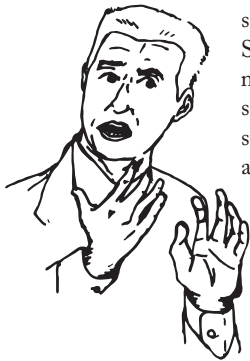
According to the mission statement of Columbia College Chicago, one of the urban institution's purposes is "to help students to find out who they are and to discover their own voices, respect their own individuality, and improve their self-esteem and self-confidence."

If that sounds like a commitment to comprehensive student mental health services, consider this: Twenty years ago, counseling services did not exist at Columbia College Chicago.

Mental health programs are a relatively recent aspect of college life across the country. They emerged out of services created to address the needs of soldiers returning from World War I and subsequent conflicts, to meet

the needs of soldiers returning to school, according to research by Joseph Shannon Hodges, associate professor of Clinical Mental Health Counseling at Niagara Antioch University in Keene, New York. In the 1960s, these expanded to address needs created by an increasingly diverse student body following the civil rights and women's rights movements.

Today, they are an essential part of many students' college experience. "Therapy is just education, learning how to deal with your emotions in a complicated world," says Mark Kelly, vice president for Student Success at Columbia College Chicago. A 2014 National Survey of College Counseling Centers (NSCCC) survey of more than three million students from 275 higher education institutions across the country found that roughly 11 percent of students requested mental health services. Ninety-five percent of counseling directors surveyed reported greater numbers of students with severe psychological problems.

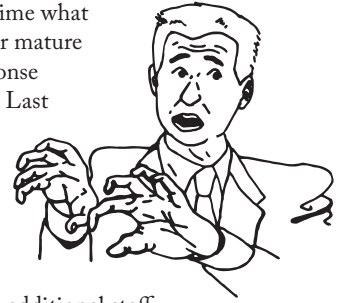


"I'm not sure if you understand the structure of student health and support," says Mark Kelly, vice president for Student Success. The college has a multitude of resources: counseling services, student relations, student health and support, advisors, self-help groups and more.



38 percent of students with mental illness surveyed do not know how to access accommodations, according to *College Students Speak: A Survey Report on Mental Health* conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).

"We've developed over time what I would argue is a rather mature system of levels of response to students," Kelly says. Last year, the student health center fee was increased in order to allow students to have 12 sessions a year instead of the previous 10, and to hire additional staff.



Colleges around the country are taking similar steps; 26 percent of the 275 centers surveyed increased counseling staff, according to the NSCCC's 2014 report.



"Every day is a new adventure. I never know what I'm going to see. It can be everything from grief and loss to anxiety and depression, to severe mental illness such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia," says Thomas "Lee" Cravens, assistant director of Student Relations.

The counseling office has six full-time, counselors, one part-time, and three interns. The student relations staff is comprised of three licensed therapists. "Think of them more as social workers. They're available to handle a student

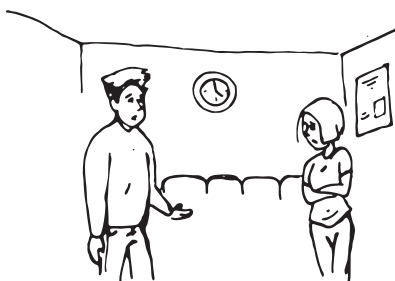


in crisis because the counseling staff can't just drop their caseload," Kelly says.



Directors report that 52 percent of center clients have severe psychological problems; up from 44 percent in the previous year, according to the NSCCC report.

With approximately 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students, that's around 770 students per therapist. The national average is one counselor to 2,081 students, according to the 2014 NSCCC report.



"I caught a friend there, we ran into each other. It was this weird thing where she didn't want to be caught there. Like, 'Oh no, he saw me,' kind of thing, even though I'm trying to get the same services. Maybe that's just mental health in general, but there's some sort of stigma with going there," says Columbia student Darren Bui, 21.



"The phone interview was really in depth and not what I was expecting. They were asking me what has happened in my life, why am I depressed, and all this stuff. And I'm sitting in my living room, answering these questions when my roommates are home," says Columbia student Taylor Robinson, 21.




Stigma remains the number one barrier to students seeking help, according to *College Students Speak*.



40 percent of centers do a pre-assessment before assigning a client to a counselor; one in eight of these use a telephone for the preassessment, according to the NSCC 2014 report.




“For the students who do reach the limit, we don’t just say, ‘You’re at your limit.’ We can make exceptions, you don’t just end sessions. We have a protocol to make sure that when there’s a waitlist, if there’s a student that needs to see us right away, they can get in to see us,” says Kelly.

 30 percent of centers limit the number of counseling sessions students are allowed, according to the NSCCC 2014 report.




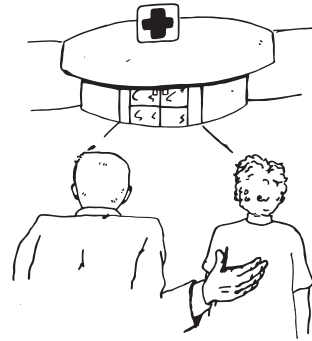
“For the first three or four weeks, it’s almost like a waste of that time, but it’s good because you’re getting comfortable.” Says Robinson. “It’s hard in the first few sessions to be completely honest because it’s like what do I tell you? How much do I give you at first?”

 50 percent of students with mental illness did not disclose their condition to their colleges for reasons including fear of stigma and lack of trust, according to College Students Speak.



“I do think that sometimes students may have unrealistic expectations of what can happen. We want to make sure that you have the right level of care. That’s why we’re referring you out. I don’t want to say I can help you with this and I can’t,” Cravens says.

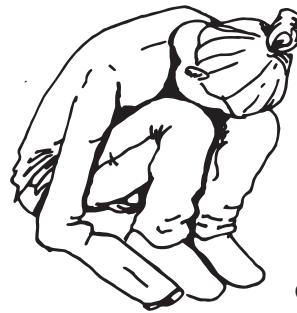
 80 percent of centers maintain the right to refuse treatment to a student whose problems are beyond the capability of their staff, according to the NSCCC 2014 report.



“As far as providing crisis intervention, it’s often assessing what is the need, what can be provided in that moment. We may have a student that is suicidal and we have to assess their safety. If this person is unable to take care of themselves, one of us will go with the student to the hospital until they are in a safe place,” Cravens says. The college has an ethical obligation to take an at-risk student to the hospital if a plan and intent to harm themselves is expressed. “It’s not optional,” he says.



73 percent of student respondents experienced a mental health crisis while in college, according to College Students Speak.



“I got really low and almost committed suicide. I wasn’t going to tell anyone, but I told the person at mental health services and he took me to the hospital himself,” says Columbia student Christian Cosme, 22.

90 percent of centers hospitalize an average of nine students per school for psychological reasons annually. The average number of hospitalizations per 1,000 students was 1.5, according to the 2014 NSCCC report.



“Are you able to go to class and participate in [mental health] treatment at the same time? We can take these classes another time. Columbia is still going to be here,” Cravens says.



65 percent of center clients report that counseling has helped them stay enrolled at their institutions, according to the NSCCC 2014 report.