



## Addressing Student Mental Health in Community Colleges: Begin with a Needs Assessment

Many faculty and staff have long maintained a watchful eye for college students encountering barriers to learning. They understand students walk onto campus with differing learning skills, styles, and needs; they work to secure resources accordingly. Just as education professionals address obstacles such as undiagnosed learning differences and financial challenges, colleges are allocating increased attention to student mental health.

The first step in addressing student mental health is to conduct a *needs assessment*. A needs assessment illuminates how to best use resources by first identifying:

- 1 What are the primary mental health needs on campus?
- 2 What are contributing factors?
- 3 What are the existing resources available on and off campus to address the primary concerns?
- 4 How ready is the college community to address these concerns and implement potential solutions?

This fact sheet outlines why and how to begin a needs assessment process at a community college.

### What is a Needs Assessment?

A campus needs assessment has two components:

1. **Student Mental Health Assessment:** This assessment clarifies (a) the primary mental health needs on campus and (b) the contributing factors to those mental health needs.
2. **Resources and Capacity Assessment:** This assessment evaluates (a) the existing resources available on campus, (b) the availability and relationships within the greater community to address students' mental health and wellness needs, and (c) the readiness of college community to address the concerns and embrace potential solutions.

### Why Conduct a Needs Assessment?

College professionals working closely with students and colleagues may possess a clear understanding of mental health needs on campus, though the range of knowledge on any campus is likely to vary. A systematic needs assessment is valuable for all college professionals, regardless of their personal familiarity with student mental health. For instance:

- ① When problems are measured and specifically defined:
  - Communication with faculty, staff, and administration regarding student mental health needs can be supported with data collected during the needs assessment process.
  - Efforts can be focused on areas of greatest need.
  - There is a benchmark for future evaluation.
- ② When contributing factors are identified:
  - The planning process becomes more strategic.
  - Chances for success and sustainability are maximized.
- ③ When a resource assessment is conducted:
  - Internal campus collaborations and partnerships are enhanced.
  - The campus is better equipped to partner with off-campus resources.
  - Duplication of services is reduced or eliminated.
  - Existing services, as well as gaps in services, are systematically outlined.
- ④ When a community readiness assessment is completed:
  - Staff raises awareness that the campus is working on the concerns.
  - Staff engages the campus community in the process.
  - The planning team may discover it needs to address readiness and awareness to prepare the campus for change. Change is most likely to occur when concerns are acknowledged by the campus community.

## Understanding Data Options

Campuses gather two types of data when conducting a needs assessment of student mental health and campus resources:

**Quantitative Data:** This type of data is measureable and uses numbers. It may include:

- Student surveys
- Faculty and staff surveys
- Pre/post-tests
- Student referral and mental health intake forms
- Sign-in sheets from trainings
- College-wide health event “passports” (tally of students’ interests)

**Qualitative Data:** This type of data is descriptive and uses observations. Qualitative data adds depth and context to other types of data gathered. It asks students, faculty, and staff to define the problems and suggest solutions. Qualitative data may include:

- Focus groups
- Key informant interviews
- Anecdotes
- Case studies

## Ensuring Data Will Work

When resources are limited, it is essential to maximize investments of time, resources, and money. Be clear on the front end:

- *What do you need to know?*
- *What types of data will be used?*
- *Why will it be used?*
- *What will it be used for?*
- *Who will it be shared with?*
- *What data does the institution already gather?*
- *What data is collected and available publicly?*

Gather data that can be used to:

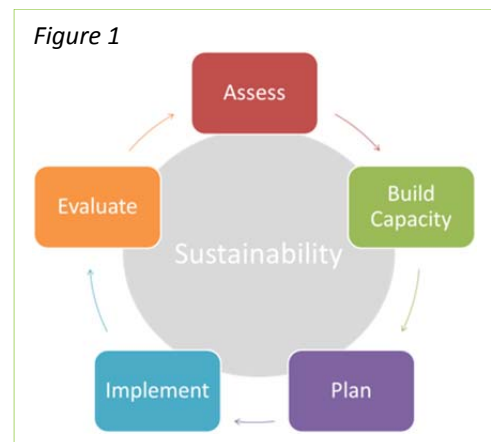
**Build Capacity.** Choose data sources that will help you assess training needs, identify partners, and secure advocates. Create a plan to share assessment results with administrators, faculty, staff, and off-campus partners to garner support with the long term in mind.

**Increase Awareness and Support.** Collect data that can be used to increase knowledge of student mental health problems among faculty, staff, and administrators. This data will highlight what is needed and why it is important.

**Advance Program and Service Planning.** Gather information that will help the campus assess gaps in services, barriers to services, and specific program needs. Data should inform whether the campus needs to strengthen policies and procedures, improve the referral system, enhance or augment institution initiatives that support student success collectively, or pursue other objectives.

The needs assessment process can provide the data to (a) document, (b) advocate for, and (c) justify the importance of student mental health for your campus. As *Figure 1* illustrates, assessment leads fluidly into *capacity building* and *planning*.

Together, these provide the foundation for *implementation* and *evaluation*. As you complete the first steps in the process, consider what information gathering systems will continue to be used on an ongoing basis to justify and sustain mental health services.



## Determining the Approach

Approaches to the needs assessment process should be based on the unique needs and resources of individual campuses at a given time, and thus will vary significantly. This section will highlight factors to consider when designing methods for a strategic assessment process on your campus.

### Who Will Conduct the Needs Assessment?

The team in charge of conducting needs assessment will be determined by the specific professional alignments at your college. As a starting place, however, Health Services representatives in coordination with other campus program partners may be the logical place to initiate a campus wide needs assessment. If your college has an intern program, qualified interns may also be good resources for leading an assessment. If the college does not have health services, leaders may emerge from personnel located in DSPS, EOPS, or even Student Equity Planning committee members.

### Who Will Participate?

Participation in the needs assessment will depend on what questions your needs assessment is designed to answer. Participants may include *students, faculty, staff, administrators, or other stakeholders*.

### What Would You Like to Know?

What topics are the college particularly interested in learning about (e.g. suicide, depression, stress, alcohol and drug use, homelessness, etc.)? Consider finding answers to the following questions:

- What are the mental health needs of students?
- How are these needs being met?
- What are the gaps in services to address these needs?
- What is the current capacity to address these needs?
- What capacity building is needed to better address these needs?

### What Resources Are Available?

Consider the fiscal budget for the needs assessment. Is there something already in place that can be leveraged or used instead of a new effort? What staffing resources are available to support the process? Personnel will be needed to assist with details such as marketing, survey distribution, focus group facilitation, and data analysis.

### Who Are the Potential Partners to Collaborate With?

Creating change requires collaboration. Professionals completing a needs assessment may discover there are potential partners both on and off campus. For instance:

- Annually, Health Services Association of California Community Colleges (HSACCC) coordinates a survey of California community college's Student Health Services and Psychological Services.
- Every three years, the HSACCC coordinates the ACHA-National College Health Assessment (NCHA) II Consortium Project.
- Campus Safety may currently administer a student safety survey. You may be able to either use this data or partner with Campus Safety to add a mental health section to its survey.
- Student Support Services, EOPS, Student Equity Planning committee, DSPS, or other programs on campus may also gather data on services provided.
- Some California community colleges and universities implement a variety of student engagement surveys and may be willing to collaborate.

- County, hospital, and community mental health agencies may also be administering mental health surveys. You may be able to use relevant data or partner with these agencies to modify their survey to be useful to student mental health planning.

## I. Student Mental Health Assessment: Mental Health Needs and Contributing Factors

As outlined previously, a needs assessment has two primary components: the Student Mental Health Assessment and the Resources and Capacity Assessment. These are further broken down into four areas:

- ① What are the primary mental health needs on campus?
- ② What are contributing factors?
- ③ What are the existing resources to address the primary concerns?
- ④ How ready is the college community to address the concerns and embrace potential solutions?

This section will outline common methods of evaluating the first two areas. Together, they form the Student Mental Health Assessment.

### Standardized Surveys

Student mental health surveys serve as a foundation to the needs assessment process. Surveys use quantitative data to measure the primary mental health needs on campus. They may also highlight contributing factors to these problems. When resources are available, additional assessments may be used to augment survey data.

Standardized survey questionnaires are available to campuses measuring student mental health. Below are four surveys campuses commonly use:

- American College Health Association: National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA II)
- Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS)
- Healthy Minds Survey
- Interactive Screening Program (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention)

Each of these surveys is unique. They evaluate differing areas of mental health and possess different fee schedules, formats (paper/online medium), and time requirements. To learn more about these surveys, see the table near the end of this fact sheet titled *Comparison of Common Standardized Surveys to Assess Student Mental Health*.

### Customized Surveys

Your campus may already be using a survey to assess student health needs. Check with the campus's Research Analyst, institutional review board (IRB), or other departments to find out if one exists that you can use as-is, or perhaps customize.

### County Mental Health Assessment Tools and Results

Check with county mental/behavioral health department and/or mental health/behavioral providers to learn if they use or recommend an assessment tool. They may have results that will inform the types of information to collect. As described in the previous section, local hospitals and community mental health agencies may also prove to be a valuable resource.

### Qualitative Methods

Focus groups and interviews can be used to elaborate on specific issues or questions. Focus groups and interviews (with faculty, staff, and students) can be used to supplement existing data and yield a deeper understanding of student mental health needs on campus. For example, standardized survey data may highlight that many students are not seeking help for depression, but cannot provide insight into the reasons why. Key informant interviews with staff and faculty, as well as focus groups conducted with students, can reveal barriers to help-seeking and either confirm or challenge planners' assumptions about those reasons.

## II. Resources and Capacity Assessment

Effective leaders know how to tap resources. They learn to do it well.

The Resources and Capacity Assessment is fundamental to the needs assessment process. With it, campuses uncover:

- ① What are the existing resources to address the primary problems?
- ② How ready is the college community to address the problems and embrace potential solutions?

This portion of the assessment looks at campus infrastructure such as policies and procedures. It evaluates campus capacity to provide adequate mental health services, and helps determine which specific services are most needed. This portion of the assessment also illuminates staff and faculty training needs regarding student mental health and referrals.

It is important to begin with a good sense of which programs are already in place on and off campus, how effective they are, and any gaps that might exist. Looking at program gaps alongside relevant survey and other data informs where adjustment is required. For example, a campus may have several programs aimed at getting more students to ask for help, and at the same time, data may reveal that certain groups of students at higher risk are less likely to do so. Focus group data can reveal the reasons for the lack of help-seeking and suggest a more targeted approach.

### Outlining Existing Resources

Key informant interviews are necessary to understand the scope of current resources on and off campus, as well as which resources are most student-friendly. Potential key informants include:

- Veteran professionals in the field of mental health, social work, substance abuse treatment, and student services;
- People who are natural networkers; or
- Individuals with expertise in accessing and utilizing services.

Be alert that the person answering phones at a front desk may be more helpful and knowledgeable about services in the community than a professional with advanced credentials. Invest the time required to secure knowledgeable interviewees who are champions for those needing mental health support. There will be dividends.

### Measuring Community Readiness

Faculty surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews can be used to measure community readiness. First, faculty and staff surveys are used to:

- Determine awareness
- Determine current capacity
- Determine areas for capacity building and best methods for providing training

Campuses can develop a customized faculty/staff survey or use a standardized one. The *Faculty Training Survey* (<http://ccstudentmentalhealth.org/resources/report.php?id=87>) is available online from the California Community Colleges Student Mental Health Program. This instrument is designed to measure faculty and staff knowledge and awareness around mental health, including knowledge related to mental health diagnoses, specific needs of at-risk populations, and signs and symptoms of mental illness. The instrument also assesses if staff or faculty know how to identify and refer emotionally distressed students, and if they know how to work with students who have mental health diagnoses.

As noted previously, focus groups and key informant interviews are a useful method of information gathering. These add depth and context to quantitative data such as faculty surveys. Focus groups and interviews provide an opportunity for faculty and staff to offer potential solutions for strengthening community readiness.

### Using the Findings

As you analyze findings from the data collection process, consider how this information can be used to:

- Build capacity
- Raise awareness
- Advocate for support

Some examples of how California community colleges are addressing student mental health needs are below.

#### **Faculty Handbook:**

Many campuses have developed guides for working with emotionally distressed students that may be easily adapted to fit the needs of your campus. To view, please visit the following links:

- [Faculty/Staff Guide to Assisting the Emotionally Distressed Student \(Long Beach City College\)](#)
- [Helping Students in Distress: A Guide for Faculty and Staff \(Rio Hondo College\)](#)
- [Assisting the Emotionally Distressed Student: Faculty and Staff Guide, 2011 \(Santa Monica Community College Psychological Services\)](#)
- [Helping the Distressed Student: A Faculty and Staff Guide \(Shasta-Tehama-Trinity Joint Community College District\)](#)
- [Assisting the Distressed Student: Administrator, Faculty, and Staff Guide \(Ventura College\)](#)
- [Assisting the Emotionally Distressed Student 2010/2011 \(WVC\)](#)

**Faculty and Staff Training:** Some campuses utilize flex days to offer specific training on (a) referral options, (b) creating a positive mental health climate in the classroom and on campus, and (c) mental health problems that require follow-up, as well as other relevant topics.

- [At-Risk Suicide Prevention Online Trainings](#)
- [Curriculum: Responding to Difficult or Distressed Online Students: Mental Health Assessment and Referrals \(CCC SMHP\)](#)

### Common Pitfalls

As the planning process moves forward, be aware of common pitfalls. It is common for staff to misinterpret legal restrictions on sharing information, rely on single interventions versus integrated approaches, or stigmatize mental illness instead of focusing on behaviors. Leaders in the planning and advocating process will need to be prepared to offer education as these misunderstandings surface.

### Overcoming Challenges

Community colleges face a plethora of challenges in advancing student mental health support. However, creativity in strategic planning is exceptionally effective in overcoming many of these challenges. For instance, campuses can increase training opportunities for faculty and staff by partnering with county mental health agencies, community mental health centers, and local law enforcement. When campus-wide training is not feasible, focus training on faculty with small class sizes and staff that interact with students on a one-to-one basis, such as academic advisors, career advisors, financial aid staff, and admissions office staff. Creativity, strategic planning, and collaboration are powerful tools in maximizing resources available both on and off campus.

## Fueling the Work

With all the threads of needs and responsibilities college staff and faculty manage each day, it is crucial to possess a clear understanding of how to utilize mental health resources strategically. A needs assessment does just that. It informs every aspect of capacity building, planning, implementation of services, and evaluation. It outlines:



- 1 The primary mental health needs on campus
- 2 The contributing factors
- 3 Existing resources on and off campus to address the primary problems
- 4 Readiness of the college community to address the problems and embrace potential solutions

A needs assessment offers a foundation for communicating *why* we do what we do. It fuels our work and provides the data to back it up. With it, we know where we are headed and can inspire others to join us along the way.

### Additional Resources

Additional resources for utilizing assessment findings are available on the Center for Applied Research Solutions-supported website <http://www.cccstudentmentalhealth.org/main.php>. There are also online resources listed in the *Resources* section of this fact sheet.

## California Community Colleges Student Mental Health Program (CCC SMHP)

Toll-free: (855) 304-1647 ~ [www.cccstudentmentalhealth.org](http://www.cccstudentmentalhealth.org)

**The California Community Colleges Student Mental Health Program (CCC SMHP)** is dedicated to increasing the capacity of the CCC system to provide student mental health services. Funded by the California Mental Health Services Authority, this program offers cost-free training and technical assistance (TTA) to California's community college campuses.

**The California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA)** is an organization of county governments working to improve mental health outcomes for individuals, families and communities. Prevention and Early Intervention programs implemented by CalMHSA are funded through the voter-approved Mental Health Services Act (Prop 63). Prop 63 provides the funding and framework needed to expand mental health services to previously underserved populations and all of California's diverse communities.

## Comparison of Select Standardized Surveys to Assess Student Mental Health

Survey	Cost	Interface	MH Issues Addressed	# of Questions	Time to Complete	More information
<b>ACHA-NCHA</b>	Visit website for more information	Paper or online	Alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use; Sexual health; Weight, nutrition, exercise; Mental health; Personal safety and violence	300	30 minutes	<a href="http://www.acha-ncha.org/">http://www.acha-ncha.org/</a>
<b>C-SSRS</b>	Free	Paper (available for download online)	Suicide (ideation and behavior)	6-15 (not all questions have to be asked)	A few minutes	<a href="http://www.cssrs.columbia.edu/">http://www.cssrs.columbia.edu/</a>
<b>Healthy Minds Survey</b>	Visit website for more information	Online	Mental health status (depression, anxiety, eating disorder, self-injury, suicidal ideation); Awareness of and attitudes towards mental health treatment; Use of mental health services; Substance use; Sexual activity; Sleep habits; Discrimination; Academic and social environment	Approx. 45, with options to customize	Not available	<a href="http://healthymindsnetwork.org/hms">http://healthymindsnetwork.org/hms</a>
<b>Interactive Screening Program</b>	Visit website for more information	Online	Suicidal ideation and attempts; Problems related to depression such as anger and anxiety; Alcohol and drug abuse; Eating disorder	35	10 minutes	<a href="http://www.afsp.org/the-interactive-screening-program/isp-for-colleges-universities">http://www.afsp.org/the-interactive-screening-program/isp-for-colleges-universities</a>

## Additional Resources

### Evaluation Framework Example

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Strategic Prevention Framework

<http://www.samhsa.gov/spf>

### Determining Your Approach: Needs Assessment Models and Examples

- [Evaluation of California's Statewide Mental Health Prevention and Early Intervention Programs, Summary of Year 2 Findings](#)
- [Capacity Survey of Mental Health Services Baseline Report](#)
- [Capacity Survey of Mental Health Services, Wave 2 \(Fall 2013\)](#)
- [CalMHSA Student Mental Health Campus-Wide Survey 2013 Summary Report](#)
- [HSACCC-ACHA-NCHA Consortium Project: CCC-NCHA 2013 Data](#)
- [California Community Colleges ACHA-NCHA Survey Summary, Spring 2013](#)
- [National College ACHA-NCHA Survey Summary, Spring 2013](#)

### Making the Case: Existing Data Sources for Student Mental Health

- [CORE Drug and Alcohol Survey](#)
- [College Survey Data Interactive Portal](#), Healthy Minds Network
- [National College Health Risk Behavior Survey, 1995](#)
- [National Survey of Counseling Center Directors](#)
- [National Survey of Student Engagement](#)

### Directing the Data: Guides and Reports to Inform Services

- [A Guide to Campus Mental Health Action Planning](#), Suicide Prevention Resource Center
- [Balancing Safety and Support on Campus: A Guide for Campus Teams](#), A Higher Education Mental Health Alliance Project led by the JED Foundation
- [California College and University Collaborations: Facilitators, Challenges, and Impact on Student Mental Health](#), RAND Corporation
- [Mental Health Trainings in California's Higher Education System are Associated with Increased Confidence and Likelihood to Intervene with and Refer Students](#), RAND Corporation

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