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## Reframing Solutions to Mental Health in Higher Education

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## Abstract

Universities in the U.S. have seen their students' experience an increase in mental health issues that relate to their personal development and academic performance. The development of non-profit organizations that specifically address the issue of mental health in higher education and recent trends of improving wellness and well-being have seen universities increase the number of professionals to treat mental health issues as well as programs that develop wellness in students. The continued increase of mental health issues in conjunction with the increase of supportive measures for students suggests that universities need to reframe solutions to the issues that students experience. Finland and Aalto University provide exemplary examples of how to create supportive resources and policies that promote health to improve health within higher educational institutes through relevant resources, improved university support through frequent points of contact, and improved organizational culture.

Keywords: mental health, organizational culture, wellness, higher education, academic support services, community support

## **Reframing Solutions to Mental Health in Higher Education**

The statistics surrounding mental health are more than just unhealthy. The high risk and substantial levels of mental health issues in students in higher education requires a new approach to improving student health. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, one in five adults in the United States lives with a mental illness (Mental Illness, n.d.). Education is a significant source of stress. We spend nearly 10% our lives within educational systems receiving instruction upon graduate from college, and this figure rises when you consider additional studying outside the classroom, extra-curricular activities, and any additional higher education (Craw, 2018). It is a cause of concern that mental health issues are not only prevalent but continue to rise. The previous and current conditions that students are put under signal that there needs to be reform, and this reflects the continued rise of mental health issues over the past 50 years (Collishaw, Maughan, Goodman, & Pickles, 2004; Storrie, Ahern, & Tuckett, 2010).

Knowing this, how can universities in the U.S. improve mental health for attending students?

### **Literature Review**

There is significant evidence from researchers, health organizations, and self-reports from students that there are mental health issues for students in higher education. These issues are prevalent even before entering university with many students claiming that they enter higher education with mental health problems (Megivern, Pellerito, & Mowbray, 2003). Once in university, mental health issues are a common issue with 30% of students reporting being diagnosed or treated by a professional for a mental health related issue (ACHA, 2018).

The American College Health Association (ACHA) has been conducting annual surveys since 2008 that asks undergraduate and graduate students from 40 institutions about their mental, social, and physical health. ACHA's 2018 study found that 85% of students felt overwhelmed,

83% exhausted, 68% sad, 63% lonely, 62% overwhelming anxiety, 53% hopeless, 41% depressed. The ACHA's findings also support previous findings that mental health issues are continuing to rise. Nearly all areas of mental health in the ACHA report increased from their 2008 findings and specifically students who were so depressed that it was difficult to function rose 35% over the last decade.

While it is common to have stress during times of transition, the transition from traditional college life and the stressors of graduate school contribute to health issues. Numerous reports by student led organizations outline the need to improve mental health on campus. These reports are supported by research findings that over half of students surveyed described at least one mental health problem (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Gollust, 2007; Zivin, Eisenberg, Gollust, & Golberstien, 2009). The findings of the ACHA outline overall issues within higher education, but the same research describes that transfer students, upperclassmen, and students living off campus have been correlated with poor mental health (Beiter et al., 2015). These linked and correlated issues reflect the findings and feelings of students and continue to support the idea that students are not getting the necessary support during their time at university (Healthy Minds Network, 2019).

### **Perceived Sources that Impact Academic Performance**

Beyond just acknowledging that mental health issues exist, it is important to understand where the source of this stress is coming from. Mental health is interdependent on other aspects of life, and examining core areas of life helps explain not only mental health issues but also academic performance (Beiter et al., 2015; Kruisselbrink-Flatt, 2013). Academic performance, pressure to succeed in university, and plans after graduation make the top three concerns followed by financial concerns in fourth. Additionally, nearly 40% of respondents believe that

academic performance and the pressure to succeed is an extreme source of pressure for them underpinning issues regarding post-graduation plans and the financial concerns that come with university (Beiter et al., 2015).

When examining all the major sources of stress of students, the remaining six of the top 10 concerns shift away from academic and career performance. Academic performance, pressure to succeed in university, plans after graduation, and financial concerns are the top four, but quality of sleep, relationships with friends, relationships with family, overall health, body image, and self-esteem make up the next six most concerning issues regarding. These concerns build on the holistic nature of our health and its interconnectedness to areas of wellness such as mental, physical, social, occupational, and financial health suggesting that impacting one area will also impact another (Adams, Bezner, Drabbs, Zambarano, & Steinhardt, 2000).

When considering the list of sources and their interconnectedness, this time of transition for many students is also a time of transition into young adulthood. For traditional students, developmental psychology identifies these issues with mental health in two ways. Erik Erikson's psychosocial development outlines the students' issues stemming from two cores issues of identity and intimate relationships (McLeod, 2018). Jeffrey Arnett's (2014) work provides a different concept through characterizing university students as emerging adults who undergo gradual changes with their family and friends, explore life, and continue self-discovery. Both concepts emphasize a period of transition, instability, and transformation with themselves as well as family, friends, and acquaintances. This psychological perspective aligns with the major sources of stress for university students and details issues faced by emerging adults that impact their lives beyond academics.

## **University Support**

With the rising awareness and the increased focus on increasing wellness among students, universities have taken a number of measures to combat the issues faced by students that impact their mental health (Bauer-Wolf, 2019). Universities have physical health centers and mental health centers to provide professional help. To promote health, organizations like the Jed Foundation have worked with universities to promote mental health and prevent suicide. In 2013, the Jed Foundation began awarding universities and colleges their JEDCampus Seal. The Jed Foundation initially awarded 30 campuses that exhibited comprehensive mental health promotion and suicide prevention programs. Today, the Jed Foundation offers a complete program with policies and support for universities to use to promote mental health and prevent suicide that is used by over 200 universities. Additionally, universities are increasing medical and mental health services to support students on campus (New, 2016). These professionals offer both treatment and preventive services that students can take advantage of to improve their health.

In addition to the professional services, universities are increasing the number of wellness programs available for students to promote health through the various wellness domains. There is an increase of physical health activities available, nutritionally conscious options and programs, and mental health activities such as yoga and mindfulness (Klawe, 2019). The increases of these programs offered by the university or companies contracted by the university provide students the opportunity to not just treat options but to promote health which has the side effects of preventing health issues.

Even though universities are stepping up their efforts to support students academically and personally, the mental health issues are continuing to rise. These issues can have a lasting impact on students inside the classroom and in their own lives.

### **Impacts of mental health on university students**

The presence of mental health issues within higher education has significant issues in a variety of ways. The stigma surrounding mental health prevents many students from acknowledging the issues they face or getting the help they need (Eisenberg, Downs, Golberstein & Zivin, 2009). Multiple studies found that as many as 90% of students who were found to have depression or anxiety issues did not seek out or receive any services (Eisenberg et al., 2007; Megivern, Pellerito, & Mowbray, 2003). While many universities have the resources to employ professionals and programs to support students' mental health, students find it difficult to choose engage with the necessary help for reasons including awareness, stigmatization, privacy, and lack of time (Eisenber et al., 2009; Lannin, Vogel, Brenner, Abraham, & Heath, 2016; Sontag-Padilla, Seelam, Kase, Woodbrdige, & Stein, 2018). While there is discussion that universities may or may not have the resources, there is support that college campuses have the capacity to support mental health internally or through partners, but the key barrier is awareness of resources and gaining access (Sontag-Padilla et al., 2018). At the same time,

Without the necessary help, it increases the chances of students dropping out of university. The impact of mental health issues can interfere with students' degree pursuit with students reporting difficulties to devote time to studying because of emotional issues. These issues among other had been linked to cycle of dropping out and re-enrolling in university (Megivern et al., 2003).

These perceived impacts go beyond just the emotional issues that are reported by the students. The ACHA has done extensive work to better understand students and their perceptions of what impacts them. Yearly student surveys conducted by the ACHA show reportedly high numbers and continuing increasing feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, sad, lonely, anxious, hopeless, and depressed (ACHA, 2011; ACHA, 2018). Even with the support provided by the university and its surrounding community, students are still perceiving university life as a place that destabilizes their mental health. These perceptions continue as students describe that stress, anxiety, sleep difficulties, and depression as major sources that impact their academic performance (ACHA, 2018). These perceptions add into the previous suggestions that mental health issues lead to distractions from academic performance and thus further hindrance to their academic pursuit (ACHA, 2018).

The students' perceived influences also align with findings that outline factors that impact student achievement. Depression, anxiety, and stress have been linked to student success with reducing stress and anxiety for the student to improve student achievement, and the presence of depression has the opposite effect where it greatly hinders student achievement (Killian, 2017). Additionally, the emotional health of students has a significant impact on a student's GPA and, more importantly, their intent to drop out (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). The students' perception of perceived academic influences is supported by a volume of robust studies further supporting the need for increased mental health.

The students and researchers in addition to the current elaborate support systems that include a variety of health professionals and wellness programs indicate that the current methods used to support and promote optimal mental health as well as prevent and treat mental health issues show less than ideal results. It is best to examine an academically, high performing

country that has exceptional mental health support. Finland and its higher education system represent a great case study to examine how to improve mental health systems.

### **Finland University Students and Mental Health**

Whenever there is a discussion about education in recent times, it is natural for Finland to immediately come to mind. They have one of the best education systems in the world with possibly the best primary education in the world, consistently high Programme for International Student Assessment and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, its higher educational system is only second to Singapore, and is home to some of the world's best universities (Schwab, 2018). These results come from their initial 1968 educational reform that was slowly implemented to improve education holistically through improving the quality and status of teachers and the outcomes of its students (Sahlberg, 2007). Since then, reforms in the 1980s and 1990s have seen the whole system of education from early childhood to adult learning change. These changes and resulting high performance of their primary and secondary education system generate students who are academically prepared for the rigors of tertiary education where there are well-being issues related to academic performance.

Big parts of the reform emphasize whole student education with an emphasis on instilling well-being in students. Throughout all areas of education and educational organizations, the well-being of students is built into the policies, programs, curriculum, and pedagogy. Well-being is not just an idea; it is practiced throughout the organization and as a cultural expectation to be mentally, socially, and physically healthy. This implementation of well-being into all areas of the education system, including the idea of life-long learning, emphasizes the idea of whole student learning. Finland as a culture promotes well-being across all areas of its nation and especially within education. This has created a culture that is the happiest, safest, and the

most trustworthy place in the world (Helliwell et al., 2019). Trust and safety in addition to policies that promote health lead to people in Finland getting the help and support they need to be fulfilled in their lives and the path that they choose.

### **Comparing U.S. and Finnish Universities**

While Finland does implement well-being into all aspects of education, it has not translated into complete success. Universities in Finland are consistent in supporting individual rights, but there is anonymous information from government bodies that provide useful findings about the university student population in Finland. Ylioppilaiden Terveydenhoidot, the government funding university student health service, conducts surveys on students' overall health. When comparing this survey to the ACHA, both represent their population, but the Finnish health survey covers 4.8% of the university students while the ACHA only covers 0.1% of the U.S. university student population.

When comparing the findings of the university student surveys, the 2018 Finnish student health report found that 72% of students reported a recurring or long-term illness that has been diagnosed by a professional (Finnish Student Health Services, 2018). Only 52.1% of students at American universities reported having a long-term illness that has been diagnosed by a professional (ACHA, 2018). Given the interrelated nature of mental health with social and physical health, these universities need to improve overall health. When examining mental health, both countries have seen depression and anxiety rise within their university student populations. The implementation of well-being in pre-kindergarten, primary, and secondary education as well as in government policies is reflected in the raw numbers of mental health issues. When finding comparable results, 10% of Finnish university students were diagnosed with depression while 15% of U.S. university students were diagnosed in 2016. When

examining anxiety, 6% of Finnish students and 19% of U.S. students were medically diagnosed.

The trends of these figures represent a more complex picture. Between 2008 and 2016, depression diagnosis has more than tripled in Finland, but the overall number of students who are clinically depressed are still one-third less than in the U.S. In the same time, anxiety has risen about 40% in Finland, but it has increased by 80% while also being at a higher overall rate.

While it is concerning that Finland jumps a large percentage, the low overall number of university students that have been diagnosed. Like in the U.S., there are a number of available options to support students physical, mental, and social health along, but in Finland, the government has strong social welfare programs that support student housing and finances. This support allows the students to be relieved to focus on their studies and accept jobs that fits their career path. This is unlike U.S. students who must consider the significantly rising financial costs of higher education and need to manage their time should students consider getting a job.

### **A Case Study of Aalto University**

Aalto University is a top university in Finland and among the top 200 in the world. They set out an ambitious goal of improving students study ability. This is conceptualized into four key areas: teaching, personal resources, study skills, and study environment. Teaching consists of the teachers' pedagogical skills, study counseling, and teacher tutoring. Personal resources are the students' physical, social, and mental health as well as life management. Study skills includes the students' understanding and application of study techniques, learning styles, study strategies, and problem solving skills. Study environment is the students' choice of where to study as well as the interactions between students and their peers. Knowledge of the interconnectedness of well-being and learning have been established, and Aalto University is implementing support for students academically and personally while keeping the cultural

drivers of trust, safety, and happiness (The Kyky Project, 2014). Aalto University aims to support students through their rigorous studies through a variety of methods such as courses, online workshops aimed to improve specific skills within study ability, and relationships with Aalto University professors, professional staff, and administrators. What sets Aalto University apart from the world is the commitment to improving student wellbeing and mutual trust between the students and the university.

Part of Aalto University's current strategic plan is to reduce student burnout from 20% to 10% through its Success of Students initiative. The burnout rate of students is gathered through the AllWell? survey, and it plays an integral part at the university. The AllWell? survey is given to all second year undergraduate students and first year graduate students, and students who complete the survey are anonymously given feedback in various areas of their personal resources, study skills, and study environment. This survey reflects the factors that contribute to a students' overall well-being as well as what is necessary to succeed in university. If a student scores low in an area or skill, the student is linked information, courses, and workshops to improve the weak areas that contribute to burnout. In addition to providing feedback to the student, the survey anonymously provides the information anonymously to each student's school and department allowing for a better understanding of the issues faced by the students in addition to the Success of Students team to understand the percentage of students who are at risk of burnout and the percentage of students who are not at risk of burnout. The versatility of the AllWell? survey provides both the students and the university a way to improve the culture, knowledge, and skills necessary to improve the conditions that impact students' mental health (AllWell Questionnaire, 2018).

Additionally, the mutual trust between students and Aalto University allows there to be effective communication and use of resources. Students find that the professors and the professional staff as champions to support students academically and personally. The AllWell? survey led by the Success of Students team has been well received, and it is a representation of the university's commitment to promoting well-being on campus. In 2018, nearly half of the students who were able to participate in the AllWell? survey completed it (Almost half, 2019). This figure has risen every year since the start of the AllWell? survey. In addition to the high response rate, the students have responded to the efforts of the Success of Students team by giving them an award at the yearly Aalto Gala in 2017, near the start of the initiative. The mutual trust and commitment from both sides to improve the mental health at Aalto University underpins the success in having a 0% increase in burnout (AllWell, 2018). The same burnout rate that is calculated through improving areas related to mental health, including personal resources, study skills, and study environment.

It is unclear whether Aalto University purposely aligned with the health promotional movement, but Aalto University and Finland promote health as opposed to treat illness. Aalto University's policies and programs match the current calling for health promotion within universities and within lives as described in the Okanagan Charter and the Ottawa Charters which outline health promotion frameworks. This reconceptualization of health from treating illness to optimal living is a major reason why Finland and Aalto University see less prevalence of mental health issues.

## **Discussion**

Universities are acknowledging that addressing mental health issues is a must. While many universities are increasing the number of professional staffs, wellness programs, and

surveys for students, the culture within U.S. universities emphasizes treating issues instead of preventing them or improving individual skills or traits. Aalto University's strategy focuses on supporting students through promoting health and skills throughout the university through its policies, mission, and its employees while also providing the accessible support for students through professional help, coaching, programs, workshops, and courses. Implementing the methods to improve academic skills and personal development, improving trust, and knowledge of resources, and access to resources could improve health and prevent the mental health issues seen in university students in the U.S. While these are not directly implementable, using frameworks to promote health, academic skills, and personal development using an organizational lens would set the ground work to improve the mental health situation.

Supporting students to improve their knowledge and skills to improve their overall health and have the necessary academic skills to succeed can be replicated in U.S. universities. Creating an environment for growth is at the heart of a university, and with the mental health issues that have been documented over the decades, it is recommended to create workshops and courses that address issues students face in addition to facilitate healthy growth in a personal and professional manner. Local solutions can be crafted from combining observations and intern metrics with national, regional, and state data on student health and academic skills.

Aalto University has created a series of courses called Personal Impact that emphasize, "values and meaningfulness, self-leadership, societal impact, human potential and well-being" (Personal Impact, 2019). Since opening these courses, students immediately filled up. This response is similar to when Yale University opened the course Psychology and the Good Life with one-fourth of all undergraduates enrolling in the course (Shimer, 2018). Universities that have opened these types of courses have seen similar responses as Aalto University and Yale

University, and universities should be encouraged to open these courses as electives to improve students' knowledge and skills to improve their quality of life. Furthermore, the creation of online workshops that improve students' wellbeing, practical life skills, personal development, and academic skills would benefit students to improve themselves at their own pace in addition to reducing the barriers to access the necessary help that could hinder students from seeking it out.

In addition to supporting students through the improvement of knowledge and skills, it is important to create a supportive environment at the university. Healthy Campus and JEDCampus initiatives have aimed to improve the situation through full programs and benchmarks, but the places students spend their within U.S. universities create stress. Professors and staff spend a significant amount of time with students, and they need to be a source of support or at the very least, not a source of stress. Additionally, counselors need to be approachable seen as a contact point for treatment, prevention, or support. In contrast to the U.S. universities, Aalto University's students have cited that professors, counselors, and mentors are significant sources of support at the university. It would be beneficial if professors improved the awareness of issues that students face, empathy, emotional intelligence, and knowledge of accessible resources for student while also frontloading the points of stress within the curriculum. Ensuring that professors are a source of support for students during a course, not overwhelming stress, is a significant step toward creating a positive culture that supports students. This should be considered as part of the review or development process using student feedback to improve professor's relationships with students, and while having successful relationships with students is ideal, not being a significant source of stress is an important step forward. Additionally, improving this area can be done through a detailed email, the on-boarding process, professional

development, and during preparation for the semester or programs. Curriculum changes should be implemented into the early parts of programs to increase soft skills that would benefit student, such as time management, improved study skills, and meta-cognitive skills, as well as prepare them for the specific difficulties that are part of the programs and majors. Finally, it is imperative that professors know what resources are available to students to address personal or academic issues the student faces. These recommendations can help connect students to the necessary resources to improve their knowledge and skills to thrive while at the university.

Finally, an increase in trust within the university and its employees would improve its goals to reduce mental health issues. While the factors that go into improving trust can be complicated and culturally relevant, universities would greatly benefit to invest resources to improving safety, improving trust between students and university employees, and becoming more transparent. Students at Aalto University trust the university and its employees to provide and deliver quality education as well as provide the necessary resources for students to improve academically, personally, and professionally. While U.S. universities have ample amounts of resources to support students, there is a lack of trust within the university either in the community, university employees, or the quality of the resources available. This lack of trust hinders students' motivation to seek out the support necessary to thrive within the university. Increasing trust on campus would increase the use of the available resources and the relationships with those students who are in frequent contact with allowing for the university to promote health across campus.

Implementing these ideas aligns with creating an environment and culture that encourages health, skill development, and lifelong learning. Initially, there could be an increase in diagnosis and counseling visits since knowledge of and access to information to help mental

health increases. It could also be suggested that the current situation is merely the middle of that current process with increasing visits to medical and mental health centers with Healthy Campus, JEDCampus, and internal initiatives. This does require shifting processes, policies, and responsibilities in a variety of ways. Asking organizations to make incremental shifts is the strategy set out by Healthy Campus and the JEDCampus initiatives, but the biggest hurdle is making the change to the culture to get buy-in from professors and staff to align with the ideas so that there is knowledge of and access to resources to treat and prevent mental health issues in addition to promoting health and skills necessary to live at their best.

## **Conclusion**

Universities in the U.S. have been improving the necessary resources to support students' mental health. However, the data does not support the overall trend of increasing the treatment based support through medical and mental health centers given the continuous increase of mental health issues within university students. Adopting a health promoting approach, improving trust across the university, and creating accessible resources that facilitates optimal health would be more beneficial as seen in Aalto University and Finland. Examining both Aalto University and the benefits of health promotion, American universities would benefit from these approaches to address the issues faced by students within universities that contribute to mental health issues. These approaches are largely culturally based and may take a prolonged period of time to implement, but short term achievements may be seen by students through increased access and frequency of access of resources or the recognition of the efforts of the university by student bodies. For universities to improve mental health, there must be a cultural shift away from treatment and an emphasis on trust and promoting health through sources students interact with the most frequently. This holistic improvement at the university would see similar benefits that

Aalto University has created, but given the cultural sensitivity and differences between universities, the delivery of each component would be contextual on the needs of the university.

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