

Maryland college students seek mental health help amid COVID-19 pandemic



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Some college students have experienced difficulty adjusting to life during the COVID-19 pandemic, facing elevated rates of stress and/or anxiety.

“During June 24–30, 2020, U.S. adults reported considerably elevated adverse mental health conditions associated with COVID-19,” according to a study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Young adults were among those that experienced negative mental health outcomes.

At the same time, university counseling center utilization saw a 32% average decrease, according to a study conducted across 63 institutions by Penn State University's Center for Collegiate Mental Health, but attributes the drop to students leaving campus.

“The fact that these students, living at home, sought mental health services from distant campuses at a lower rate makes sense; people tend to seek help where they live,” according to the study.

Other reasons that contributed to the decrease included academic demands, caring for family, financial issues, lack of a private space and lack of support, said Dr. Chetan Joshi, Director of the University of Maryland's Counseling Center.

“Everything else becomes like a back burner, including getting treatment for mental health,” he said.

In accordance with counseling attendance decreasing, so too have budgets. The University of Maryland, College Park chopped almost \$163,000 off its funding from fiscal year 2020 to fiscal year 2021, a 3.8 percent drop. UMBC did the same, dropping its funding by over 13 percent from \$1.1 million to \$974,386. Towson, however, moved in the other direction, increasing its funding by 9 percent from \$2 million to almost \$2.2 million.

Still, among colleges in Maryland that responded to requests for funding data, Towson, College Park and UMBC remain amongst the institutions with the least amount of money spent on counseling services per student, based on fiscal year 2020 data. Towson University spent \$91 for every enrollee, compared to \$139 per student at Frostburg State and \$121 at St. Mary's College of Maryland. Enrollment data was not available to compare changes in student populations between fiscal year 2020 and fiscal year 2021.

Many college counseling centers have continued to provide mental health services with some adjustments due to the pandemic, including Towson University, the University of Maryland, College Park, Frostburg State University and Salisbury University. They have shifted their services to an online environment, including telehealth options and COVID-19 mental health resource pages.

“The Towson University Counseling Center has remained open throughout the pandemic, offering same-day telehealth counseling sessions, daily virtual drop-in support groups for students wanting to connect with others, skills-building and therapy groups, virtual outreach programming and 24-hour crisis support,” said Mollie Herman, Interim Director of Towson University’s Counseling Center, in an email.

“Additionally, the Center reaches many students remotely through social media series focused on mental health and wellness during the pandemic,” Herman said.

At the University of Maryland, College Park, students can access mental health services through the Counseling Center, which offers individual, group and couples counseling, workshops and referrals.

According to the Counseling Center website, UMD students can utilize up to 8 individual counseling sessions in a 12-month period.

In order to continue offering these services to students during the pandemic, the Counseling Center moved services online.

“When the pandemic struck in the March of 2020, obviously it did raise several challenges that needed to be kind of quickly acted upon to ensure that mental health services continue to be available and open to students,” said Joshi.

“So basically, all individual therapy or group therapy, consultation, as well as wellness workshops and other outreach intervention activities, everything has been transitioned online.”

Despite the initial challenge of quickly shifting to an online environment, Joshi said the benefit of teleservices was the accessibility it gave students.

“Sometimes students are not able to engage in treatment because of not being able to come in person,” Joshi said.

“They might be living far, they have to commute, their schedules might not arrange for it, but with a teleservices format, all of that becomes much more accessible, which is something that we have seen consistently and is definitely a benefit.”

Several students said they sought help for the first time during the pandemic.

Leilani Clendenin, a junior at UMD, used the services offered when the pandemic hit. This was her first experience with counseling, and she said it was something that helped her through hard times.

“I definitely would recommend it to other students as a stepping stone to lifelong therapy. I think it is a great first start. They go from individual therapy to group therapy,” Clendenin said. “You can ask questions and they can give you recommendations off campus.”

One difficulty with the online environment is the lack of in-person communication, she said.

“The process was easy, but difficult to stay motivated to do it. I think I had seven sessions and out of those seven I think I only went to four. Because it was online, it felt like I didn’t have to go,” Clendenin said.

Some students found the services were ineffective. Madeline Redding, a junior at UMD, did not find what she was looking for from the Counseling Center during her freshman year. She then sought help from outside services during the pandemic that she found helpful.

She said she found the pandemic to be a difficult time for her mental health.

“When COVID hit it took away a lot of my self care. Going into the city with friends was what helped me and that wasn’t possible anymore. COVID amplified everything for me,” Redding said.

A major complaint from many students is the lack of support after the school sessions have been used. Yani Hill, a junior at UMD, said her experience was positive, but ended too soon.

“The exit process for one-on-one services should be not so short-term. I think there should be a period of check-ins from the person you were working with,” Hill said. “I think having an exit process that was more structured would suit it better.”

Out-of-state students have expressed difficulty in receiving help due to state limitations.

Stephen Lyons II, a sophomore at UMD, said he reached out to the Counseling Center, but was not able to receive counseling through the university.

“Because of COVID, I’m not living on campus. My local address is in D.C., so since I’m not in the same state — you have to be in the same state as your mental health therapist person apparently so they can like, call emergency services if need be — so they were basically like, we can’t help you,” Lyons said.

Lyons was referred to other companies in D.C., but did not find the process easy and eventually gave up.

Bill Kassay, a senior at UMD and a veteran, utilized services outside the school. He compared his experience with mental health services before and during the pandemic.

“There’s a big difference in not having a human being in the room,” he said.

“For me, when I was doing it online [...] there’s a lot of disconnect. Sometimes I felt like she wasn’t listening,” Kassay said. “On the other hand you do feel more anonymous because you’re not going to a place and sitting in the waiting room.”

Kassay said he mainly faced difficulty finding therapists who were currently accepting new clients and finding the right one for him. The appointment process, he said, was much easier.

“I would take [my laptop] into my room down here, my little basement, and I would sit with her, it wasn’t like I had to drive anywhere,” he said. “That process was easier, but it was harder to

find somebody.”

He found that an added benefit of the online environment was the ability to connect from a distance.

“Zoom can connect you with a mental health professional that is miles and miles away, so it kind of bridges those gaps,” he said.

If the campus community is vaccinated by the fall semester, Joshi said the hope is to offer in-person services.

“The plan is to transition back to in-person services, like we used to do before, but then also figure out which aspect of our services that were online were especially beneficial to students, and then continue to maintain those services in an online format, to continue to allow for access to students,” Joshi said.

“We definitely want to figure out what are the specific aspects that we want to continue beyond the pandemic in the teleservices format,” Joshi said.

Thomas Hindle contributed to this story.

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