

INSIDESOURCES

Attentiveness by All Can Help College Students Deal With Mental Health Issues

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Student suicide is at the top of the list of “what keeps college administrators up at night.”

A student committing suicide while at college makes all of us feel that we failed the test. The issue is complex. The “signs” are paradoxical. On one hand, some signs are right in front of our face. For example, when student suicide hits the school, we may respond with “I knew something wasn’t right.” On the other hand, there may be no signs, thus we feel helpless because “we just didn’t know there was a problem.”

As with any complex health issue, it deserves a “comprehensive approach” — from prevention strategies to an assessment of student’s health status and needs, treatment, interdiction and crisis intervention.

One common and essential component is being attentive to students while they are on our campuses. The responsibility to help rests with all of us. While the counseling center is the place we think students should be getting help to “deal with student issues,” these professionals with their counseling expertise actually have minimal face time compared with the multiple faces students see daily around campus and in classrooms.

Here are a few attentiveness suggestions for key people that can be considered as part of the plan to help students who are struggling with mental health issues at college.

Students (and parents): Take the decision about “college readiness” very seriously. If you don’t feel ready for college, don’t go just yet. The notion that college is a place and the time “to find yourself,” while traditionally romantic, is overstated. Colleges are complex and expensive places to find yourself. Take the time you need to decide not only where to go to college but when. Taking a gap year or two before starting college can be healthy. When you are ready, the college will be there with all the games, parties, co-curricular activities, academic pursuits, and friends you are likely to have for life.

Parents: The aim is not to find “the best” college, rather to find the college that best suits your son or daughter. Help with the process of making a decision about whether it is the right time to start college. Pay attention to the high level and overall issue of college readiness, not just the sundry of temporal matters for sending them off. Once they are there, stay connected — giving them enough space to grow, but also a safety valve to change plans, if things are not going well.

Administrators: While the law may say in loco parentis is no longer applicable, you know this is not realistic. Parents expect reasonable care and that we have a duty to safeguard students on our campuses. Interdisciplinary, as well as the common interdepartmental, committees are helpful. These groups should generate a range of ideas on how to support students to stay engaged and healthy on our campuses. Establishing committees may appear to be a perfunctory response — however, college leaders need to pay close attention to these committees.

Counseling Center Staff: You cannot do this alone. While you are the experts, your face time is minimal compared with others who see these students throughout the day and night at school. Find ways to (legally of course) cut through the barriers and firewalls set up by the acronyms (FERPA, HIPPA, ADA, etc.) that keep us from talking with one another to help students. Those outside the counseling center may not be the experts, but they have good instincts. They are “the resource center” too!

Faculty: Be alert to who is missing from your classroom. Get creative with “taking roll” and follow up with those who are missing. I know taking roll in that Intro Course with 100 plus students could be tedious and time consuming, but letting students know they are missed has a big payoff for them. Call on new technology, for example, to assist with student “sign-in.” Err on the side of some students who will feel chagrined that they missed your class because of last night’s party. Deep down students feel good that

someone missed them. Parents appreciate this, and at some level, it is a best practice for college compliance. Send a note to the student's academic adviser, mentors, coaches, or co-curricular staff that the student is missing from your class. These actions can be helpful in filling in a better picture of their engagement and overall school experience.

Roommates (and classmates): Go with your instincts. If you suspect your roommate or friend is struggling, chances are you are on to something. Keep them engaged! Keep inviting them to breakfast, sports events, parties and study areas, or just take a refreshing walk through the campus (without cell phones and ear plugs!).

All: Take time in your day to stop and consider with compassion or pray about the ways you can take action to help a student in your everyday life have a good experience at college. Acting with compassion, kindness and genuine connection may help a student in need get through the day.

