


Chapter 2

Perhaps a Little Handholding is Appropriate: Targeted Case Management for University Students

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ABSTRACT

Universities are experiencing challenges with students completing their degrees due to an increase in mental health issues. Effects of social media, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a lack of community, and ineffective self-help and coping skills appear to be positively associated factors. The consequences of unaddressed mental health issues on academic efficacy are well established in research. In an effort to assist struggling students, universities have invested in multiple on-campus student success programs; however, the students in greatest need of these services are often the least likely to take advantage of them. Personalized targeted case management (TCM) is an active approach that physically connects students with services. Social work students are uniquely prepared for these positions due to the discipline's theoretical underpinnings, skills-based approach, and accreditation standards for practicum-based education. Specifics of the TCM job description, lessons learned from a pilot semester, and suggestions moving forward will be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will discuss the increasing problem of mental health issues interfering with university students' ability to successfully complete their educational careers, and one university's innovative approach to decrease attrition rates. The terms *college* and *university* will be used interchangeably throughout the chapter to indicate institutions of higher learning that grant undergraduate degrees, customary in the United States. Research indicates that mental health issues among university students continue to rise,

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with multiple reasons cited for this increase. This chapter will focus on the influence of social media, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of physical and psychological community due to the increase of online coursework, and the use of ineffective self-help and coping skills. Fortunately, there are interventions that can be harnessed to offset the negative sequela of mental health issues and help students be academically, physically, and emotionally successful.

The chapter will begin with a discussion concerning the correlation between mental health issues and decreased academic success in higher education. Research indicates that the number of university students struggling with mental health issues has increased considerably in recent years (Lingan-Huaman et al., 2023; Marconi et al., 2023, Xu et al., 2023). Social media's influence on young people and the positive correlation between social media and mental health issues in students is well developed (Hashemi et al., 2022). Other topics related to increased mental health presentations in college students include the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the loss of community due to online courses and the decrease of a physical presence of students and faculty on university campuses (Barry et al., 2024; Birmingham et al., 2023; Ramirez et al., 2023). Although positive coping techniques can assist in living successfully with mental health issues, students commonly do not know how to engage in these behaviors or actively avoid them to prevent stigmatization by other students and faculty (Bornschlegl & Caltabiano, 2022; Li et al., 2023).

Secondly, the chapter will discuss the changes in university business practices and the need for most schools to actively recruit and retain students for operating capital. This has resulted in universities providing a host of free and/or low-cost assistance programs; however, actual use of services by students remains low (Dickason et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023; Murray & Sotardi, 2022). This inspired one university to develop a student-filled, targeted case management (TCM) position for a "boots on the ground" connection between struggling students and needed services. The chapter will discuss the inspiration for this position, the development of the role, the TCM job description, reception of the idea by university administration, and outcomes of the pilot semester.

Lastly, the chapter will discuss the evaluation of the TCM position, lessons learned from the pilot semester, and suggestions moving forward with the position. Additional assistance and ideas, such as internal grants for supplies, a dedicated TCM cell phone, supervision, and documentation of services will also be discussed. Case studies of students that received TCM services will be provided, as well as a testimony from the student who served in this position. The chapter will end with a discussion concerning implications for universities and ideas for future research and service projects that should be considered to encourage student success.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mental Health Status of Today's University Students

Universities worldwide report compounding challenges associated with increasing numbers of students struggling with mental health presentations (Ismail & Kadhim, 2023; Lingan-Huaman et al., 2023; Marconi et al., 2023; Ramirez et al., 2023). According to Flannery (2023), 44% of university students in the United States disclosed struggling with depression, 37% report anxiety, and 15% admitted to experiencing suicidal ideation. These numbers were the highest recorded in 15 years. Likewise, more than 60% of college students qualify for a diagnosis of at least one mental health issue, overwhelming

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