



Ready to Help: Exploring Student Affairs Practitioners' Readiness to Support Students Amid Increasing Mental Health Challenges

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What types of challenges do student affairs practitioners perceive students encountering?
2. What skills or resources do student affairs practitioners utilize to help students?
3. To what extent do student affairs practitioners feel equipped to provide support and resources for students in crisis?
4. What resources or professional development opportunities do you need in order to enhance their ability to help students in crisis?

FINDINGS

TYPES OF CHALLENGES & FREQUENCY

- 7 Focus areas
 - Mental Health, Substance Abuse, Basic Needs, Trauma, Identity, Social, and Academic
- Classification of student challenges
 - Mild to Critical
- Frequent or very frequent interactions with students of concern
- Significant increase in student referrals

"You name it, they're dealing with it. We're seeing an increasing number of student who are really struggling with high level mental health. We average 8 to 12 referrals a day for new students of concern."
- Jack

FUNCTIONAL AREA & READINESS

- Correlation between functional area and readiness
- Areas with higher levels of readiness
 - Housing and Residence Life, Case Management, and Student Conduct
- Areas with lower levels of readiness
 - Admissions, Career Services, and Orientation
- Differences between job position within functional area

"Coming from Residence Life [has] created a very strong exterior when it comes to dealing with distress and crisis. Serving on-call for now 9 years, there is nothing that really scares me."
- Christine Miller

NEW VERSUS EXPERIENCED PROFESSIONALS

- New professionals feeling ill-equipped
- Experienced professionals feeling hesitant
- "Learn As You Go" mentality
- Complexity of student challenge narrows gaps between professionals

"It's my jam and I feel pretty confident in it! But there are circumstances and situations where none of us know what to do and putting first-year folks at the tip of it, is just scary. That's the stuff that makes me nervous. Their coming into a situation that's already hot because their was all these [challenges] before they even walked onto the scene and now we're looking to [them] to manage it."

- Evelyn David

TRAINING & CONFIDENCE

- Lack of Specialized Training Impedes on Confidence
- Beneficence
- The "Right Way" Mentality
- Strong Desire for Specialized Training
- Need for Cross-Departmental Training and Collaboration

"It's just a feeling like I have a lack of competency to deal with it. I haven't really been trained to help students through those challenges. I would refer them to someone else who is better equipped."

- Rose Witherspoon

LITERATURE REVIEW

The topic of mental health challenges has become a common conversation amongst higher education professionals. The amount of students reporting mental health difficulties, self-harm and suicidal ideation has continuously increased over the past several years (Chaudhary, 2021). The amount of students struggling with issues coupled with the notion of having to learn how to independently manage these issues as an adult for the first time leaves students open to experiencing different types of trauma (Ladejo, 2021). Traumatic events and vulnerability factors have the tendency of impacting students' success in college settings because of the challenges they face with coping and adjusting after said events have occurred (Garlow et al., 2008). Although dying by suicide has increased on college campuses, there is a national disconnect between the amount of students utilizing campus support services for mental health challenges in comparison to the amount of students needing support with their mental health (Megivern et al., 2003; Pennsylvania State University, 2019).

Student affairs professionals (SAPs) support students through wrap-around services and programs. They have a responsibility to respond to crises and resolve conflicts that arise by serving in many different capacities (Shaw & Roper, 2017). With the increasing amount of students in distress on campus, when responding to different types of crises or conflict, SAPs must have a certain set of skills and use appropriate intervention strategies in order to provide students with the support they need (DuBrin, 2013; Wooten & James, 2008). Although higher education faculty, administrators, and student affairs practitioners alike have a role in assisting students through challenges, they sometimes feel unprepared to support students in distress due to a lack of formalized training and on-the-job experience (Zdziarski, 2006).

RESEARCH METHODS

- Pragmatic worldview
- Mixed methodology with convergent design
 - 16 Survey Participants
 - 8 Interview Participants
- Sample: Current higher education professionals in student affairs
- Nonprobability and snowball sampling

(Creswell & Creswell, 2018)

REFERENCES



FUTURE PRACTICE

- Provide mental health first aid training for all staff
- Implement ongoing mental health training for all staff
- Create trauma response protocols
- Facilitate specialized trainings around current challenges among students
- Organize cross-departmental training sessions

FUTURE RESEARCH

- New challenges facing students in order to provide specialized training opportunities
- Onboarding strategies that prepare new professionals to support students during increased levels of challenge
- Strategies to build confidence in crisis management