Mental Health &
College Student Success

Completing College: What it takes, What’s at stake?
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Agenda

- Overview of common mental health problems
  - National epidemiological research

- College student retention and engagement
  - Where does mental health fit in?

- Impact of mental health on student success
  - Empirical evidence

- Implications for research and practice

- Questions/discussion throughout
Mental Health and Success

“Americans are inundated with messages about success—in school, in a profession, in parenting, in relationships—without appreciating that successful performance rests on a foundation of mental health”
College Student Mental Health

Overview of national epidemiological research
Age of Onset

- ~½ of all lifetime mental disorders have first onset by mid-adolescence and ~¾ by the mid-20s

- Some research suggests that symptoms of psychopathology have been rising among adolescents and young adults in the U.S.
  - Twenge et al., 2010

- NCS-R: 18-29 year olds: 52.4% meet criteria for 1 disorder, 33.9% for 2, and 22.3% for 3+ disorders
  - Kessler & Wang, 2008

- “Mental illnesses are the chronic diseases of the young”
  - Insel & Fenton, 2005, p. 590
Prevalence [1]

• 91% of campus counseling directors report an increase in the number of students with severe psychological problems
  • National Survey of Counseling Directors, 2010

• Past AY, ~45% of college students felt “so depressed that it was difficult to function”
  • ACHA-NCHA, 2008

• Suicide 2nd leading cause of death among college students
  • National Mental Health Association College Student & Depression Pilot Initiative (n.d.)
Prevalence [2]

Sources: The Healthy Minds Study (2010-2012), U-SHAPE 2012
Help-Seeking

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What’s at stake?

- Students report depression and anxiety among top impediments to academic performance
  - ACHA, 2011
Individual-, Campus-, & Societal-level Impact of Student Wellness

8 Dimensions of Wellness

**EMOTIONAL**
Coping effectively with life and creating satisfying relationships.

**ENVIRONMENTAL**
Good health by occupying pleasant, stimulating environments that support well-being.

**INTELLECTUAL**
Recognizing creative abilities and finding ways to expand knowledge and skills.

**FINANCIAL**
Satisfaction with current and future financial situations.

**PHYSICAL**
Recognizing the need for physical activity, diet, sleep, and nutrition.

**SOCIAL**
Developing a sense of connection, belonging, and a well-developed support system.

**SPIRITUAL**
Expanding our sense of purpose and meaning in life.

**OCCUPATIONAL**
Personal satisfaction and enrichment derived from one’s work.
College Student Retention & Engagement

Where does mental health fit in models of retention/attrition?
The “Roots” of Student Attrition

- Tinto’s model based on Durkheim’s Theory of Suicide
  - Those with fewer social ties have higher suicide rates

- Lack of integration into the social system of the college
  - Academic and social domains
Tinto’s (1975) Conceptual Schema for Dropout from College
The impact of mental health on college student success

Empirical evidence
Longitudinal Study

- Study: Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt (2009)
  - Detailed descriptive analysis of association between mental health and academic outcomes in college (not causal analysis)

- Question: **How does mental health predict academic success during college?**

- Data: random sample of undergraduate and graduate students at 1 university (baseline: 2005 (N=2,798)), follow-up: 2007 (N=747))

- Outcomes of interest: GPA, retention, credit hours

- Key explanatory variables: depression, anxiety, (PHQ-9) eating disorders (SCOFF)

- Self-reported mental health measures linked to university administrative records (including previous academic performance)
Summary of Results [1]
GPA w/in semester

• Depression is a significant predictor of lower GPA

• 15 point increase on the depression scale (“mild” to severe depression) corresponds to a 0.17 drop in GPA (p<0.01), and a 0.40 drop in GPA if co-occurring with anxiety (p=0.10)

• No significant impact of depression on credit hours
Summary of Results [2]
GPA over time

• Separate analyses on GPA, all have negative association: depression, panic disorder (p<0.01), generalized anxiety and eating disorders (p<0.10)

• Co-occurring anxiety and depression have an additional negative association with GPA

• Lack of pleasure and interest in usual activities is strongest negative predictor of academic performance

• Feeling depressed/hopeless not independently associated with lower GPA
Summary of Results [3]
Retention

• Drop-out rate is 25% among students who have <3.0 GPA and screen positive for a mental health problem compared to 9% among students who have <3.0 GPA

• Each point on depression scale associated with a 0.31% in probability of dropping out (p<0.01)

• 15 point increase on depression scale corresponds to a 4.7% increased in probability of dropping out (60% increase relative to mean probability of dropping out at the institution-8%)
Implications for Research and Practice
Implications for Practice [1]

• Anticipating drop-out (assessing risk based on academic performance and mental health status)
  • Low GPA in previous semester
  • Positive screen for a mental health problem

• Applied to sample considered here, adding mental health criteria would increase identification of students who eventually drop out (from identification of 11% to identification of 30% of all drop-outs)

• On campuses with higher drop-out rates, screening would be more cost-effective (fewer “false positives”)
Implications for Practice [2]

- Reduced depression
  - Increased retention
    - Increased student satisfaction
    - Increased institutional reputation & alumni donations
    - Increased tuition
      - Increased lifetime productivity (earnings)

- Benefits to institution
- Benefits to students and society
Research Implications

- Need for more definitive causal estimates of the effects of mental health on college success (RCTs)
- How do key outcomes (e.g., depression, help-seeking) vary across schools (small vs. large, geographic location, competitiveness, community colleges, etc.)?
Questions?


