



## Mental Health Working Group: Report & Recommendations

### April 2021

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The transition into adulthood is a time of great change – one that traditional college students are finding increasingly difficult to navigate on their own. Adopting a public health approach that promotes emotional well-being and offers more robust and innovative support for everything from homesickness to the truly complex mental health challenges that impact students is no longer a “nice to have” -- it’s a must-have. Teaching life skills, promoting social connectedness, establishing wellness programs aimed at prevention, and destigmatizing what is still considered a taboo topic are imperative to creating a culture of caring and compassion. It is critical that we adapt our counseling services to meet students where they are and embrace mental health support and well-being as a shared value for the entire Washington College community.

#### OBJECTIVE & APPROACH

A multidisciplinary Mental Health Working Group (MHWG) was convened by Vice President of Student Affairs Sarah Feyerherm and Director of Counseling Miranda Altman, in October, 2019 to evaluate services, resources, and opportunities related to student mental health at Washington College. The overarching goal of the group was to develop a set of recommendations that would improve the campus environment in ways that embrace a robust culture of wellness and support mental health for all students.

The group met monthly to discuss the current state of mental health services on campus and map out a strategic plan for improvement. As part of the group’s data collection process, a survey was developed and sent to students to assess their satisfaction with current mental health services on campus and their interest and willingness to engage in services that aren’t currently offered by the College. Additionally, the group conducted a review of our peer liberal arts colleges and their efforts to support mental health education and awareness. In December, 2020, the group’s work culminated in recommendations (outlined at the end of this document) that will create a campus environment that fully supports the mental health and wellness of all students by integrating a public health approach that promotes well-being.



#### THE EVOLUTION OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE NEEDS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

As a greater number of students enter college with complicated pre-existing mental health challenges, college counseling has had to adapt. The level of care required by many students is significant, necessitating a change in the way all institutions of higher learning provide services.



Consider as well that those with specific mental health diagnoses represent only one portion of the need. Counselors also continue to provide emotional support to an ever-growing number of young adults who are struggling to navigate the inevitable ups and downs of normal developmental challenges, to include; greater independence, personal agency, and navigating interpersonal relationships. Students may also present with a disability that is neuro atypical and requires collaboration with both counseling and disabilities services (which is housed in the Office of Academic Skills).



## WASHINGTON COLLEGE COUNSELING SERVICES OVERVIEW

Our current counseling staff includes a fulltime 11-month Director of Counseling Services and two full-time 10-month clinicians. A Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner employed through Health Services is available one day per week for psychiatric medication management. During the 2019-20 academic year Washington College counseling clinicians provided 1,822 individual appointments for 520 unique students (42% of all enrolled students.) An additional 176 appointments were provided for students during the summer months using a teletherapy platform.

Recognizing that success in college and interpersonal effectiveness are correlated, counseling services has also created skills-based training to address resiliency broadly, and problem solving, conflict resolution, and effective communication specifically. In the past two years counseling services has designed a resilience curriculum and delivered it to several student groups in multiple sessions and, in the fall of 2019, as a 1-credit course.

### WHO ARE WE SUPPORTING?

Counseling services collects annual data on students presenting disorders by frequency - see sidebar for 2019-20 data.

It should be noted that students may have more than one diagnosis, further elevating the level and complication of care/support that is required. Of our students in 2019-20 who experienced acute mental health distress, 17 required brief medical leaves during the semester and 11 required a medical withdrawal from the College.

Additionally, counseling staff clinicians supported students by consulting with faculty and staff, providing 344 such mental health consultations during the 2019-20 academic year.

Counselors also provide regular training to student leaders, campus organizations, and make presentations in classrooms. Faculty and staff were provided access to gatekeeper training during the academic year with one workshop per semester.



Data for 2019-20, demonstrates the following breakdown of these disorders in Washington College students who accessed counseling services:

- 23% with Anxiety Disorders
- 19% with Adjustment Disorders
- 17% with Depressive Disorders
- 15% with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- 11% with Bipolar Disorder



## MENTAL HEALTH WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION

According to statistics from a 2019 survey from the AUCCD, the staffing models for Colleges with fewer than 1,500 full-time students, place the median number of staff at 2.11. A recent article entitled “[Mental Health crisis on campus and how colleges can fix it](#)” published in the academic journal “The Conversation,” states that college counseling centers are being overrun with students seeking care.

Active Minds, a national organization supporting mental health awareness and education for students, offers the following statistics to underscore what college students and counselors are facing:

- 39% of college students experience a significant mental health issue and one in four college students suffer from a diagnosable mental illness.
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death in those aged 15-24 in the United States.
- A feeling of overwhelming anxiety was reported by 60% of college students.
- The mental health crisis at colleges has gone from bad to worse due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Multiple stressors account for the increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression that students are experiencing.
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Washington College counselors echo these findings at the micro level, reporting isolation, financial concerns, and lost independence as the most frequently cited negative impacts.

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## ADAPTING TO THE EVOLVING MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

Simply adding more clinical staff does not necessarily speak to the trending issues and the mandate to adapt services across a broadening spectrum of needs. Success in college is not just about good time management and study skills. New approaches focus on teaching students how to bounce back from disappointment, how to resolve conflict, and how to manage the distress that they feel. These interventions are aimed at empowering students to develop better coping mechanisms and use concrete strategies to navigate everyday challenges.

One of the major innovations on campuses is to create wellness programs that align with models of prevention. The findings of our survey suggest that we need to offer more robust and holistic options for stress management. Stress management may reduce the escalation of mental health distress and mitigating crisis means that students are more likely to remain part of the campus community and benefit from the full college experience. It should be noted that smaller, private liberal arts colleges like Washington College attract students (and their parents), who believe that we are better equipped to offer a higher level of emotional support. The promise of a small, safe, and supportive community is compelling and it is imperative that proper support is available to all students.



## CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH SURVEY

As a means to supplement national data and trends, as well as our campus metrics on students who utilize counseling services, the Mental Health Working Group decided to collect additional campus data to better inform its recommendations. A survey, administered to 400 students (selected randomly by institutional research) in November 2019, assessed perceptions, use of services offered by the College, and services they would use if available. In all, 87 (22%) students completed the survey. (See Key Findings at right.)

As a result of a review of our own internal survey data, national trends, research, and personal experiences as members of the Washington College community, the Mental Health Working Group is presenting the following recommendations. It is the group's belief that focusing on these initiatives will have the best likelihood of achieving the goal of creating a campus environment that supports the mental health of all of our students.

### SURVEY KEY FINDINGS:

Top resources currently used by students to manage mental health issues:

- a. Support of peers - 87%
- b. Exercise/walk - 72%
- c. Talking to family - 50%
- d. Meeting with a counselor - 41%
- e. Meditation - 33%
- f. Talking to faculty - 33%
- g. Therapy dogs - 29%

Additional resources students indicated they would use if they were available:

- a. Evening/flexible hours for counseling sessions - 83%
- b. A meditation space - 70%
- c. Peer Counselor - 69%
- d. Campus speaker/event - 69%
- e. Student support group - 65%
- f. Private practice therapist in town - 60%

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Upon completion of a thorough review of Washington College's current resources, the results of the campus survey, available information about best practices around mental health for colleges and universities, the Mental Health Working Group has put forward the following recommendations. The group realizes that there may be others on campus who are better equipped to make final decisions on specific tactics as well as the timing and prioritization of those tactics.

Regardless, the group agrees that the following list of recommendations and the framework below comprise what can be an effective strategy for creating an environment on the Washington College campus that supports the mental wellness of all of its students:

- i. Develop a comprehensive public-health style campaign that promotes emotional well-being and de-stigmatizes the topic of mental health and seeking support
  - Wrap all wellness and counseling activities in this branded campaign
  - Utilize social media, website, on-site signage and other avenues to gain awareness around the campaign



## RECOMMENDATIONS - cont'd

2. Increase access, availability, and visibility of counseling services
  - Consider providing services outside the normal office environment
  - Increase counselor evening and weekend hours to better accommodate student schedules
  - Expand the availability of the current PMH-NP or provide additional psychiatrist medication management options through external resources
  - Expand publications and marketing of mental health resources for students
3. Increase awareness of counseling & mental health resources
  - Using the overall campaign theme, implement a comprehensive social media campaign to highlight available programs and services
  - Update and maintain a robust web site for counseling services that includes internal and external resources
  - Implement a yearly training program for faculty and staff (on-line and in-person) to better understand student mental health needs and methods of referral
4. Forge expanded external partnerships/teletherapy
  - Partner with local therapists for referral
  - Partner with providers who offer 24/7 teletherapy (beyond current partnership for international students and study abroad)
  - Subscribe to platform (e.g. Headspace) to provide students with a 24/7 resource for stress reduction, mindfulness, and meditation
5. Integrate mindfulness/wellness programming and the campus environment
  - Partner with local and campus providers to offer expanded programs like meditation, yoga, etc. Include virtual, as well as in-person options.
  - Establish a cross-campus working group to design and deliver wellness programming throughout the year
  - Utilize the College's outdoor assets (main campus, waterfront campus, RAFC) and integrate them into opportunities for students to connect with the environment in ways that support their mental health
6. Increase services related to substance abuse & recovery
  - Consider creation of recovery programs on campus
  - Partner with local AA/NA communities to host self-help open meetings
  - Consider reviving substance-free and/or wellness housing
7. Maximize and expand Peer-based support programming
  - Develop peer coaching model to support students with low-level mental health issues
  - Partner with key student constituencies to expand population-based peer networks (athletes, SOC's, LGBTQ, Greeks, RA's) and create pathways for marginalized students to access support services



## RECOMMENDATIONS - cont'd

8. Assessment
  - Review current campus data on mental health and update metrics regularly to inform additional initiatives
  - Share key data points with campus constituents regularly
  - Integrate assessment into future strategic planning around wellness and mental health
  
9. Establish a wellness facility
  - The long-term plan to fully integrate well-being into the campus culture is a physical space that would offer a full menu of health and counseling services combined with recreation and other student meeting space

## CONCLUSION

Washington College must both adjust to the changing mental health needs of our students and figure out ways to do so by utilizing existing resources as much as possible. We believe that the above recommendations can provide a framework for the College to start incremental yet immediate change that will benefit all of our students and allow them to thrive on campus and beyond.

## MENTAL HEALTH WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

Special thanks to the following individuals for their participation in this important initiative:

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|  Miranda Altman, Director of Counseling  |  Aaron Goodman, Head Men's Basketball Coach            |
|  Hilary Bateman, Director of Academic Skills   |  Nakia Johnson, Area Coordinator (left Dec 2020)       |
|  Sarah Feyerherm, Vice President for Student Affairs                                 |  Sarah Kelly, '21 - WC Student                         |
|  Nick Garcia, Assistant Professor of Sociology                                       |  Gregory Krikorian, Interim Dean of Students (10/2020) |
|  Sue Golinski, Assistant Director of Public Safety/Assistant Coordinator of Title XI |  Kayla Mehrstens, '21 - WC Student                     |