

VCPI Testimony Before House Education Committee

Thursday, February 3 2022

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/committee/agenda/2022/4158>

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you all.

My name is Alex Lehning, I use he/him pronouns, and I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Cooperative for Practice Improvement & Innovation. We are an independent nonprofit hosted by Northern Vermont University, with a mission to impact workforce/professional development in mental health through training and education, consulting, and advocacy for positive outcomes across the system of care. In addition, I have been teaching in adult and higher education for about 8 years. Outside of these professional roles, I am a graduate student and a Vermonter with lived experience of mental illness.

COVID-19 has disrupted all aspects of daily life since March 2020, and we know that schools and learning communities have experienced some of the most significant complex challenges around navigating the pandemic safely. I am here today to share some perspective on the past 23 months to the emotional and mental health of students, faculty, and staff.

Vermont college attendees represent a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds. A recent study from Advance Vermont and the Vermont Community Foundation identified some of the essential factors which impact student life outside of the classroom:

- 25% are parents (33% over the age of 30)
- 80% are working (1/4 are working full-time)
- 55% commute and almost 40% were attending online prior to remote learning
- 40% are first generation students (such as myself)
- 13% are new Americans and 10% are veterans

This data reminds us that the opportunities which higher education can help open up are dependent on so much more than study habits, test scores, or term papers. Students are juggling family obligations and childcare, securing access to reliable technology and transportation, sustaining employment, and more – in addition to accomplishing their academic and personal goals. COVID-19 has exacerbated those challenges, magnified systemic inequities, and asked us all to confront a compounding wave of mental and public health challenges: illness, instability, isolation, compassion fatigue, depression, anxiety, grief and loss...and everything in-between. These impacts have disproportionately affected our BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities.

A 2020 NIH study found that 71% of students surveyed indicated increased mental health challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. A similar American College Health Association/Healthy Minds survey concluded that “60% of students reported the COVID-19...has increased their difficulty in accessing mental health care.” This reflects a trend from over the past decade that we’ve seen where “the rate of depression, anxiety and serious thoughts of suicide has doubled among college students.” Increased and sustainable professional mental health supports are needed on our campuses, but that is simply one aspect of the broader solution. The JED Foundation recently noted that “nearly 70% of faculty are motivated to strengthen their role in supporting student mental health.” So our teachers have an important

role to play. And often, students will look to each other first for help before speaking with or seeking out a counselor or primary care provider. According to the most recent National Peer Education Survey, approximately 40% of students turned to peer educators or counselors for support with their mental health concerns or to access suicide prevention education resources.

Acknowledgement of this mental health crisis is one step – how we talk about it is just as important. One higher education industry publication recently reported “Many students report a lack of regular and compassionate communication from their institutions as a primary stressor during COVID-19, according to a nationwide survey.” So how we talk about the pandemic, share information and decision-making, and engage around the issue is important.

Beyond direct, academic and mental health concerns – the Vermont Foodbank reports one in three Vermonters has experienced food insecurity, and this certainly includes students who may not have access to closed dining facilities or community resources.

Access to care is a significant challenge, especially as travel and public transit remain difficult. A recent report from the Northern Vermont University Health & Wellness Center is worth highlighting (and I will share some data points here):

- The number of college students who are experiencing mental health challenges is on the rise. Vermont does not have the provider capacity to support them
- It is extremely difficult to access culturally affirming mental health care for BIPOC students in Vermont.
- Many of our students have Medicaid health insurance plans and are only able to access care in their home state.
- Most of our Northern Vermont University students are not able to pay out of pocket to access services in Vermont.
- Psychiatric services are not accessible to many of our students who need it and many have providers in their home state who they see when home on breaks. They would benefit immensely from having ongoing access to these providers for medication management.

And yet, in all of this, there is hope. Vermonters have shown that we are truly “stronger, together” and college students across the country and in the Green Mountain State are reporting an increased sense of resilience as we enter the third year of a global pandemic.

I would encourage the Committee to continue to support responses to that resilience which prioritize the following areas:

1. Access to unlimited interstate mental health visits via telehealth (expansion of Act 6 services)
2. Resources and funding for peer mental health support at Vermont’s colleges and universities
3. Workforce development incentives and scholarships for behavioral health providers
4. Promotion of mental health equity and access to culturally-affirming care; increased accessibility/disability services integration
5. Support for access to supervision for pre-licensure mental health professionals (H.661)

One final data point - a very recent survey found that “almost nine in 10 college students think campuses are facing a mental health crisis.” So we know that college students are speaking up about this. And “51 percent said they have more stress and anxiety” now than they did in

January 2021. That shows the ongoing impact of the Delta and Omicron variants. “Forty-eight percent of respondents said they want more remote mental and physical health services, and 41 percent said they want more remote social support and a greater sense of belonging.” So just as important as professional and peer mental health support is our ability to create community and connectivity which we know are essential to whole-person health.

Understanding that increased support systems for mental health are essential for ALL students at ALL levels to ensure their well-being both in and out of the classroom. These steps will put us on the path to providing much needed support for our emerging adults and adult learners who will serve as the next generation of community leaders, decision-makers, legislators and engaged citizens. Thank you.

Sources

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Northern Vermont University Health & Wellness Center