



# Information BRIEF

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## The Mental and Behavioral Health of Students and the Need for Increased Counseling Services

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Student demand for counseling services exceeds the current capacity of SUS counseling centers, and demand for services continues to grow.
  - The number of counseling service clients at SUS institutions has increased 48% since 2008-09 and the number of counseling sessions provided has increased by 67%.
  - Counselors at ten of Florida's state university counseling centers serve more than the minimum recommended number of clients due to inadequate staffing levels and increasing demand for services.
  - Centers now maintain waiting lists, reduce the frequency of sessions, and refer students to clinicians in the community.

### Introduction

In March 2015, Board staff presented an *Information Brief* on the critical issues related to campus safety and security in response to increasing concerns about student behavior and campus safety. That information brief reported that the State University System (SUS) university presidents recognized a need to increase the number of well-trained, professional counselors in order to adequately address the growing demand from students with mental and behavioral health issues. In 2016, the SUS requested funding from the legislature to support an increase in the number of counselors, as well as additional law enforcement staff. That request was not funded, although the demand for counselors remains -- and continues to grow.

### *National Counseling Center Activity Data*

Annual national surveys of counseling center directors find that the vast majority of directors have been reporting increases in the number of students entering postsecondary education already taking psychiatric medication for at least a decade.<sup>1</sup> From the latest survey, directors reported that 41% of all eligible students, across all institutions participating in the survey, sought either individual or group counseling. This is up from 9% in the 2006 survey. The directors also reported that 52% of clients have serious psychological issues, up from 41% in 2003. They also reported that 26% of clients were on psychiatric medication, up from 9% in 1994. The

most commonly documented problems included anxiety disorders, pressing crises, issues with psychiatric medication, clinical depression, learning disabilities, sexual assaults on campus, and self-injury issues. While the number of students seeking counseling has increased, the number of counselors available to support these students has not. The 2004 survey found that the ratio of counselors to clients, on average, was 1 to 1,511. In the 2014 survey, the ratio was 1 to 2,081.

The American College Health Association (ACHA) found in a spring 2015 survey that approximately 19% of students report that they had received psychological or mental health services from their current institution's counseling center or health service center.<sup>ii</sup> ACHA also found that 57% of students felt overwhelming anxiety at some point during the previous year, and 35% felt so depressed that it was "difficult to function." These percentages are up from 51% experiencing overwhelming anxiety and 31% who felt so depressed that it was "difficult to function" on the spring 2012 survey.<sup>iii</sup> Further, the national American Freshman Survey from 2014 found that students' ratings of their emotional health were the lowest ever reported.<sup>iv</sup>

An array of explanations for the increasing incidences and severity of psychological problems on postsecondary campuses are being offered by mental health professionals. A frequently asserted view is that these trends are resulting from larger societal tendencies toward increasing levels of anxiety and depression resulting from information and technology overload, increased financial stress, and an ineffectual mental health care system. In addition to the increasing numbers of students arriving on campus with pre-existing emotional and behavior health issues, university counselors are also finding that the current generation of students lacks the coping skills and resiliency demonstrated by previous generations.

### *The State University System*

SUS institutions maintain counseling centers with licensed, highly-trained professionals who provide comprehensive services for students. Services include the evaluation of student concerns and behaviors and the development of individualized treatment plans that promote mental and behavioral health, as well as academic success. Center personnel are also involved in the education and training of students in leadership positions to enable them to recognize student behaviors that may signal a need for professional intervention. Many universities now maintain *Students of Concern Committees* and *Threat Assessment Teams* that identify and monitor students with serious mental or behavioral problems. Counseling centers also provide mental health outreach and prevention programs to students and training for faculty and staff, though these activities are provided with less frequency due to the increase in demand for counseling services.

Nine SUS counseling centers are accredited by the International Association of Counseling Services (IACS), the accreditation association for over 200 university and college counseling centers worldwide. IACS standards state that minimum staffing ratios should strive to be "in the range of one FTE professional staff member to every 1,000 to 1,500 students, depending on services offered and other campus mental health agencies." Currently, counselors at ten of the 12 SUS counseling centers are serving more than the IACS standard for minimum staffing of one staff member per 1,000 students.

### *Counseling Center Activity*

All SUS counseling centers strive to respond to the mental and behavioral health needs of their students. However, similar to national trends, the demand for counseling and related services has increased significantly in a short period of time. The number of student clients has increased 48% since 2008-09, and the number of sessions has increased by 67% during the same timeframe. The most common issues students cited when requesting services were anxiety, depression, relationship issues, and academic stress – all of which are consistent with national findings.

In addition to the growing numbers of clients and counseling sessions, there has also been a significant increase in the severity of student problems as evidenced by an increase in emergency or crisis visits. During the 2013-14 academic year, nearly 4,200 visits to SUS counseling centers were classified as emergency or crisis visits. Most of these visits were due to severe depression, acute anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Centers have also recorded an alarming increase in Baker Act hospitalizations, with over 300 student hospitalizations during the 2013-14 academic year.

### **Summary**

Student demand for counseling services has outstripped the capacity of the SUS counseling centers. Student client surveys show that university counseling services enable students to successfully address their issues and remain enrolled. However, as a result of the increased demand for services and the complexity of the problems that students are experiencing, SUS counseling centers may maintain waiting lists, reduce the frequency of appointments for students with ongoing issues, or refer students to clinicians in the community that could in turn saturate community resources. As a result, less staff time is available for preventive programs that would benefit the larger campus community and support student success. The SUS counseling centers provide services that are critical to student retention and success and the need to address the mental and behavioral health of SUS university students has never been more critical.

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<sup>i</sup> Gallagher, R. P. (various). *National Survey of College Counseling Centers*. Retrieved from <http://www.collegecounseling.org/surveys>

<sup>ii</sup> American College Health Association. (2015). *American College Health Association National College Health Assessment II Spring 2015 Reference Group Executive Summary*. Retrieved from [http://www.acha-ncha.org/pubs\\_rpts.html](http://www.acha-ncha.org/pubs_rpts.html)

<sup>iii</sup> American College Health Association. (2012). *American College Health Association National College Health Assessment II Spring 2012 Reference Group Executive Summary*. Retrieved from [http://www.acha-ncha.org/pubs\\_rpts.html](http://www.acha-ncha.org/pubs_rpts.html)

<sup>iv</sup> Eagan, K., Stolzenberg, E. B., Ramirez, J. J., Aragon, M. C., Suchard, M. R., & Hurtado, S. (2014). *The American freshman: National norms fall 2014*. Retrieved from <http://www.heri.ucla.edu/tfsPublications.php>