National Disability Center
for Student Success

De-Siloing Mental Health and Disability Resources

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TEXAS
The University of Texas at Austin

Institutional Challenge: Reaching and Supporting Students with Mental Health Disabilities

This Campus Accessibility Spotlight focuses on early efforts at The University of Texas at Austin to connect institutional resources that support students experiencing mental health challenges in their academic course load and trajectory. Interviews with multiple campus partners indicated that there are significant resources and training available to support students, but it is mainly siloed in different units across the institution.

Adding to the challenge are the difficulties in reaching this segment of the student population from a top-down initiative. Furthermore, those students who might benefit from support are often those who are least aware of the fact that mental health can qualify for disability support services or who fear stigma from sharing their struggle with instructors or the institution.

The Pain Points

- Mental health conditions are on the rise, especially for young people emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Outreach to students can be challenging. Although students are informed about services via multiple campus channels, timing is critical. Students receive so much information and there is immense competition for their attention.

- When in search of accommodations for their academic needs, many students do not directly disclose mental health conditions. Another key reason they don't disclose? They don't know their condition, such as depression, is a disability that can receive accommodations.

- Although on-campus providers routinely refer students with mental health challenges to seek academic accommodations, off-campus providers are often unaware of these services.

- Many faculty are on the front line — aware of students who may be facing challenges and able to share just-in-time information, particularly as it relates to supports for mental health as part of the academic journey — but they are already stretched thin with teaching responsibilities.

- Local initiatives — for example, faculty training, information-sharing suggestions, and just-in-time information — are not coordinated across an entire campus, but they do provide a much-needed personal touch and can build relationships.

Meet the People

Leaders involved in various campus resources were extensively interviewed by the National Disability Center about their work to support students with mental health disabilities. Those leaders interviewed were:

Chris Brownson, PhD

Associate Vice President for Health and Well-being | Division of Student Affairs Clinical Professor | Department of Educational Psychology

Role: In addition to his UT Austin responsibilities, he has been the director of the National Research Consortium of Counseling Centers in Higher Education since 2004 and is leading a longitudinal study investigating the intersection of psychological well-being factors and academic success.

Madeleine R. Holland, PhD

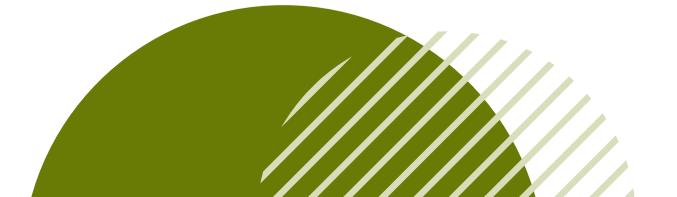Associate Professor of Instruction | Department of Communication Studies

Role: Focuses on the intersection of identity and relational communication in her teaching and research. As program manager for interdisciplinary education initiatives, she coordinates partnerships among departments and with other academic units on campus and works on collaborative learning initiatives.

Mike Mackert, PhD

Director of the UT Austin Center for Health Communication Professor | School of Advertising & Public Relations | Department of Population Health

Role: Leads a center to bring together a diverse group of researchers, scholars, practitioners, and experts in many areas of health communication — where they can collaborate, share innovations, and advance their scholarship to improve the health and well-being of people and populations.

Anita Vangelisti, PhD

Professor and Interim Dean, Moody College of Communications

Role: Teaches and researches the associations between communication and emotion in the context of close relationships. She believes teaching is about building relationships – between students and their instructors, between students and course material, and between students and their peers – to facilitate the development of those bonds.

Thea Woodruff, PhD

Program Coordinator, Texas Well-being

Role: Leads the Well-Being in Learning Environments program at the Longhorn Wellness Center, where she works with faculty to embed wellness practices in their classrooms, office hours, and other learning contexts through several resources, including a guidebook and Canvas course.

Implementation Steps and Milestones

- **Understanding mental health** as part of disability and wellness

- **Sustaining outreach** to faculty on a consistent basis

- **Connecting faculty and staff** with each other to strategize

- **Identifying pockets of opportunity** for classroom-based sharing

- **Leveraging communication strategies** and making them student-centered

- **Finding cross-unit strategies** that build a coherent vision for success

- **Building further networks** that include multiple campus stakeholders

By The Numbers

44.7%

Disability prevalence in higher education

>60%

Disabled students who report a mental health condition

45%

Disabled students who **did NOT** disclose their disability to the institution

Source: National Disability Center for Student Success College Accessibility Survey. "Disability" was defined as having a physical or medical, mental health, or chronic health condition for 4 months or longer.

Fresh Insights

We have worked toward developing a critical mass of faculty who are invested and interested in sharing information with their students. While we cannot reach everyone, we do have a substantial group of faculty (whose numbers are growing) who share important just-in-time information throughout the semester.

Thea Woodruff

There's so much we can do in the areas where we have an influence. I coordinate large undergraduate courses in our college, where we can reach hundreds of students at a time. Let's make sure information about disability, mental health, and access to academic supports are part of their curriculum from day one.

Madeleine Holland

Faculty are not always as empathetic about issues related to mental health as they are about issues related to physical health. Sometimes this is because they aren't familiar with the effects on students – other times it is because they are concerned that changes to course deadlines mean that course rigor is compromised. Helping faculty understand the importance of accommodation requests would go a long way toward addressing this issue.

Anita Vangelisti

Health communication is exploding as a field, especially in the wake of COVID-19 and the need for high-quality, accessible, and relevant information sharing. In all our work, matching the platforms with where our students are at — they are not on Facebook and aren't waiting for your email — helps to target relevant information to people to support their personal and public health.

Mike Mackert

We have an opportunity to connect the needed dots for disabled students. We've recently shifted such that many of the departments related to student health and well-being — mental health, rec sports, disability services, health services, and more — are now coordinated under one administrative unit.

Chris Brownson

Future Priorities

- Collaborate on problem-solving

- Develop a coherent vision

- Focus on student success

- Deploy resources effectively

- Use agile staffing

An Unexpected Revelation

What looks like an academic performance issue can often be a mental health issue, and vice versa. An accessible learning space can reduce stress and anxiety for all students, but especially those who face challenges with mental health.

What a Student Says

> "

When I first came to college, I did not know that my mental health disorder was considered a disability. I also had no idea I was able to qualify for accommodations. They have helped me out tremendously with my coursework.

– Undergraduate student at UT Austin

Strategies For Success on Your Campus

1. Make student mental health and wellness a priority.

Integrate into overall goals surrounding student success and be integrated into accommodations assessments.

2. Raise faculty competency, especially new or part-time faculty.

Help them better understand the mental health challenges students face, how they qualify as disabilities, and how accommodations and flexibility can support mental health (and, studies show, academic achievement). Encourage them to be mindful of the role they have in supporting students' emotional, motivational, and social health as well as with students' cognitive growth and learning.

3. Build just-in-time capacity at all levels of the system.

For example, identify creative staffing measures for the beginning-of-semester crunch. Delays in services can have a significant impact on long-term success.

4. Connect with students before they arrive on campus.

Discuss possible accommodations in their transition between high school and college or after their acceptance and before enrollment. This may reduce rates of "summer melt" and improve rates of persistence.

5. Set a welcoming tone.

In college materials and syllabi, issue a clear statement about openness and your efforts to provide accessibility, accommodations, and open dialogue. Communicate all of the disability categories and everything that falls under them.

6. Make support universal.

Design campus support resources that are universally available to all students and do not require disability disclosure. Be flexible and proactive with accommodation requests for activities outside of class – those that connect students to each other and build community.

7. Be aware of hidden stigmas and ableism.

Studies show many young adults with disabilities experience high levels of bullying and stigma, including high levels of cyberbullying — one of the key reasons that students do not disclose their disabilities to institutions. Disclosure also varies by major, with students in some majors being more wary of being seen as "weak" if they are identified as having a mental health disability.