



UNITED UNIVERSITY PROFESSIONS

Testimony on the Mental Health Needs of Students at Institutions of Higher Education

Presented to

Assemblymember Deborah J. Glick, Chair
Assembly Committee on Higher Education
and

Assemblywoman Aileen M. Gunther, Chair
Assembly Committee on Mental Health

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Chairperson Glick, Chairperson Gunther, distinguished members of the Assembly Higher Education Committee and Mental Health Committee, thank you for inviting United University Professions (UUP) to testify at this important public hearing on the mental health needs of students at institutions of higher education.

My name is Dr. Frederick E. Kowal, and I am the president of UUP. It is my honor to represent more than 37,000 academic and professional faculty at the State University of New York (SUNY). Our members live and work in communities across the state of New York, serving hundreds of thousands of students and patients at 29 SUNY comprehensive, technical, specialized and university centers, SUNY academic medical centers and state-operated public teaching hospitals, and System Administration.

I commend you for taking steps to address the mental health crisis that college students are facing today at SUNY and across the nation. The need for student mental health services has been on the climb for years – between 2013 and 2021, college students’ mental health has consistently declined, with a 135% increase in depression and 110% increase in anxiety. The pandemic and its aftershocks have dramatically exacerbated the need for student mental health services and increased the urgency to take immediate and enduring action.

I have great admiration and appreciation for the resilience and sensitivity of young adults across the great state of New York. They turned out in droves during the midterm elections, making their issues and priorities clear. They did so with an acute awareness of the ways in which rapid climate change, access to guns, racism, antisemitism, poverty, and a myriad of intersecting issues pose constant threats to their health and safety. These are also the conditions under which they are pursuing their higher education. It is little wonder that the percentage of adults with symptoms of anxiety or a depressive disorder increased from 36.4% to 41.5% from August 2020 to February 2021, with the most significant increases occurring among young adults aged 18-29 years old, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

I applaud the state Legislature and Gov. Kathy Hochul for the necessary investments they have made thus far in our students, including providing tuition assistance, paid internships, and direct stipends for minority and multilingual students. We also support the SUNY Board of Trustees’ September 2022 announcement to use \$24 million in American Rescue Plan funds to increase access to mental health and wellness services and expand on-campus programming. This timely infusion of resources and innovative programming affirms SUNY’s unique position to address the mental health crisis in a way that advances scholarship, teaching, and practice within the intersecting mental health fields, with an emphasis on health equity. We are also proud that two SUNY programs are part of this expansion: Upstate Medical University’s Student Tele-Counseling Network and the University at Albany’s Middle Earth Peer Assistance Program. SUNY’s comprehensive approach to expanding mental health services and enhancing wellness

programs is promising, and with appropriate funding this is just the beginning of the unprecedented change that I am confident we can accomplish together.

Last month, UUP held a notable roundtable event, the National Mental Health Roundtable on Structural Racism, Generational Trauma, and Mental Health Equity. Our expert panelists discussed the importance of providers being nimble, curious, and able to deliver mental health care that is multiculturally oriented and linguistically appropriate. The stakes of the issue were made clear by Dr. Norma Day-Vines, a professor and the associate dean of Diversity and Faculty Development in the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University. She said that “30% of all counseling sessions end prematurely and 50% of counseling sessions with minoritized clients end prematurely” due to clinicians’ assumptions and/or narrow cultural framework.

Racism and white supremacy can be lethal, and they certainly have harmful cumulative effects on the mental and emotional health of individuals, families, and communities. Our panelists made clear that we must place multiculturalism and racial equity at the center of any approach to mental health. Barriers to accessing care, combined with the lack of culturally competent care, further alienates marginalized members of our communities.

Now is the time to break the cycle of structural racism and intergenerational trauma and invest in our communities that have been neglected for far too long. UUP is committed to the long-term work needed to achieve mental health equity and this effort must be a main priority not just for our union, but also for the SUNY system and for New York state as a whole. Together, we can chart the path for a more just New York.

As I said, there are immediate and long-term actions that can be taken to respond to the mental health needs of SUNY students while alleviating the increased workload and complexity of care on professional staff and faculty on SUNY campuses. Today, I’d like to focus on three primary actions: Hiring 50 additional mental health counselors across the SUNY system; Enhancing support and services for students with disabilities; and Creating the Mental Health Educational Opportunity Program (MEHOP).

More Mental Health Counselors for SUNY

Across the SUNY system, we see a chasm between student need and available resources. Campus counseling centers are chronically understaffed and have been historically underfunded as a result of state disinvestment in our public education system — which turned a corner when Gov. Hochul, took office. Wait times of weeks or months for an on-campus appointment are unfortunately the rule rather than the exception. Students referred out to a private provider may face further financial burden that can deter them from attending appointments. The student-need-to-staff ratio is a challenge for students seeking treatment and for campus counselors diligently trying to help as many students as possible.

The lack of care providers is compounded after hours and can even be dangerous for students seeking help. As many campuses lack the capacity for after-hours crisis response, students may

feel that they have no choice but to call university police — which not only perpetuates the criminalization of mental illness but can lead to dangerous outcomes, including heightened trauma, particularly for students of color.

UUP advocates for the hiring of 50 additional mental health counselors across the SUNY system to reach the International Accreditation of Counseling Services (IACS) goal of one counselor for every 1000 students. In addition to serving students, additional staff will help ease the burnout and excessive caseload counselors face as they work to help our students. Only 9 campuses within the SUNY system are currently meeting this standard. When counselor to student ratios are higher than the limits recommended by IACS, waiting lists increase, campuses have difficulty providing services to students experiencing increasingly more severe psychological issues, students experience decreased academic success, and counseling centers are less available to serve the broader campus community.

Enhancing Support and Services for Students with Disabilities

There are multiple points of intersection between disability services on campus and the mental health of our students. Academic stress is one of the leading causes of mental health crises on campuses. Last year SUNY was part of a higher education request of \$15 million to expand student accommodation needs, improve data collection, train faculty and staff, and transition programs for diverse learners. This \$15 million request resulted in an appropriation of just \$2 million, with SUNY receiving less than \$850,000. This year we must fully fund this request. Students with mental health diagnoses seek accommodations, but we are failing them and their academic success. Recently when visiting Rochester, UUP heard from student Daniel Dale. Daniel spoke about the Brockport Student Accessibility Services center, which is designed to assist students with anxiety, depression, and ADHD. One of their most critical programs is the accommodation for extra test time for these students working through their mental health struggles. This program has over 600 students registered, yet there are 11 seats available for test takers and only 8 desks with computers. SUNY's request for funding is acknowledgment of this deficiency at campuses like Brockport.

Mental Health Educational Opportunity Program (MHEOP)

SUNY is in a unique position to address the mental health crisis in a way that advances social justice. SUNY campus communities tend to be more diverse than the general population, and we must ensure that campus counseling staff are representative of, and responsive to, students seeking mental health care. UUP supports recruitment and training of mental health professionals from underrepresented backgrounds, both immediately and through supporting educational pathways to these careers.

To help make the latter option a reality, UUP proposes the creation of a Mental Health Educational Opportunity Program (MHEOP) to provide comprehensive support for under-resourced and underrepresented students pursuing careers in mental health fields, including psychology, sociology, social work and mental health and addictions counseling. The

recruitment and training of mental health professionals from underrepresented backgrounds is a necessity when you consider the vast disparity between the demographic composition of behavioral health professionals and the general population. With increased investment, the Legislature can ensure that a wider array of students have access to these educational pathways and, in turn, strengthen New York state's middle class.

SUNY's Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) and the newer Medical Educational Opportunity Program (MEOP) are highly successful, and UUP believes that a Mental Health Educational Opportunity Program is the best means to address barriers to mental health care on college campuses throughout New York state.

Conclusion

For many students, college is the first time they have the choice to access counseling. SUNY is poised to create a widespread culture of care and deconstruct the associated stigma, making it easier and more acceptable for future students to access mental health care services.

Thank you for your time and for inviting me to provide UUP's perspective on the mental health crisis faced by students and mental health care providers on SUNY campuses. Mental health is not an individual problem; outcomes are shaped by the social structures that our students interact with. It is our duty to enact the structural changes necessary to improve the lives of all and to build a more just New York.

Thank you.