



Returning to School as a Pathway to Employment

Mental Health in Higher Education

- 75% of mental health conditions develop by the age of 24, so the “college years” are often a time when people begin to struggle to function well in academic environments. The new academic and social responsibilities and opportunities that accompany higher education can be added stressors for students with a mental health condition (www.nami.org).
- This time of life is a critical time of young adult development in terms of their social and vocational identities.
- Positive mental health is strongly correlated to academic success, retention, and ultimately vocational success and adult resiliency. The return on investment for higher education in the lives of students with mental health conditions is high (Douce & Keeling, 2014; Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009).
- Roughly 1/3 of undergraduates have clinically significant symptoms of mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression and 50% of community college students live with anxiety and depression (ACHA, 2017; Wisconsin HOPE LAB, 2016).
- 42% of college students state they have felt so depressed that they struggle to function with their responsibilities (ACHA, 2017).
- Students with mental health conditions who attend college, experience high dropout rates—one of the highest of any disability group (Brueffaerts, et al, 2018; Hartley, 2010).

Potent Intersection of Mental Health Struggles and Functioning in College

- Students with mental health conditions can experience academic difficulties related to both emotional, social, and executive functioning domains (Eisenberg & Lipson, 2014).
- Medication side effects also can have a negative impact on academic and social functioning (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009).
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death, after traffic accidents, among college students (CDC, 2017).
- Post-secondary education is a protective factor that can insulate students with mental health conditions from long-term unemployment, poverty, and dependence on systems of care (Hjorth, Bilgrav, et al, 2016).
- Post-secondary institutions are committed and required to provide equal and integrated access for students with mental health conditions to all the academic, vocational, social, cultural, and recreational programs they offer.

- The Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA, 2009) provides students with mental health conditions the right to access the opportunities to meet the demands of higher educational environment.
- If a student takes a medical leave of absence for mental health reasons, the institution must provide the same arrangements for withdrawal from classes, incompletes, and refunds of tuition or other costs as well as procedures for return to school, as it does for a student who takes a leave of absence or leaves college housing for physical health reasons. Know that a school cannot require that a mental illness be cured or that disability-related behavior not recur unless that behavior creates a direct threat that cannot be reduced to an acceptable level with accommodations (Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law's Model Student Policy).

Helpful Information for Parents of Students

- The [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act \(HIPAA\)](#) and the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#) protect the privacy of a college student's health and academic information. In some circumstances, these laws may allow disclosure of information without a student's consent to other treatment providers, payers of health care, other sources of financial assistance, public agencies that oversee treatment providers, and others. These laws also may allow disclosure when the student is considered incapacitated and at risk for self-harm or harm to others.
- It can be very helpful for parents and students to discuss this law and why agreeing to share academic information with family can be supportive. Universities provide students with the opportunity to agree to have academic information shared with parents and guardians.
- Parents/Guardians always have the right, if they are worried about their college student, to call the school and let them know their concerns. Schools will do wellness checks with the student to ensure their safety.

Helpful Strategies when Working with Students who are on a Leave of Absence from Higher Education

- Engage students and seek to understand their educational and vocational aspirations. How does higher education fit in?
- Seek to understand the challenges and barriers the students experienced while in school and the reasons for departure. Explore the academic, wellness, and social issues that may have occurred.
- Build a plan for returning to school that includes resources, strategies, and supports at school, so when students face the same challenges, they can navigate them with more resilience and succeed in school.
- Students with mental health conditions have a right to reasonable accommodations that can provide the needed resources, people and spaces that will support them to succeed ([UMASS Active Minds](#)). People supports are very important. Encourage students to use and connect with peer mentoring, student groups, such as Active Minds, caring faculty, and mental health resources on campus.

Career Exploration and Returning to Work

- Help students identify their interests, passions, values, and strengths. Assist students with mental health conditions to pursue jobs, internships, and apprenticeships. These experiences are essential in building a path to employment that is both satisfying and successful. Students learn not only the skills of choosing and getting work, but the critical skills of keeping work while living with a health condition.
- Assist students to identify the wellness strategies they need in their daily lives that will support them to succeed both academically and at work.

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