REPORT SUMMARY

Degrees of Distress

How Higher Education Institutions Hurt and Help Student Mental Health



60%

of college students reported experiencing one or more mental health challenges in 2021.

National Healthy Minds Study

Who is responsible for college student mental health? With rising public concern around mental health, it is clear that serious stressors are taking a toll on the social and emotional well-being of college students across the country. Students of color and other minoritized groups shoulder an outsized share of this burden. To be sure, many of the forces hurting student mental health—including hostile politics, state violence, wealth disparity, a pandemic—originate elsewhere. But colleges and universities themselves bear no small part of the responsibility for how their students feel and fare. *Degrees of Distress* provides an extensive analysis of the data and scholarship on this topic. It surfaces higher education practices known to impact student mental health with the goal of informing the policy, practice, and narrative for a national movement toward students thriving. Top takeaways are presented here.

COLLEGES CAN BE COMPLICIT IN CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES BY:

- **Promoting social isolation** as students from less privileged backgrounds are marginalized on campus and pressured to sever ties with their home communities.
- **Sustaining hostile climates** that permit violence and microaggressions that can activate negative physical, psychological, and behavioral stress responses in students.
- **Perpetuating excessive competition** through individualistic cultures, aggressive performance assessments, and pressure to outperform others, all of which add stress and undercut social cohesion.
- **Exacerbating financial precarity,** particularly for lower-income students who must navigate financial aid processes, accumulate significant loan debt, work longer hours while enrolled, and manage food and housing insecurity.
- **Creating barriers to support** that include under-resourced counseling centers, services that are difficult or confusing to access, and a lack of culturally relevant care.

COLLEGE FUTURES FOUNDATION
More Graduates for a Thriving California

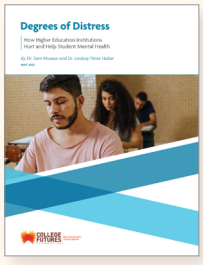
COLLEGES CAN PROMOTE POSITIVE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH, WELL-BEING, AND FLOURISHING BY:

- **Centering care in serving students** with programs that promote individual self-care through good sleep, nutrition, exercise, and mindfulness, as well as community-building experiences that relate to spirituality, gratitude, and mutual aid.
- **Promoting connections and belonging** including opportunities to build relationships with college personnel and peers, as well as culture- and identity-based experiences that enrich connections with home communities.
- **Creating affirming structures and spaces** through culturally relevant curricula, affinity spaces, and campus art that validate the identities of marginalized groups.
- **Building curricula that prioritize well-being of diverse students,** understanding that such programs, like Ethnic Studies, are both linked to student achievement *and* facing substantial political threats.
- **Providing culturally relevant mental health programming,** including increasing the availability of practitioners from diverse backgrounds to expand awareness, normalize discussion, and promote healing.

NEXT STEPS FOR RESEARCHERS, THOUGHT LEADERS, AND DECISION MAKERS:

While the above findings underscore important ways for colleges and universities to support student mental health, there is still much to learn and do across systems on this topic. Key steps are to:

- **Lead a more holistic, coherent national conversation** with a coalition of experts across systems and services to bridge study of student experiences, educational outcomes, and mental health.
- **Reframe the mental health crisis as the systemic problem it is** (and not solely a byproduct of the pandemic) to focus on how those with power and resources can and should take responsibility in addressing this issue.
- **Understand mental health as integral to student success** by integrating research on college student diversity, mental health, and achievement.



LEARN MORE IN THE REPORT

Degrees of Distress is authored by **Dr. Sam Museus** and **Dr. Lindsay Pérez Huber** and commissioned by College Futures Foundation. Find the full report, including details, data, and resources, at **collegefutures.org/insights/degrees-of-distress**.