



BRIEF 1 OF 3

Navigating the Mental Health Provider Shortage in Higher Education

Since the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, there has been a renewed focus on postsecondary mental health. A growing body of evidence draws explicit links between student mental health and their likelihood of entering and persisting through higher education, highlighting a truth that mental health professionals and postsecondary leaders deeply understand in the years following the pandemic: mental health is a basic need critical to student persistence and academic success.

In response to this need, the Trellis Foundation launched the two-year Postsecondary Mental Health and Wellbeing Learning Community to support student mental health and academic success.

In this first brief in a three-part series, we will provide an introduction to the community, as well as a summary of learnings to date around service capacity constraints that campuses and regions are navigating in order to serve their students. These sections include:

- The Persistent Mental Health Personnel Shortage
- Recommendations for Hiring During a Mental Health Provider Shortage
- Recommendations for Building Multifaceted Mental Health Systems

It is important to note that many of the solutions outlined in this brief are, at their core, short-term solutions for a larger systemic issue. This brief is restricted in scope to what counseling and student services staff can do to continue providing as many high quality and accessible services as possible amid a persistent personnel shortage. Policy makers, licensing boards, and higher education leadership teams must continue to explore systemic changes that tackle the core issue, such as funding and financial incentives, or institution-wide approaches such as integrating behavioral health models into postsecondary healthcare systems.

Introducing the Trellis Foundation Postsecondary Mental Health and Wellbeing Learning Community

In 2022, ten four- and two-year institutions of higher education across Texas were selected to join this first-of-its-kind statewide learning community. Each member institution received grant funding to implement unique programs supporting student mental health. ([Learn more about the members and their projects here.](#))

Over the two-year period, each institution will receive implementation support from The Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute ([Meadows Institute](#)) and individualized technical assistance from national partners at [Active Minds](#), [The Jed Foundation](#), and [The Steve Fund](#). Members will also participate in a learning community facilitated by The Meadows Institute, where they will have access to curated learning and connection opportunities to break down the siloes persistent in postsecondary education so that institutions can problem-solve as a community.

The Trellis Foundation's investment created a groundbreaking learning lab where members implement, solve problems, and receive expert support in real time. Through all this, The Trellis Foundation and Meadows Institute have been tracking common obstacles and emerging solutions to share takeaways with the field in a series of learning briefs over the grant period.

This first learning brief will center on a key critical challenge that has deeply affected everyone in the mental health field—a persistent nationwide provider shortage that is making it difficult to hire enough staff to meet increasing mental health needs. Below, we outline the personnel issue and highlight learning community members' methods for navigating it.

The Persistent Mental Health Personnel Shortage

Texas is grappling with recruitment and retention challenges presented by a persistent nationwide mental health personnel shortage.

In early 2023, 98% of Texas' 254 counties were wholly or partially designated as mental health professional shortage areas by the federal government, defined as more than 30,000 residents per clinician.¹ An aging workforce and retirement drain were already a cause of

concern before the pandemic, with more than 60% of practicing psychiatrists over the age of 55, and COVID-19 exacerbated existing issues by spiking both public demand for mental health services and provider burnout.²

In recognition of this growing public health need, policymakers are investing energy and resources into rehauling systems to attract new and former providers to the field to grow the provider pipeline. Still, change takes time, as does training and licensing new personnel. The mental health personnel shortage will be a persistent challenge for the foreseeable future, and it is imperative that postsecondary mental health programming accounts for the challenges this shortage will continue to present.

Recommendations for Hiring During a Mental Health Provider Shortage

Colleges and universities compete with hospital systems, private practices, a growing telehealth industry, other higher education institutions, and more to recruit and retain qualified staff. In short, everyone is looking for counselors. The hard truth is that the compensation packages that postsecondary institutions can provide often do not compete with salaries offered by large hospital systems or private practice.

What should institutions consider when hiring during the provider shortage?

- First and foremost, revisit compensation packages to make them as attractive as possible. Salary is not the only consideration; packages can include benefits, paid time off, and more.
- Consider various provider types (LPC, LMFT, LCSW, etc.) when hiring and how to maximize providers acting at the top of their license. Having a system that can accommodate a variety of licensed professionals provides flexibility during the hiring process.
 - Many supports that offer significant value to the student body do not require licensing, such as referrals, outreach, education, and curriculum-based/skill-building groups around coping with stress and anxiety. Training unlicensed staff to provide these can significantly expand access to these services.
- Contribute to the provider training pipeline while expanding service availability by serving as an internship site.

¹ <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/02/21/texas-mental-health-workforce-shortage/>

² <https://www.aamc.org/news/growing-psychiatrist-shortage-enormous-demand-mental-health-services>

- Some members of the Trellis Foundation Postsecondary Mental Health and Wellbeing Learning Community, such as **University of Houston-Downtown** and **Amarillo College**, have developed partnerships with other universities to serve as internship sites for mental health care practitioners.
- This can be a great way to build the knowledge of future providers under a seasoned mentor while expanding access to care at the internship site and creating a new opportunity to recruit qualified staff after the internships end.
- When considering this plan, remember that there are specific license and training requirements for internship supervisors specific to the license each intern is seeking (LPC-S, LMFT-S, LCSW-S, etc.).
- Remember that patient-facing care can be emotionally taxing. Designing positions that allow for responsibilities beyond clinical care can help reduce the risk of burnout.
 - Providers at **Victoria College** voiced that what drew them to work in higher education over purely clinical care was the ability to balance therapy provision with compelling work that flexes their skill sets in other areas, such as student outreach and program implementation. Opportunities to innovate in a supportive team environment can help draw professionals to postsecondary work.
- Many mental health providers report feeling pressured by administrative burdens, such as paperwork and supervisory responsibilities.
 - Consider assessing the workload of your mental health providers and determining what administrative duties can be eliminated or supported by non-clinical staff. This can free up time in the provider's schedule for responsibilities that leverage their expertise.

Recommendations for Building Multifaceted Mental Health Systems

Recruitment is only as strong as retention. Mental health needs and the demand for services have steadily risen in postsecondary settings over the past few years. Even in best-case scenarios where campuses can hire easily, the sheer demand for services would continue to pressure counseling center staff.

To avoid provider burnout, it is imperative to build

postsecondary mental health systems emphasizing prevention, early intervention, and tiered supports to reach students before they experience a crisis requiring a licensed professional's intervention. These comprehensive systems help create space in counselor schedules to provide individualized services to students who may need them the most.

How can higher education institutions build multifaceted mental health systems that do not hinge solely on provider capacity?

- Consider supplementing campus-based services by contracting with external teletherapy service providers.
 - Whether or not teletherapy is suitable for your campus depends on various factors, such as budget and institutional policy. Still, it can be a helpful way to increase access to care for students who may not need or may not be able to access face-to-face counseling during business hours.
 - The team from **Amarillo College** and the Panhandle Partnership discussed how their in-person services are not in competition with telehealth services; the two service types work together to meet consistently high demand. *"There is always need. We are not going to counsel ourselves out of a job,"* they said.
- Universal supports, including prevention and early intervention, can reach students before their mental health needs reach crisis points that require professional intervention. Universal supports can take a variety of forms. Student-centered supports that foster senses of wellness and sense of belonging, including those that support high-quality interactions on campus, have emerged as key levers in student success and persistence.
 - **Sam Houston State University** incorporates mental health awareness and supports into its first-year orientation, opening the conversation early in students' postsecondary careers. These early mental health promotion activities can help improve students' awareness of available supports and promote help-seeking by reducing stigma and improving belonging.
 - In addition to student events, **Angelo State University** has invested heavily in promoting inclusive mental health events that are well attended by the campus and broader communities. These public events have positively impacted stigma reduction and wider

support for mental health in the communities where students live and work.

- **University of Houston Downtown** works closely with student groups and leadership to incorporate student voice into mental health programming and outreach. Through this work, they have identified the need to further increase the sense of campus belonging among remote students. Through a centralized resource and student event page, along with in-person and virtual engagement fairs, the university has established connection points with all the students the serve.
- **San Jacinto College District** has launched “pop-up counseling,” where students can connect with counseling providers in a low-pressure setting outside of the counseling center, providing accessible on-ramps to mental health programming.
- Universal supports can take various forms and can go a long way toward engaging students who may not otherwise seek services or would not seek services until reaching a crisis point.
- Spread responsibility for supporting campus well-being across departments to develop a sustainable, embedded culture of support that promotes student mental health, early identification, and intervention.
 - **The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley** has seen great success in developing a multifaceted postsecondary mental health system with a reach beyond the direct services provided in the counseling center. They have trained faculty and staff on making appropriate referrals, developed a peer-to-peer support network, and strengthened communications between the student advisor alert system, which proactively issues early alerts when students are experiencing issues that may affect academic success, and the behavioral health intervention team.
 - **Alamo Colleges** developed an advocacy center and

basic needs hub that coordinated mental health and wraparound supports across the district’s multiple campuses. Case managers act as the hinge that helps connect students to services. Through warm hand-offs and care coordination across campuses, Alamo Colleges has created a unique support system that serves the whole student.

- Establish community partnerships for services and supports that are not feasible on campus.
 - **Paul Quinn College** has established a robust partnership with **UT-Southwestern**, which provides critical psychiatry services to students who may not otherwise be able to access them.
 - **Austin Community College** has developed partnerships with low- and no-cost local providers, including community partners who address basic needs. The college uses a tailored intake form to connect students with these services.
 - Determining which community partnerships to pursue depends largely on the needs of the student body and the services available in the community. Establishing and maintaining these partnerships present unique challenges that will be discussed in detail in the next brief.

The mental health personnel shortage presents significant and persistent problems that will continue to challenge higher education institutions attempting to hire new campus providers. The Trellis Foundation Postsecondary Mental Health and Wellbeing Learning Community members have navigated these challenges by revisiting hiring practices and investing resources in developing multifaceted mental health systems that do not hinge solely on provider capacity.

In the next brief, we will dive deeper into the opportunities that community partnerships provide for expanding services and supports and the challenges inherent in identifying, establishing, and maintaining these partnerships.

For questions about the Trellis Foundation Postsecondary Mental Health and Wellbeing Learning Community, contact **Jenny Achilles** at the Trellis Foundation (Jenny.Achilles@trellisfoundation.org) and **Leilani Lamb** at the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute (llamb@mmhpi.org).

Funder and Learning Community Convener: Learning Community Facilitator and Lead Technical Assistance Provider:

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