



BRIEF 3 OF 3

Key Learnings from the Postsecondary Mental Health and Wellbeing Learning Community

In 2022, five community colleges and five universities across Texas were selected to join the groundbreaking **Trellis Foundation Postsecondary Mental Health and Wellbeing Learning Community**. Each member received grant funding from Trellis Foundation to implement mental health and wellbeing supports that were unique to their institutions. Over the two-year period, each institution engaged in a learning community facilitated by the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute (Meadows Institute), where they broke down the siloes persistent in postsecondary education and collectively tackled barriers to implementing mental health services and supports. As challenges and opportunities emerged, they worked closely with technical assistance providers from the Meadows Institute, Active Minds, The Jed Foundation, and The Steve Fund to further develop efforts to improve mental health and wellbeing on campus.

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:

National Experts and Learning Community Technical Assistance Providers:



The Trellis Foundation's investment created a groundbreaking learning lab where members implemented new programs, collaborated with peers, and received expert support in real time. Each unique project generated challenges and opportunities, which led to the development of key strategies for improving postsecondary mental health. Through all of this, Trellis Foundation and the Meadows Institute have tracked learnings and highlights from each institution's participation.

In the final brief in this three-part series, we examine takeaways from each institution that can inform the wider field. Each learning is accompanied by a snapshot of the learning in action, demonstrating how the institutions leveraged these strategies to support postsecondary mental health and wellbeing in their own unique settings.

Key Learnings from the Trellis Foundation Postsecondary Mental Health and Wellbeing Learning Community

Alamo Colleges: A strong foundation of institutional commitment—including active contributions from leadership at all levels and investments of time, personnel, and resources—is critical to the success of postsecondary mental health systems.

Amarillo College: Sharing resources across institutions of higher education in a region is a successful strategy for leveraging existing mental health services and personnel to expand access to care.

Angelo State University: Administering a needs assessment that comprises validated mental health and wellbeing measurement tools and utilizing data gathered to tailor services helps institutions meet the needs of their unique students, while shaping conversations around mental health and wellbeing on campus.

Austin Community College: Fostering close, structured partnerships with community providers with strong intake practices, co-located services when possible, and strong referral pathways are successful strategies for connecting students to care.

Paul Quinn College: Providing universal or widespread access to mental health and wellbeing screenings helps to normalize help-seeking behaviors and the utilization of mental health and wellness services.

Sam Houston State University: A robust orientation for first year students increases a sense of belonging and wellbeing, while providing an opportunity to generate awareness of an institution's mental health services and supports among incoming students.

San Jacinto College District: Creating innovative, engaging, and accessible on-ramps to mental health supports through outreach events and informal counseling services helps to foster student engagement with programming that supports their mental health and wellbeing.

University of Houston Downtown: Developing mental health champions across campus and creating a culture where students and staff are partners in innovation engages the broader community in actively supporting campuswide mental health and wellbeing.

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley: An effective strategy for destigmatizing mental health and quickly connecting students to supports is creating a growing "front line" of students, faculty, and staff across campus who are equipped to talk about mental health and effectively share information on resources available.

Victoria College: Understanding the needs of an institution's unique student body and developing flexible, adaptable mental health services helps to bolster student engagement with these supports.

The remainder of this brief provides a snapshot of each institution, their unique project, key learnings, and a study of this learning in action to inform the wider postsecondary mental health field.

Alamo Colleges - Creating Communities That THRIVE

Project Overview

To develop a nuanced understanding of student mental health needs across its five colleges, Alamo Colleges District launched extensive surveys and focus groups early in the Trellis Foundation grant project period. This comprehensive assessment laid a foundation for building a multi-faceted approach that includes peer support; in-depth training on wellness practices for faculty, staff, and students; and mental health and wellness messaging to address and support diverse student needs. With compelling evidence of need and impact, additional funders and institutional leadership provided resources to expand the availability of professional support.

Key Learning

A strong institutional commitment—including active contributions from leadership at all levels and investments of time, personnel, and resources—is critical and foundational to the success of postsecondary mental health systems.

Learning in Action

Located in the Greater San Antonio area, the Alamo Colleges District is a network of minority serving community colleges with an enrollment of over 70,000, including campuses that are federally recognized as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic-Serving Institutions. AlamoTHRIVE is a groundbreaking partnership of the five independently-managed colleges, facilitated by strong leadership at the district level.

A high degree of institutional commitment has been foundational to the success of this initiative, which involved robust information-gathering and analysis so that the district could better understand how mental health needs differed across campuses and student subgroups. The AlamoTHRIVE committee is coordinated by a district leader, and each college designates a representative to collaborate and innovate to better serve the student bodies. To ensure better representation of students and broader institutional commitment, the committee pulled in colleagues representing special populations, such as students with disabilities, Veterans, and parenting students.

Through AlamoTHRIVE, the colleges have been able to significantly expand their support offerings, innovate, and implement comprehensive wraparound services that meet the needs of each college's unique students with buy-in from the entire campus community. Outcomes data have demonstrated the positive returns that these colleges have experienced from investing in student mental health and wellbeing, leading to further investment of resources for sustainable programming.

Given the breadth and scope of this program, it is difficult to properly and concisely convey the entirety of what AlamoTHRIVE has been able to achieve thus far, but it all boils down to one core takeaway: with robust institutional commitment and strong leadership fostering collaboration, anything is possible.

Alamo Colleges - Creating Communities That THRIVE

Additional Project Highlights

- The district conducted the Healthy Minds Survey at each of the five Alamo Colleges and shared the data with Student Success senior leadership. Data rich reports from this study were used to provide trainings and presentations to faculty and staff on the mental health needs of students at each of the Alamo Colleges.
- Trellis Foundation partnered with The Jed Foundation (JED), Active Minds, and The Steve Fund to support learning community member institutions with their projects. Through this, Alamo Colleges drafted strategic plans for each of the five colleges, co-created with the guidance of the JED Campus Advisor. College data were compared to national averages and presented to Alamo Colleges senior leadership to guide decision-making; takeaways were featured in several presentations for the wider postsecondary field.
- Taking a proactive approach to reducing mental health stigma across the colleges, AlamoTHRIVE introduced innovative programs such as Active Minds peer support clubs, launched classroom presentations in a Let's Talk About Mental Health series, and provided animal therapy and sensory spaces for anxiety reduction. These efforts significantly enhanced the mental health support infrastructure and mental health literacy among the college community.
- AlamoTHRIVE also offered mental health faculty and staff trainings at each of the five Alamo Colleges, with over 554 faculty and staff in attendance. Topics included resources available on campus, how to have difficult conversations related to mental health, and, for many, ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training).
- With impact demonstrated by a 25% increase in students receiving mental health support and an 82% increase in counseling sessions, the initiative has also secured increased institutional and philanthropic funding, which has enabled it to add five new case managers, two counselors, counseling telehealth services, and two psychiatric mental health nurse practitioners. The impact and growth of the program underscore the institution's commitment to student wellbeing.

Amarillo College - Expanding Access to Care Through Collaboration

Project Overview

With support from Trellis Foundation, Amarillo College launched the Panhandle Partnership, which established a collaborative and comprehensive mental health service delivery system for four rural higher education institutions in the Texas Panhandle region: Amarillo College, West Texas A&M University, Clarendon College, and Frank Phillips Community College. The [Panhandle Partnerships Wellness Clinic](#) was also launched through this collaborative; it provides free mental health services to students from all four institutions.

Key Learning

Sharing resources across institutions of higher education in a region is a successful strategy for leveraging existing mental health services and personnel to expand access to care.

Learning in Action

Amarillo College is a two-year, Minority Serving Institution with an enrollment of ~10,000 credited students, primarily first-generation college students. The college leads the groundbreaking Panhandle Partnership, a collaboration between four institutions of higher education serving students across the expansive Panhandle region.

The Panhandle Partnerships Wellness Clinic, originally centrally located, transformed through this grant into a mobile resource that offers vital services at multiple accessible locations, including Amarillo, Canyon, and Hereford. This mobile clinic is a cornerstone of the partnership, extending free mental health support to students from all member institutions.

Each mobile clinic location is equipped to provide both in-person counseling sessions and telemedicine appointments, ensuring access to mental health services for students regardless of their proximity. The clinic is led by the Project Director of the Panhandle Partnership, a grant-funded position housed within Amarillo College. Under the guidance of licensed supervisors, graduate interns and practicum students deliver essential services at each clinic site, contributing to the regional expansion of mental health care capacity.

Through this partnership and collaboration between member institutions, campuses have scheduled days on site for in-person counseling and learning assessments at campuses throughout the Panhandle. This offering ensures that students have access to comprehensive mental health support.

Amarillo College - Expanding Access to Care Through Collaboration

Additionally, the partnership continues to prioritize training opportunities, with a focus on cultivating the skills and engagement of local mental health and wellbeing professionals to enhance services. By nurturing local talent and community collaboration, the clinic aims to bolster the number of mental health providers available to the Panhandle. This includes the establishment of identity-based support groups, skill-based workshops, and other initiatives aimed at addressing the diverse needs of the community. Through these efforts, the partnership remains committed to promoting mental wellness and resilience across the region.

The Panhandle Partnership is an innovative model that holds substantial promise for the field. Collaborating across institutions, with strong leadership and coordination, is emerging as one of the most effective ways to leverage existing resources to expand access to services across a region. The regional focus of these partnerships has a dual benefit of increasing community engagement and culturally responsive care.

Additional Project Highlights

- *Mentorship program.* The Panhandle Partnership has embarked on a new initiative to establish a mentor program at Amarillo College, recognizing the invaluable role mentors play in supporting students' academic and personal development. The partnership aims to connect students with dedicated mentors who can offer guidance, encouragement, and practical advice as students navigate their educational journey. To ensure effectiveness and quality, and equip mentors with necessary skills and tools, the partnership has collaborated with outside educators and experts in mentorship training who bring a wealth of experience and knowledge in mentorship best practices, pedagogy, and counseling techniques. Mentors also receive instruction on cultural competency, trauma-informed practices, and ethical guidelines to engage with students from diverse backgrounds.
- *Community resource mapping.* The Panhandle Partnership has forged collaborative relationships with local mental health nonprofits to address the broader mental wellness needs of the community. Together, these entities are working on mapping to identify existing mental health services, support groups, and other resources available to residents in the area. The result will be a comprehensive database of mental health resources that makes it easier for individuals to access the support they need. Through these collaborative efforts the partnership aims to create a supportive ecosystem where students can thrive academically, emotionally, and personally.

Angelo State University - Removing the Stigma Against Help Seeking

Project Overview

With support from Trellis Foundation, Angelo State University (ASU) worked to promote the use of mental health resources and wellness strategies by taking a data-driven approach to destigmatizing service utilization, debunking myths around mental health, and highlighting the humanity and bravery of help-seeking behaviors.

Key Learning

Administering a needs assessment with validated mental health and wellbeing measurement tools and utilizing the data gathered to tailor services helps institutions meet the needs of their unique student population, while shaping conversations around mental health and wellbeing on campus.

Learning in Action

Angelo State University is a four-year public university and certified Hispanic-Serving Institution based in San Angelo with a student population of nearly 11,000. The institution is focused on serving rural and underrepresented students in the West Texas region.

Through this project, ASU conducted a robust needs assessment using a variety of validated tools to assess mental health concerns, loneliness, substance use, belonging, myths around mental health, values, and other issues affecting student wellness. The data provided a snapshot of the unique needs of ASU students, which has allowed the university to tailor its services and supports to fit those needs. As generations and contexts change over time, ongoing needs assessments like these can help institutions determine whether current offerings are meeting students where they are with the most appropriate supports.

ASU's process included purchasing assessment materials, then recruiting, hiring, and training graduate research assistants and student workers to administer the assessments. To complement assessment data, ASU drew upon data gathered in Counseling Services, RamPantry, and at institutional events. For example, Counseling Services provided satisfaction surveys at intake, after three sessions, and after six sessions. Findings from these surveys have been used in continuous improvement for ASU to better tailor services based on student feedback and identified needs.

Over the 2023–2024 academic year, ASU also leveraged feedback from the campus needs assessments to hold numerous events aimed at reducing stigma around mental health needs and care. These community Mental Health Panel Discussions and Night Out events were either open to the entire university community or tailored to specific affinity groups. The events reached hundreds of students who learned common signs and symptoms of the top five physical and mental health concerns ASU students reported in the campus needs assessment. Institution leaders also engaged the larger San Angelo community in mental health discussions, gaining regional traction and widespread support for their efforts with major turnout from the campus and local communities at awareness events.

Angelo State University - Removing the Stigma Against Help Seeking

Additional Project Highlights

- ASU's Mental Health Panel Discussions are beneficial, effective, and relevant to the issues students face—and an opportunity to reach, educate, and engage the greater community.
- Collaborations across the university are essential in efforts to improve student mental health and wellbeing.
- Partnerships with the local and campus community, such as ASU's Stress-Less Events, are valuable, effective, and increase the visibility of counseling services as well as the likelihood that students will use these services in the future.

Austin Community College - Promoting Wellbeing Through Partnership

Project Overview

With support from Trellis Foundation, Austin Community College (ACC) partnered with community organizations to promote existing counseling services, provide holistic health care resources, and connect underserved students to mental health evaluations to support access to continuous care and the wellness tools students need to complete their degree program.

Key Learning

Fostering close, structured partnerships with community providers with strong intake practices, co-located services when possible, and strong referral pathways are successful strategies for connecting students to care.

Learning in Action

Austin Community College is a Hispanic-Serving Institution with a network of 11 campuses and more than 86,000 learners in the Central Texas region. While the college has been able to provide free, brief counseling services to enrolled students since Fall 2018, the counseling unit quickly realized that more services were needed for students facing mental health and other basic needs challenges. Through the current project, ACC partnered with Foundation Communities to help students enroll in health care coverage for long-term mental health and medication support, while also promoting other supportive programming such as Foundation Communities' College Hub and its tax preparation services. Additionally, ACC partnered with regional providers who offer low-cost psychological testing and evaluations, as well as with other community organizations that offer critically needed wraparound supports.

To connect students with these community partners and other services not provided by the college, the ACC counseling team conducts a thorough student intake process to match students with appropriate internal and external resources. In addition, ACC faculty, administrators, academic guidance team members (advisors, coaches, student advocates), and staff have been made aware of these partnerships and work closely with the counseling unit and community partners to provide warm hand-offs when a student signals that they would benefit from services.

Through all of these efforts, ACC student advocacy and counseling leadership coordinate and analyze internal and external resources to understand where gaps and overlaps may exist. This allows the college to maximize resources without duplicating efforts, improving overall sustainability and a better student experience.

Austin Community College - Promoting Wellbeing Through Partnership

Additional Project Highlights

- Of students who accessed counseling services at ACC (intake plus one or more sessions) in the 2022-2023 academic year, 87.6% persisted through their studies.
- From July 2022 to July 2023, 81 students ages 19-67 were connected with Foundation Communities to receive health insurance enrollment support, with exponential increases semester after semester as the project continued.
- ACC launched an Active Minds chapter, a student-led group supporting mental health outreach and awareness efforts. The planning and launch was spearheaded by a group of students passionate about peer programming.

Paul Quinn College - Supporting Mental Health from the Start

Project Overview

With support from Trellis Foundation, Paul Quinn College (PQC) worked to improve student outcomes by normalizing help-seeking behaviors and the use of mental health and wellness services. Through this project, PQC implemented whole student care by providing an initial mental health assessment for all on-campus students, followed by the option to be connected to appropriate services either on campus or through a partnership with The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, which provides psychiatry services. In addition, PQC also provided wraparound support resources to address student basic needs, including housing, meals, and transportation.

Key Learning

Providing universal or widespread access to mental health and wellbeing screenings helps to normalize help-seeking behaviors and the utilization of mental health and wellness services.

Learning in Action

Located in Dallas, Paul Quinn College has a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) designation and is the nation's first federally approved Urban Work College. Founded in 1872, PQC has a diverse enrollment of over 500 students and prides itself on serving Pell Grant recipients to eradicate generational poverty.

PQC launched universal mental health and wellbeing screenings for students during Summer Bridge, a program designed to prepare new students for the rigors of postsecondary education. The universal screenings aimed to assess students' needs and offer students an opportunity to be connected to services as appropriate. The screening also provided baseline data and information about student mental health and wellbeing, which allowed PQC to understand the efficacy of its programming as students are reassessed annually.

Offering mental health assessments to all students as part of routine enrollment activities has helped to normalize help-seeking behavior and the utilization of mental health services. Throughout the academic year, PQC maintained efforts to destigmatize mental health needs through creative, engaging events and messaging. Counseling staff supported students outside of traditional mental health counseling by taking them on community outings, including attending the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and basketball games. Staff utilized these outings as opportunities to build rapport and begin conversations around mental wellbeing by including educational components such as stress management among athletes. These complemented wider health marketing efforts, such as signage around campus, including in gyms and other common spaces, on the link between mental health and physical health.

PQC has created a culture on campus that promotes help-seeking behaviors, opens up conversations among students on how to support mental health, and—critically—drives home the message: “Mental health is health.”

Paul Quinn College - Supporting Mental Health from the Start

Additional Project Highlights

- PQC incorporated art, such as creating mandalas, into weekly, well-attended stress management workshops.
- Inviting professionals in the field to share their journeys and perspectives on mental health during student wellness field trips to community events supported education and opened dialogue among students about mental health.
- To foster a campuswide culture of care, many PQC faculty and staff members completed Mental Health First Aid trainings.

Sam Houston State University - Kicking Off With a Sense of Belonging

Project Overview

With support from Trellis Foundation, Sam Houston State University (SHSU) launched the Bearkat Kickoff, a series of orientation events intended to increase wellbeing and belonging on campus, in addition to providing comprehensive academic preparation. SHSU leveraged the existing freshman orientation model and has used it as an opportunity to strategically raise awareness about mental health and wellbeing, while ensuring students know about the services offered by the university through programming led by staff and peers.

Key Learning

A robust orientation for first-year students increases their sense of belonging and wellbeing, while providing an opportunity to generate greater awareness of an institution's mental health services and supports.

Learning in Action

Located in Huntsville, Sam Houston State University is a certified Hispanic-Serving Institution with an enrollment of approximately 22,000 students in the Southeast Texas region. With a large and growing student body, SHSU leadership recognized the need to build a strong connection with students early on and used orientation activities to promote postsecondary belonging, wellbeing, and success.

With support from Trellis Foundation, SHSU hosted the first-ever Bearkat Kickoff in 2023, a week-long onboarding program for first-time freshman focused on bolstering academic preparation, health, and wellness. The program aims to promote a strong sense of belonging and wellbeing for new students while also focusing on the proactive academic supports available that empower students to take ownership of their academic careers from the beginning of their tenure at the institution. The success of the Bearkat Kickoff hinged on robust cross-departmental collaboration and recognition from leaders across the university that mental health and wellbeing are critical to student success. SHSU understood that student voice is critical in designing programming that serves students and was thoughtful in incorporating student leaders into the planning and execution of the week of events. Forty peer educators received training on leadership and connectedness prior to serving as leaders during orientation and throughout the welcome week.

Educating students about the mental health and wellbeing supports on campus is a key part of the orientation programming and SHSU's larger efforts to help students feel both connected to and supported by the university. To gauge the effectiveness of the Bearkat Kickoff model, the university is formally assessing its outcomes related to students' sense of belonging and utilization of different services supportive of their mental health and academic success. Early data show an increase in freshmen seeking counseling services, with freshmen making up over one-third of all clients utilizing services. This new, innovative orientation model shows promise for being effective in boosting student success over time.

Sam Houston State University - Kicking Off With a Sense of Belonging

Additional Project Highlights

- About 3,200 freshmen attended approximately 479 sessions during the inaugural Bearkat Kickoff.
- The implementation of this program led to new initiatives designed to address equity for SHSU's underserved student populations in three key ways:
 - Enhanced mental health support for underserved students, such as a workshop series for faculty on the intersection of mental health and learning loss, as well as a new research study on barriers to support service utilization by underserved students.
 - Mental health stigma reduction, such as a PSA series on mental health that is played during athletic games and in the student union, as well as the creation of a new student support hub website to improve ease of referrals.
 - Mental health awareness among underserved students, such as the creation of mental health awareness weeks for targeted student groups including, but not limited to, first generation college students, Veterans, Hispanic students, African American students, men, students with low income, and others.

San Jacinto College - Engaging On-Ramps to Care

Project Overview

With support from Trellis Foundation, San Jacinto College worked to eliminate barriers and increase mental health services and supports for students while promoting broader mental health awareness. The college accomplished this by evaluating existing services and using that information to reorient outreach and engagement strategies, reassess community partnerships to better serve students, and address obstacles to receiving care.

Key Learning

Creating innovative, engaging, and accessible on-ramps to mental health supports through outreach events and informal counseling services can foster student engagement with programming that supports their mental health and wellbeing.

Learning in Action

San Jacinto College is a Hispanic-Serving Institution with over 31,000 online, in-person, and dual credit students with campuses across Houston and eastern Harris County. Serving so many students with hybrid enrollment poses challenges for mental health awareness and outreach efforts, so the college took unique approaches to reaching students who may be juggling many competing priorities.

First, San Jacinto College counseling staff partnered with other departments to reach students where they are. Partnerships with STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) faculty, staff, and admissions were particularly effective in reaching students who historically had not engaged with mental health and wellbeing services. These partnerships included (1) comprehensive training with information on how to make referrals, which led to a significant increase in referrals by faculty, and (2) classroom visits on topics related to mental health, wellbeing, and service availability. Across campus, the college coordinated Mental Health First Aid and QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) Suicide Prevention Training to equip staff with the tools they need to understand mental health needs and connect students with care.

Second, San Jacinto College hosted engaging and low-pressure outreach and support events, such as pop-up counseling across campus where students could have coffee with a counselor and discuss top-of-mind issues without a formal appointment. These casual on-ramps into services have been hugely successful and led students who could benefit to continue with more traditional mental health care. Other successful events that garnered student attention have included goat yoga, a suicide awareness event with a hands-on activity to create calm-down jars, and more.

Once students are interested in formal services, San Jacinto College makes it easy for them to engage through a user-friendly online scheduling portal, online assessments, and counselors who offer virtual appointments. The San Jacinto College team continues to innovate and has leadership who prioritize innovation and continuous quality improvement in these efforts.

San Jacinto College - Engaging On-Ramps to Care

Additional Project Highlights

- Collaboration with other departments, including faculty, has been instrumental in increasing awareness of student mental health. Going forward, San Jacinto College plans to further these collaborations by engaging registered student organizations in mental health promotion efforts.
- A focus on small, but meaningful, initiatives implemented across campuses college-wide is an effective strategy for improving student engagement with mental health and wellbeing services and supports.
- Trellis Foundation partnered with The Jed Foundation, Active Minds, and The Steve Fund to support learning community member institutions with their projects. San Jacinto College's partnership with The Jed Foundation and the results from the Healthy Minds Survey have been an important part of helping the college better understand student needs so the district can tailor services to match.
- San Jacinto College has taken a college-wide approach spanning all campuses to ensure students, including those learning virtually, can engage in all aspects of programming, training, and awareness events. The college recognizes that attendance has changed over the past few years with more students taking online classes and wants to ensure the district is meeting the needs of those students as well. Efforts include a greater focus on social media, online mental health screenings, and hosting virtual events or recording on-campus events to post virtually.

University of Houston-Downtown - Champions for Wellness

Project Overview

With support from Trellis Foundation, the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) aimed to expand access to on-campus services and leverage community partnerships to improve student mental health. The university implemented faculty and staff training to create champions across campus to further these efforts. Key components of the project included collaborating with the University of St. Thomas to host graduate interns at UHD for mental health care provision, training the UHD community to identify signs of mental health concerns, and partnering with community organizations to offer wraparound services.

Key Learning

Developing mental health champions across campus and creating a culture where students and staff are partners in innovation engages the broader community in actively supporting campuswide mental health and wellbeing efforts.

Learning in Action

The University of Houston-Downtown is a four-year university in the heart of Houston. Its students reflect the diversity of the Greater Houston Area and it is a federally designated Minority Serving Institution. The campus has more than 15,000 degree-seeking students.

This project developed champions across campus through thoughtful and strategic partnerships to create a campus-wide investment in prioritizing mental health and wellbeing. In Fall 2023 alone, over 150 faculty and staff were trained in Mental Health First Aid, a skills-based training course that teaches participants about mental health and substance use, including risk factors and warning signs for mental health and substance use concerns, strategies for how to help someone in both crisis and non-crisis situations, and where to turn for additional assistance. Due to these efforts, the campus has increased its number of certified trainers available to provide this training for academic colleges and across the larger university. In turn, UHD has experienced an increase in individuals reporting when students need support and has created a community better prepared to connect students to available services.

UHD opened its first Wellness and Success Center in January 2023, a hub for expansive supports that promote mental health and wellbeing. The Center, which sits in the heart of campus, was created to redefine the student experience at UHD by enhancing fitness, recreation, and learning about health and wellbeing while providing students with new venues for studying, socialization, and community-building. Professional counselors are present within the space to ensure accessibility and provide immediate services to students in crisis. The Center has also engaged the RN to BSN nursing program to host classes and involve students in education around sleep and its correlation with mental health.

University of Houston-Downtown - Champions for Wellness

Project leads at UHD continue to leverage the unique strengths of students and staff to create a culture of caring on campus. Successful student engagement efforts include the uptake of Active Minds activities at the university, student-led events such as making friendship bracelets to promote wellbeing, and launching a virtual recovery community for students who want to support one another. In February 2023, the campus announced its official affiliation with the Association of Recovery in Higher Education, taking UHD behavioral health initiatives to new heights. This affiliation provides additional peer and institutional support for students who are actively in recovery from substance use disorders.

Overall, UHD has focused on access and education to create a broader impact on mental wellbeing. Developing mental health champions has been a critical factor in efforts to implement campuswide supports and establish a healthier campus environment.

Additional Project Highlights

- Implementation of Mental Health First Aid training for faculty and staff.
- Increased number of certified Mental Health First Aid trainers on campus.
- Expanded access to care through the placement of dedicated mental health counselors in the Wellness and Success Center.
- Development of strategic partnerships to increase campuswide investment in mental wellbeing.

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley - Creating Front Line Mental Health Support

Project Overview

With support from Trellis Foundation, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) Counseling Center launched the Front Line Mental Health Support Project. This project is built on the premise that a diverse group of trained individuals who have close contact with students at risk of mental health concerns, especially those from historically vulnerable communities or marginalized identities, can form the most effective “front line” in connecting those students to important supports and resources they may not otherwise access. The Front Line Mental Health Support Project includes recruiting and training peer advocates and counselors, implementing a culturally sensitive training model for faculty and staff, and further developing case management strategies.

Key Learning

An effective strategy for destigmatizing mental health needs and quickly connecting students to supports is to create a growing “front line” of students, faculty, and staff across campus who are equipped to talk about mental health and effectively share information on resources available.

Learning in Action

Established in 2015, UTRGV is a comprehensive academic institution of higher education and a medical school that lies along the southern border of Texas, just north of Mexico along the Rio Grande River. It is one of the largest Hispanic-Serving Institutions in the nation with enrollments of over 30,000 students. The Front Line Mental Health Support Project is an innovative approach to training that works to increase the number of people on campus who feel comfortable talking about mental health concerns as well as confident and prepared to connect others to additional support.

To make this project a success, UTRGV’s Counseling Center strategically partners with departments across campus and with student leaders to build a robust community of supportive experts. Counseling staff and other faculty/staff trainers provide workshops to student advisors, athletic department personnel, teaching and lab assistants, academic tutors, psychology students, and others. The main training modalities have been suicide prevention and Active Minds’ V-A-R (Validate-Appreciate-Refer) training (which is now Active Minds’ A.S.K. training). Training covers how to identify when someone may be experiencing a mental health need, what resources are available, and how to connect others to those resources. These newly trained members of the campus community play critical roles, each as a point person positioned to provide optimal student support across campus.

Student engagement is a key piece of building up the mental health “front line.” It has been recognized that students are often the first to recognize when other students are experiencing a mental health concern, and trained student peers can often be the most effective in intervening when a student needs support. This project leveraged the strength of UTRGV’s [Active Minds](#), a student-led group that initiates conversations and training to support student mental health. With funding from Trellis Foundation, student leaders attended the national Active Minds conference in Washington, D.C. in 2023. This experience invigorated them to create a stronger local Active Minds chapter equipped with fresh information and knowledge. In turn, UTRGV’s Active Minds membership increased and the group was prepared to contribute to the Front Line Mental Health Support Project’s mission by encouraging involvement, learning how to assist other students, and serving as Front Line trainers along with faculty and staff.

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley - Creating Front Line Mental Health Support

Additional Project Highlights

- The UTRGV project team sent out a baseline survey to faculty, staff, and students in Summer 2023 asking about perceived student needs for mental health support and basic needs resources, perceived barriers to accessing resources, and perceived importance of having a trained mental health front line. Over 700 responded, equally representing faculty, staff, and students. Survey data indicated three important findings: there is an overwhelming perception among faculty, staff, and students that many students need these support resources; many students struggle to connect to such resources; and having a trained front line consisting of faculty and staff would be important to help connect students to resources.
- Suicide prevention training and Active Minds' V-A-R (now A.S.K.) training have proven to be effective, popular, and efficient training models for the Front Line Project. In practice, this includes having groups participate in two separate two-hour workshops where participants learn and practice basic active listening skills, then utilize those later when learning and practicing how to intervene when someone may be in crisis.

Victoria College - Learning Through Launching

Project Overview

With support from Trellis Foundation, Victoria College (VC) established its first-ever comprehensive mental health counseling program for their historically underserved student population to support student persistence and academic success. VC launched the Counseling Center Without Walls program with a full-time therapist who supervises graduate student interns, developed a bank of community partners who provide referral pathways and specialty services, incorporated teletherapy options and flexible staff hours, and substantially expanded health promotion activities, campus awareness of mental health supports, and access to services.

Key Learning

Understanding the needs of an institution's unique student body and developing flexible, adaptable mental health support services helps to bolster student engagement with these supports.

Learning in Action

Victoria College is a public, two-year, open-admission, Hispanic-Serving community college located along the Texas coast. Through the course of this grant, VC took a thoughtful, data-driven approach to launch their comprehensive mental health and counseling program, using findings from the Hope Center [Student Basic Need Survey](#) to design service offerings.

Many students commute to college, work, or care for dependents, so VC staff were surprised when students expressed a preference for in-person counseling over teletherapy options. To address this preference and increase access to face-to-face counseling services, VC became one of the few practicum sites in the region and partnered with a neighboring graduate degree program in counseling to integrate counseling student interns. Through thoughtful planning, VC also managed to extend service hours and supplement face-to-face visits with teletherapy options offered through a telehealth platform available 24/7.

When launching a new program, there may be challenges in ensuring awareness and uptake among the target population, so VC was intentional about its outreach and communication to make students aware of the new services and supports. VC counseling staff have been very visible throughout the college community, such as in a mandatory orientation section for incoming students (including distance learning students), with staff training on program referrals, and at large-scale awareness events that incorporate regional partners. Through data collection and outreach events, counseling center staff identified unmet needs in their population—such as additional supports needed for students who are parents—and implemented new programming to meet these needs, demonstrating their adaptability and commitment to ongoing quality improvement.

Victoria College - Learning Through Launching

Additional Project Highlights

- With targeted awareness campaigns and the addition of graduate-level interns, the counseling center tripled the number of VC students served from Spring 2023 to Fall 2023.
- 77% of students who utilized counseling services indicated they would not have been able to obtain mental health support or intervention without these free services integrated within VC through this Trellis Foundation project.
- Data showed that the counseling center provided proportionally more services to special target populations at VC, demonstrating the effectiveness of efforts to reach students with increased risk for mental health concerns.