Supporting Postsecondary Mental Health and Wellbeing Through Partnership: Three Key Themes

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 institution received Trellis Foundation grant funding to implement mental health and wellbeing supports unique to the institution's needs and goals. Over the two-year period, the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute facilitated the learning community, engaging members in breaking down the siloes persistent in postsecondary education and collectively tackling barriers to implementing mental health services and supports. As challenges and opportunities emerged, members 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.

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Trellis Foundation's investment created a groundbreaking learning lab for members to implement new programs, solve problems, and receive expert support in real time. Through all of this, Trellis Foundation and the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute (Meadows Institute) have tracked common obstacles and emerging solutions to share takeaways with the field in a series of learning briefs.

The first learning brief explored how member institutions are navigating the persistent, nationwide provider shortage deeply affecting everyone in the mental health field. Institutions shared recommendations for building multifaceted mental health systems that leverage resources across campus.

In this second brief in the series, we build on those learnings by outlining how partnerships, both with community providers and within an institution, help colleges and universities provide accessible mental health services and supports.

Among the most successful strategies that learning community member institutions leveraged to strengthen partnerships, three key themes emerged:

- Community partnerships benefit from a strategic sharing of existing resources.

- Community partnerships thrive when there is structure and sufficient room for innovation.

- Partnerships between departments within institutions are often the key to success for both new and existing mental health supports.

Theme 1: Community partnerships benefit from a strategic sharing of existing resources.

Developing community partnerships is essential to meeting the mental health, wellbeing, and wraparound support needs of various student populations on a campus. These community partnerships can take many forms with varying levels of effort and investment, and all require negotiating the resources required from each partner. The longevity of partnerships often relies on leveraging existing resources strategically, taking care not to strain the capacity of any partner organization involved.

The following examples highlight innovative strategies that Trellis Foundation Learning Community members

have used to share resources, such as space and personnel, strategically.

Victoria College: It can be difficult for students to access off-campus resources, leading to high attrition rates for external referrals to care. Victoria College holds scheduled time and space on campus for community partners to provide services, making it easier for students to access critical care without venturing beyond the campus boundaries. This type of partnership is especially beneficial for students who have limited access to transportation, childcare needs, or work/family conflicts that could prevent them from traveling off campus for care.

Amarillo College & The Panhandle Partnership: The Panhandle region of Texas is expansive, slightly larger in size than the state of West Virginia. To serve students across the region, Amarillo College joins with other Panhandle institutions of higher education (West Texas A&M University, Frank Phillips College, and Clarendon College) in a unique, collaborative partnership that offers access to comprehensive care. Together, these institutions make up The Panhandle Partnership, which maintains a centrally located clinic that offers in-person and telehealth services to students enrolled at participating institutions. Amarillo College works closely with West Texas A&M, which provides graduate interns and practicum students for the clinic. This partnership helps to expand access to care while supporting the training of future mental health care providers.

Angelo State University: Drawing on the larger regional community can sometimes be a stronger strategy for leveraging resources than coordinating with a single partner. For example, Angelo State University's (ASU) Ram Pantry provides free, non-perishable food items and toiletries to students as needed through a collaboration of multiple local organizations that band together to consistently stock the pantry. This effort is coordinated by ASU staff, in a collaborative approach to resource sharing that improves sustainability by taking the pressure of meeting student demand off a single community provider.

Paul Quinn College partners with The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center (UTSW) to expand access to critically needed psychiatry services, using a co-located model similar to the one described earlier for Victoria College. Through this partnership, PQC refers students to

UTSW for psychiatric appointments and provides space for students to receive services on the PQC campus during agreed-upon dates and times.

Theme 2: Community partnerships thrive when there is structure and sufficient room for innovation.

Community partnerships can be formal, cemented by a contract or memorandum of understanding, or they can be informal in nature. All partnerships benefit from the structure provided by shared language, goals, and communication expectations.

While structure is imperative to a good partnership, the most successful partnerships leave space for innovation and flexibility as student needs and situational contexts shift over time. The following examples explore how Trellis Foundation Learning Community members developed partnerships with both structure and flexibility at once.

University of Houston-Downtown has a robust collection of community partnerships serving their students' mental health, wellbeing, and wraparound needs. These partnerships vary in formality, with the philosophy that no one size fits all and each collaboration should be unique to serve specific student needs. At the outset of every partnership, the university works with community providers to develop shared goals and expectations, a clear scope of work, and work processes that leverage the strengths of each organization. Defining a scope of work and workflow processes provides clear expectations that both partners can revisit as needs shift over time.

Austin Community College has a longstanding partnership with Foundation Communities, a nonprofit organization that provides housing and services for families and single adults in 28 communities across Austin. To facilitate this partnership, each organization designates representatives who perform critical roles in sustaining the work. Representatives are responsible for managing communication, jointly monitoring progress toward shared goals at defined intervals, and reassessing whether the services are continuing to meet student needs along the way. This thoughtful approach to roles, responsibilities, and accountability has helped the partnership grow substantially over time to be able to offer more services and supports.

Alamo Colleges has student advocacy centers with robust case management that drives the coordination of services supporting student mental health, wellbeing, and wraparound needs. These services are driven by community partnerships, which can be based on referrals, co-located on campus, or braided into the existing service delivery model at Alamo Colleges. The partnerships follow a structured model underpinned by a philosophy of innovation. Student advocacy center directors have characterized this philosophy as "always say yes," driving collaborators to enter conversations from a strengths-based perspective instead a needs-based outlook that is more focused on what is missing. By approaching partnerships with an open mind and a willingness to strategically leverage existing resources, Alamo Colleges has been able to innovate and grow partnerships that provide students with services for counseling, food security, assistance with health insurance and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) applications, and more, all accompanied by robust case management.

Theme 3: Partnerships between departments within institutions are often the key to success for both new and existing mental health supports.

While partnering with external providers is often a critical element of a successful postsecondary mental health strategy, the value of partnerships made within a campus community cannot be overstated. Collaborating and communicating across departments helps to minimize the risk of duplicating efforts while also improving awareness of services and streamlining access to care. Robust, cross-departmental partnerships help to generate comprehensive postsecondary mental health systems that reflect the commitments made at the institution-wide level.

The following examples explore how Trellis Foundation Learning Community members developed partnerships within their own institutions to improve mental health and wellbeing efforts campuswide.

Sam Houston State University launched the Bearkat Kickoff, a week-long onboarding program for incoming students focused on academic preparation, health, and wellness to promote a stronger sense of belonging and wellbeing. Given the campuswide nature of the orientation, cross-departmental collaboration was critical to its success. Core divisions across the university each

appointed a representative to the committee, which thoughtfully established workflows, roles as a team, and meaningful opportunities to incorporate student voice in planning. Fostering a culture of collaboration around the shared orientation goals was critical to the success of planning the week of onboarding programming and collectively determining which services to highlight. The committee used an internal assessment process to identify which programs and services make the greatest immediate impact on incoming students' academic preparedness, health, wellness, and sense of belonging.

San Jacinto College has had success in reaching its community of over 31,000 online, in-person, and dual-credit students from Houston and eastern Harris County thanks to a combination of innovation and collaboration. The college works closely with departments across campus on outreach efforts, including the launch of the Why Cancel Class? program. Rather than cancel a class, faculty members can reach out to student services to book a workshop or presentation for students on various topics, including mental health and wellness topics on decreasing stigma, practical skills for discussing mental health, and more.

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) launched the Front Line Mental Health Support Project, 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 care. This is a university-wide effort with a huge cross-departmental focus. UTRGV cemented these internal partnerships by being thoughtful about securing buy-in early. Project leads hosted focus groups with staff from various departments, then launched an assessment using input from these groups. All of this data gathering set the foundation for the "front line" at UTRGV today, a robust training and outreach program that leverages faculty, staff, and student voices to support campuswide mental health and wellbeing.

Partnerships—both within an institution and with entities in the wider community—help colleges and universities provide mental health, wellbeing, and wraparound supports critical to student success. This brief explored how Trellis Foundation Postsecondary Mental Health and Wellbeing Learning Community members leveraged partnerships strategically to build upon existing resources, increase awareness of services, and encourage innovation in program development as needs shifted over time. In the next brief, we dive deeper into each member's project supporting student mental health, wellbeing, and success with a reflection on ten key learnings from the field and a snapshot of each institution's work as it developed over time.

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