

Funding secured, a 10-college consortium will study coordinated response to mental health

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This story contains a discussion of mental health issues. If you or someone you know may be struggling with suicidal thoughts, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255 or Trevor Lifeline for LGBTQ Youth at 1-866-488-7386.

BOSTON - It's a program that has been working for colleges and universities in New York, and now Massachusetts lawmakers have agreed to fund a study to determine whether the project that consolidates mental health crisis response for students in one place will work as well in Massachusetts.

Growing issue on college campuses nationwide

“Behavioral health on college campuses is an issue nationwide, a growing concern among young people,” said Jeanine Belcastro Went, executive director of the Higher Education Consortium of Central Massachusetts, the organization that brought the issue to the attention of Massachusetts legislators. “I believe legislators heard the issue.”

Speakers at a May 2 meeting between the consortium and lawmakers pointed out that a whole generation of students have been attending school under pandemic restrictions. Only the current kindergarten class has been spared COVID-19 restrictions and allowed to attend class without masking, distancing or attending virtually.

Many, they pointed out, have missed out on social and emotional growth.

The HECCMA “Day on the Hill,” the first one celebrated in several years, featured two speakers who addressed the growing crisis among college students: Nick Covino, president of [William James College](#); and Nadia Ward, a professor of psychology at Clark and executive director of the college’s [Mosakowski Institute for Public Enterprise](#), an organization dedicated to the mental health of young people. The institute envisions a world where all adolescents and young adults are supported in developing the social and emotional skills they need to be successful in school and in life and is focused on mental health issues concerning young men of color.

Behavioral health plan a need, not a nicety

In his remarks, Covino said that two years of pandemic safeguards also put limitations on basic, necessary social interactions, which hurt students' ability to "grow."

"You can't learn what your identity is like unless you interact with people," Covino said, mentioning the inability to sit next to friends at lunch or not being able to see others' facial expressions. Covino said this generation of students is also marked by living through the stress and fear of a deadly virus, and possibly the grief of losing loved ones to COVID-19.

Once considered an "add-on" or "benefit" on campus, mental health services are now "an essential," said Covino. "If you have depression or you have anxiety, you can't study. It's hard to focus, it's hard to remember, it's hard to do analytic reasoning about stuff."

Read about a new space for students at [Worcester Polytechnic Institute](#) here.

Consortium members believe the answer is in the program initiated in New York by St. John’s University, Hofstra University and Adelphi University.

Students get lost in system not tailored to needs

“They were losing students,” Went said, explaining that students decompensating on weekends or late at night when health care and crisis centers were unstaffed would be transported to area hospitals and were “never heard from again. “There were no protocols for treating students in crisis.”

The colleges came together to create a program that would address students’ issues in one place. Now, 97 institutions use it for crisis care, Went said.

The HECCMA consortium, a group of 11 institutions of higher learning located in central Massachusetts wants to create a similar program for the state. The office would serve as a hub for the state’s more than 100 colleges and universities with standardized protocols for students in crisis.

And it is proposing to play host to the office that could be located at any one of the colleges or universities located in the area, but not limited to the 11 members: Anna Maria College, Assumption University, Clark University, College of Holly Cross, Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts, Nichols College, UMass Chan Medical School, Worcester State University, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Massachusetts College of Pharmacy & Health Concerns and Quinsigamond Community College.

The funding to conduct the study was approved during the last legislative session.

“Young people were struggling, and we needed to address the issue,” said Rep. Mary Keefe, D-Worcester, one of the representatives who, with Rep. Ruth Balsar, D-Newton, sponsored the amendment needed to secure the funding. “It was urgent, we stepped forward.”

State funding starting at \$250K

To recognize the work, the consortium issued awards to both representatives. And to commemorate its 10th anniversary as an organization, it presented an

award to Sen. Anne Gobi, D-Spencer, for her work as chair of the Joint Committee on Higher Education.

“The representatives supported the earmarks for the two mental health proposals,” Went said.

The state funding totals \$250,000 - \$150,000 to perform the behavioral health college partnership study, and \$100,000 to the faculty and staff at William James College, an institution dedicated to mental health studies.

The second grant would be used to develop a program that would train college faculty and staff across Massachusetts to recognize when students are beginning to decompensate and are struggling with the early stages of a mental health crisis. Under the plan, the program would be accessible to all institutions of higher learning in Massachusetts, public and private, two- and four-year institutions.