

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Chair, Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor  
& Pensions  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Burr  
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Health,  
Education, Labor & Pensions  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bobby Scott  
Chair, House Education & Labor Committee  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Virginia Foxx  
Ranking Member, House Education & Labor  
Committee  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Ron Wyden  
Chair, Senate Committee on Finance  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Crapo  
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Finance  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Frank Pallone  
Chair, House Energy and Commerce Committee  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers  
Ranking Member, House Energy and Commerce  
Committee  
Washington, DC 20515

April 13, 2022

Dear Members of Congress,

On behalf of nearly 100 organizations representing a diverse coalition of students, institutions of higher education, mental health professionals, researchers, advocates, and others, we strongly urge you to support and prioritize the mental and behavioral health needs of the roughly 20 million students in higher education as your committees develop mental health legislation.

We have been heartened at the attention and urgency Congress has shown toward addressing significant mental health needs in America, as well as the bipartisan and bicameral interest in tackling this urgent problem. This is a critical opportunity to address the mental health crisis among college students that has been under addressed for too long, and has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Better mental health is essential for students to persist in college, graduate, and become healthy and productive leaders and workers in our communities nationwide. To meet this moment, Congress should both invest in existing programs and reexamine ways that key legislation can support the mental health and basic needs of America's college students.

Rates of mental health concerns, crises, and diagnoses have grown substantially over the past few decades. According to the American College Health Association (ACHA) which has been fielding the National College Health Assessment for more than 20 years, rates of students reporting ever being diagnosed with depression have increased by almost 250% between 2000 and 2019.<sup>1</sup> Research from The Hope Center for College, Community, and

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<sup>1</sup> National College Health Assessment, American College Health Association, 2000-2019.

Justice shows that four-in-ten students reported experiencing anxiety or depression at the height of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

Yet students often cannot access the resources and treatment they need.<sup>3</sup> Recent survey data from the nationally-recognized Healthy Minds Study finds that nearly half of all college students (47%) are struggling with clinically-significant anxiety or depression, but only 40 percent of those students have had any mental health counseling or therapy in the past year.<sup>4</sup>

This is reinforced by conversations with campus leaders. In the American Council on Education's Pulse Point Surveys over the last 18 months, the majority of college presidents (often more than 70 percent) have consistently identified student and staff mental health as a top concern.<sup>5</sup> In the spring 2021 survey, 86 percent of all presidents indicated that they are most frequently hearing about students on their campus who have anxiety, followed by depression (80 percent).<sup>6</sup> Access to mental health resources is also unequal: underrepresented students, especially Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ students, face much greater barriers to accessing mental health resources and treatment.<sup>7</sup> Parenting students also face widespread and unique mental health challenges and are less likely to be able to afford mental health care.<sup>8</sup> Without affordable and equitable access to mental health resources, students are significantly more likely to consider suicide, experience substance misuse, or drop out/stop out of college.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the significant mental health needs of college students, there is exceedingly little federal support available to address these needs. Current federal policies are largely limited to immediate crisis resolution, such as suicide prevention and response, as opposed to comprehensive supports, including preventative and early intervention efforts, to help meet students' mental health and related basic needs. Students need more holistic support in order to be academically successful. Although it is critical to increase the mental health services provided on college campuses, student mental health cannot be solely the

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<sup>2</sup> Calculations from The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, #RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic, March 2021, <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/RCReport2021.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Mary E. Duffy, Jean M. Twenge, Thomas E. Joiner, "Trends in Mood and Anxiety Symptoms and Suicide-Related Outcomes Among U.S. Undergraduates, 2007–2018: Evidence From Two National Surveys," *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Volume 65, Issue 5, 2019, Pages 590-598.

<sup>4</sup> "Depression, Anxiety, Loneliness Are Peaking in College Students," *The Brink*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2021/depression-anxiety-loneliness-are-peaking-in-college-students/>

<sup>5</sup> American Council on Education, 2021 Fall Term Pulse Point Survey of College and University Presidents, Part II, <https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Senior-Leaders/Presidents-Survey-Fall-2021-II.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> American Council on Education, College and University Presidents Respond to COVID-19: 2021 Spring Term Survey, <https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Senior-Leaders/College-and-University-Presidents-Respond-to-COVID-19-2021-Spring-Term.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> Higher Learning Advocates, Today's Students Mental Health Factsheet, May 2021, [https://higherlearningadvocates.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Todays-Students-Mental-Health-Factsheet\\_Final.pdf](https://higherlearningadvocates.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Todays-Students-Mental-Health-Factsheet_Final.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Ascend at the Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation, *Improving Mental Health of Student Parents: A Framework for Higher Education*, May 2021, [https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MentalHealthFramework\\_Final.pdf](https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MentalHealthFramework_Final.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Eisenberg, Ezra Golberstein, Justin Hunt, "Mental Health and Academic Success in College," <http://www.personal.umich.edu/~daneis/papers/MHacademics.pdf>

responsibility of counseling centers and their staff. Instead, it must be a campus-wide priority, and many institutions continue to lack the resources to implement such a holistic approach.

The Garrett Lee Smith (GLS) Campus Suicide Prevention Grant is the only federal program currently available to directly support mental and behavioral health services for college students. This program is authorized at just \$7 million per year, and is only available to a handful of institutions who must compete for funding. The scope and scale of the mental health crisis among college students will require far more support than the federal government currently provides, and it will require the federal government to deliver support to institutions and students in a timely, flexible manner. Congress should update and dramatically expand the authorization level for the GLS program for higher education.

We encourage Congress to update the Public Health Service Act and the Higher Education Act to support holistic and evidence-based practices that meet students' mental health needs. Given the well-documented link between student basic needs insecurity and mental health challenges,<sup>10</sup> Congress should increase support for basic needs interventions throughout higher education. Federal agencies like the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, and Education, should provide more information to colleges on evidence-based preventative measures and interventions that support students' mental health and basic needs, as well as expand research funding to improve understanding of what works to support mental health, particularly at the community and organization level. In addition to expanding research capacity and building evidence, the federal government can also facilitate connecting students to public benefit programs and sources of financial support they can use to seek mental health treatment.

We also urge your committees to prioritize support for under-resourced institutions and institutions serving historically underrepresented students such as community colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges & Universities (TCUs), other Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) and those institutions participating in the Strengthening Institutions Program, which often have the fewest resources to address the significant mental health needs of their students. Further, Congress should ensure that mental health investments reach students facing intersecting mental health needs and barriers to accessing resources, including LGBTQ+ students, students of color, parenting students, military-connected, first-generation, low-income students, and adult learners.

We applaud Congress for tackling urgent mental health challenges across the nation. With sufficient federal resources, students in higher education can graduate and build a healthier,

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<sup>10</sup> Kathryn Coakley, Sarita Cargas, Marigold Walsh-Dille, and Heather Mechler, Basic Needs Insecurities Are Associated with Anxiety, Depression, and Poor Health Among University Students in the State of New Mexico, 2022, *Journal of Community Health*, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10900-022-01073-9>; Cindy W. Leung, Sara Farooqui, Julia A. Wolfson, and Alicia J. Cohen, "Understanding the Cumulative Burden of Basic Needs Insecurities: Associations With Health and Academic Achievement Among College Students," *American Journal of Health Promotion* 35, no. 2 (February 2021): 275-78, <https://journals-sagepub-com.libproxy.temple.edu/doi/full/10.1177/0890117120946210>; Daniel Eisenberg, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Sarah K. Lipson, and Katharine Broton, "Too Distressed to Learn? Mental Health Among Community College Students," *Wisconsin HOPE Lab*, 2016, [https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Wisconsin\\_HOPE\\_Lab-Too\\_Distressed\\_To\\_Learn.pdf](https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Wisconsin_HOPE_Lab-Too_Distressed_To_Learn.pdf)

more prosperous, and equitable society. Without these resources, students will continue to face substantial challenges to their academic success. We look forward to working with you to support the mental health needs of college students as your process moves forward.

Sincerely,

Achieving the Dream

ACPA—College Student Educators International

Active Minds

American Association of Colleges and Universities

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education

American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers

American Association of Community Colleges

American Association of State Colleges and Universities

American College Health Association

American Council on Education

American Indian Higher Education Consortium

APPA, "Leadership in Educational Facilities"

American Psychological Association

Ascend at the Aspen Institute

Asociación de Colegios y Universidades Privadas de Puerto Rico (ACUP) [The Association of Private Colleges and Universities of Puerto Rico]

Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors

Association of American Universities

Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges

Association of Baccalaureate Program Directors

Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities

Association of Chiropractic Colleges

Association of Community College Trustees

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges

Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities

Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Massachusetts

Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Pennsylvania

Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Rhode Island

Association of Independent Colleges of Art & Design

Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities

Association of Public and Land-grant Universities

Association of Research Libraries

Association of Schools Advancing Health Professions

Association of Vermont Independent Colleges

Association of Young Americans (AYA)

Campus Compact

Center for First-generation Student Success

Council for Christian Colleges & Universities

Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities

College and University Professional Association for Human Resources

Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities  
Common App  
Conference for Mercy Higher Education  
Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges  
Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area  
Council of Graduate Schools  
Council of Independent Colleges  
Council of Independent Colleges in Virginia  
Council of Independent Nebraska Colleges Foundation  
Council on Social Work Education  
The Education Trust  
EDUCAUSE  
EnglishUSA  
Federation of Independent Illinois Colleges and Universities  
General Board of Higher Education and Ministry  
Grand Challenges for Social Work  
Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work  
Healthy Minds Network  
Higher Education Consultants Association  
Higher Learning Advocates  
Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities  
The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice  
Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida  
Independent Colleges and Universities of New Jersey  
Independent Colleges of Indiana  
Independent Colleges of Washington  
The Jed Foundation  
Kansas Independent College Association  
Louisiana Association of Independent Colleges and Universities  
Maryland Independent College and University Association  
Middle States Commission on Higher Education  
NAFSA: Association of International Educators  
NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education  
National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO)  
National Association of Black Social Workers  
National Association of Colleges and Employers  
National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work  
National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities  
National Association of Social Workers  
NCAA  
National College Attainment Network  
New American Colleges and Universities  
North American Association of Methodist Schools, Colleges and Universities  
North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities  
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities  
Oregon Alliance of Independent Colleges and Universities

Phi Beta Kappa Society  
South Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities  
State Higher Education Executive Officers Association  
Student Veterans of America  
Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association  
UPCEA  
Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities  
Yes We Must Coalition  
Young Invincibles