

2024 Higher Education Policy Summit

Exploring Mental Health and Wellbeing as a Student Success Strategy



Trellis Foundation has long recognized the connection between degree completion and wrap-around support for student success. A growing body of evidence draws explicit links between student mental health and higher education persistence. We began hearing from college presidents in 2017 about their concerns for student mental health – concerns exacerbated a few years later by the COVID-19 pandemic. [Recent studies](#) indicate that emotional stress is the primary reason students consider discontinuing their coursework.

In response, Trellis Foundation engaged in deep learning with our grantees and partners about philanthropic, public policy, and institutional levers to support mental health in postsecondary education. The Trellis Foundation's third biennial postsecondary policy summit in Austin, TX, on April 19, 2024, explored mental health and wellbeing as a strategy for student success. The event brought together policymakers, practitioners, and experts to discuss the connection between basic needs support for students, their mental wellbeing, and college completion.

The summit, a collaborative effort planned with Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute (MMHPI), showcased the early results of our Texas-wide college and university mental health and wellbeing learning community. This work, facilitated by MMHPI with technical assistance to institutions provided by The Jed Foundation, Active Minds, and The Steve Fund, underscores the collective effort and shared responsibility in addressing student mental health.

This comprehensive convening summary provides key takeaways from each panel. As reiterated by many of the day's speakers and panelists, the summit was designed to instill a greater sense of the opportunity and imperative that we all share in response to the growing need for mental health and basic needs support on college and university campuses. We also aim to highlight the thinking, programs, strategies, and practices that show promise in supporting student wellbeing and college completion.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Supporting mental health and basic needs is a crucial student success and retention strategy. Speakers and panelists highlighted that the pandemic has exacerbated mental health issues among students, making it essential for institutions to implement supportive programs and strategies.
- Early successes in policy and practice of the Trellis Foundation-supported learning community, launched in 2022, affirmed the collective effort needed to address student mental health.
- The adoption of Texas House Bill 8 (HB-8) reflects a significant policy change, shifting community college funding to prioritize student outcomes and support marginalized student populations. This may lead to additional financial incentives to invest in student success strategies that support mental health and wellbeing as a strongly correlated factor in degree completion.
- Effective mental health support requires strong institutional leadership and a long-term commitment to integrating mental health into campus culture. Leaders from various institutions shared successful approaches, such as early alert systems and cross-campus collaborations. Sustained efforts are needed to ensure that mental health becomes a priority in academic and student affairs, focusing on creating a community and culture of care.



41% of college students report experiencing depression, and 36% report experiencing anxiety.



Emotional stress & personal **mental health** reasons are **the top** reasons why students consider stopping their coursework for both Bachelor's & Associate degree students.



40% of college students who reported experiencing depression did not see a mental health professional or use medication in the past year.

A Fireside Chat with Commissioner Harrison Keller

Dr. Richard Rhodes, president of Texas A&M Central Texas in Killeen, sat down with the Commissioner of Higher Education for a conversation about the current landscape and opportunities for student success in Texas. Dr. Keller has served the state of Texas at the Higher Education Coordinating Board since 2019.



Commissioner Harrison Keller and Dr. Richard Rhodes

"The kids are not ok, and things are not back to normal...that is why this conversation [about mental health] is so important."

- Commissioner Harrison Keller

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- House Bill 8 (HB-8) completely transformed how community colleges in Texas are funded. Instead of funding based primarily on contact hours, 95% of state funding is now tied to student outcomes. Funding incentives exist to increase the number of students earning credentials in high-demand fields, successful transfers to four-year universities, and completion of dual-credit courses. These incentives encourage colleges to boost completion supports, including mental health and wellbeing services.
- There is a pressing need to address academic and mental health challenges as we move out of the pandemic. There has been a high demand for academic remediation and mental health services, particularly for anxiety. Without addressing these mental health issues, students may struggle academically, regardless of the quality of instruction. Meeting students where they are and acknowledging the scale of these problems is essential for their success.
- The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) aims to be a resource, partner, and advocate for higher education in Texas. The agency has set up a new division dedicated to student success for two-year and four-year institutions. However, institutions often operate in isolation, and few opportunities for cross-institutional collaboration exist. Institutions need to share what they learn, avoid repeating mistakes, and identify scalable strategies. Adapting solutions to local contexts is also crucial for their effectiveness.

[Video: A Fireside Chat with Commissioner Harrison Keller](#)

Federal Perspectives on Postsecondary Wellbeing and Student Success

Our keynote panel – moderated by Dr. Mark Milliron, immediate past chair of the Trellis Foundation Board and president of National University – included Sakshee Chawla, senior policy analyst for the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO); Dr. Zainab Okolo, senior vice president for policy, advocacy, and government relations at The Jed Foundation; and Dr. Sunny Patel, who serves as senior advisor for children, youth, and families in the Office of the Assistant Secretary at the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Agency (SAMHSA).

The panelists drew on their expertise and perspectives working at the federal level on mental health and wellbeing and discussed examples of effective policy and practice from recent years. They also highlighted opportunities for collaboration and for leveraging federal and state efforts that can benefit postsecondary systems, institutions, and programs.

"We all know that the pandemic exacerbated a lot of the issues [surrounding mental health], but it really, for me, brought to light the elephant in the room that we refused to name, and now we are here having these really productive conversations."

- Dr. Zainab Okolo



Dr. Sunny Patel, Dr. Zainab Okolo, and Sakshee Chawla

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Mental health is now a top priority on the presidential administration's policy agenda, [particularly with SAMHSA](#), as noted by Dr. Patel: "It is a bipartisan issue, and we're at a unique, inaugural moment where broader conversations and dialogues about mental health are finally happening."
- The Jed Foundation has been working with campuses to create a community and culture of care. Their comprehensive approach encourages open conversations about mental health, helping to remove the stigma and shame that often comes with seeking mental health services.
- Mental health has been the missing ingredient in the student success conversation. It needs to be a priority for both student affairs and academic affairs. There is a broad legislative framework at the federal level that can be adapted at the state and local levels, recognizing commonalities across states. It is essential to broaden the table, bringing as many people as possible into the conversation to ensure the effective use of limited resources.
- To help strengthen the practitioner pipeline in mental health, [federal programs like AmeriCorps](#) are expanding to support school and community needs. In addition, peer-support networks and programs such as [Active Minds](#) are filling a need on campuses nationwide.

[Video: Federal Perspectives on Postsecondary Wellbeing and Student Success](#)

The Role of Institutional Leadership in Mental Wellbeing and Student Success

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Alamo College District has implemented training on wellness practices for faculty, staff, and students, along with peer support and mental health and wellness messaging. Their approach incorporates feedback from student surveys and focus groups to address the needs of a diverse student body.
- San Jacinto College is prioritizing additional staffing and diversifying its mental health provider pool of applicants by requiring only one year of broad counseling experience and emphasizing internal training and professional development. They have also expanded their capacity to support student mental health by utilizing interns and community organizations.
- At Angelo State University, mental health initiatives are led by Academic Affairs in collaboration with Student Affairs. These departments increase outreach during high-stress periods for students, and an early alert system flags students who are showing signs of mental health issues or struggling academically.
- Commitment from institutional leadership is crucial for scaling mental health and wellbeing programs and dedicating adequate attention to student support. This holistic approach to student support systems requires leaders to take a long view to aligning strategy and resources with data and outcomes.



Retired Air Force Lieutenant General Ronnie Hawkins, Dr. Brenda Hellyer, Dr. Mike Flores

The second panel featured dynamic leaders from higher education institutions who shared their institutional priorities for mental health and discussed their current challenges and successes: Chancellor Mike Flores from Alamo College District in San Antonio; Retired Air Force Lieutenant General Ronnie Hawkins, President of Angelo State University; and Chancellor Brenda Hellyer, leader of San Jacinto College District. They also explored considerations for sustaining long-term efforts in the field of mental health.

The conversation was moderated by Trellis Foundation Board member Suzanne Walsh, who is also the President of Bennett College, a women's college and HBCU in Greensboro, North Carolina.

"We recognize that we have seven different generations on our campus, from the professors all the way to students in dual credit, and you have to appreciate people don't think, act, feel, and react the same way all of the time."

- Retired Air Force Lieutenant General Ronnie Hawkins

[Video: The Role of Institutional Leadership in Mental Wellbeing and Student Success](#)

The Current and Future “State” of Mental Wellbeing and Student Success

In the third conversation of the day, three statewide organizations came together to discuss mental health programming through networks and technical assistance. The panelists shared what has been effective post-pandemic and how these lessons are shaping excellent opportunities ahead for higher education in Texas.

The discussion was moderated by Jenny Achilles, Senior Program Officer at Trellis Foundation, and included Dr. Jennielle Médica Strother from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, Dr. Cynthia Ferrell of the Texas Success Center/Texas Association of Community Colleges, and Tegan Henke from the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute.

“From the past, we learned that if we wanted to really make sustainable change, we needed to have the right folks in the room, and we needed them to change in ways that last even beyond themselves.”

- Dr. Cynthia Ferrell



Left to right, top to bottom: Dr. Jennielle Médica Strother, Jenny Achilles, Tegan Henke, and Dr. Cynthia Ferrell

[Video: The Current and Future “State” of Mental Wellbeing and Student Success](#)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Texas Association of Community Colleges leveraged learning from previous initiatives to develop a statewide strategy for community colleges in Texas. This approach covers all student experiences, including recognizing the importance of supporting student wellbeing and belonging as part of the foundation bolstering their academic success.
- Institutions can bring about long-lasting change through strategic plans, mission statements, and the data that trustees review. These elements can significantly impact the institution's environment, ensuring that mental health and student support are essential to the college experience.
- The Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute proposes a public health approach to supporting all students. This includes reducing stigma, increasing access to and awareness of services, and fostering collaboration among institutions and partners. The Minding College Minds model emphasizes the importance of institutional commitment, mental health services and supports at all levels of intervention, and creating a community that holistically supports the mental health needs of students.
- The collective energy seen at the Summit is something we can harness to our advantage. There has been a significant increase in strategic investment in mental health initiatives, providing an opportunity to align efforts and scale them effectively. Institutions can ensure comprehensive student support by broadening the mental health ecosystem to include faculty and staff.

Additional Resources

[Student Voices on Mental Health](#)

Trellis Foundation invited students from across Texas to share their perspectives on postsecondary mental health and the role students play in improving mental health and wellbeing on college campuses. These students represent Austin Community College, the University of Houston-Downtown, and the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley, all members of Trellis Foundation's Postsecondary Mental Health and Wellbeing Learning Community.

[Trellis Strategies Student Financial Wellness Survey: Fall 2023 Semester Results](#)

- [Student Financial Wellness Survey \(SFWS\) Fall 2023 Semester Report – Texas Community Colleges](#)
- [Balancing Act: Understanding the Intersection of Basic Needs and Mental Wellbeing in College](#)

[Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute](#)

In this series of learning briefs, Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute provides highlights from the Trellis Foundation Postsecondary Mental Health and Wellbeing Learning Community and a summary of lessons to date.

- [Navigating the Mental Health Provider Shortage in Higher Education](#)
- [Supporting Postsecondary Mental Health and Wellbeing Through Partnership: Three Key Themes](#)
- [Key Learnings from the Postsecondary Mental Health and Wellbeing Learning Community](#)

[A Decade of Improving College Mental Health Systems: JED Campus Impact Report](#)

This report analyzes a decade of data (2013 to 2023) from JED Campus schools and the Healthy Minds Network survey.



Mission Statement

Trellis Foundation advances equitable educational opportunities in Texas by supporting postsecondary programs, practices and systems that reduce disparities and lead to success for low-income students and students of color.

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