RUDERMAN FELLOWSHIP TRAINING NOTES 2024
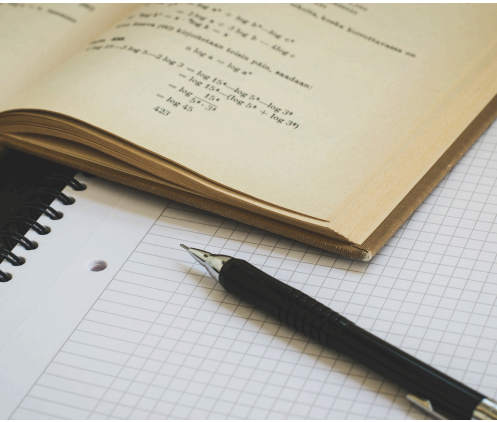
AUTHOR
L MEGAN KERSTNG, LMHC, PSYD

RUDERMAN
FAMILY FOUNDATION

WILLIAM JAMES
COLLEGE

CONTENTS

WILLIAM JAMES COLLEGE

COLLEGE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

THE LANDSCAPE OF COLLEGE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

The discussion surrounding student mental health within higher education has gained signficant momentum, especially heightened by the challenges introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic. This ongoing dialogue, spanning over a decade highlights the significant increase in the use of mental health services and a heightened emphasis on the psychological well-being of students.

Between 2016 and 2023, the mental health of students was cited as the top concern of college presidents regardless of institution type. (*American Council on Education Pulse Point Survey of College and University Presidents, 2023*)

According to a 2024 Gallup poll, 32% of students (n=5,000) currently pursuing a bachelor's degree have contemplated taking a leave of absence from their program for a semester or longer. Of this group, 64% cited emotional stress as the primary reason for considering such a break. (*Gallup-Lumina State of Higher Education, 2024*)

Despite a 5% decrease in overall college and university enrollment from 2009 to 2015, counseling center utilization increased by 30 to 40% during the same period. (*Center for Collegiate Mental Health Survey, 2023*)

Over 90% of college counseling staff reported significant feelings of burnout, isolation, and overwhelm. (*Biancolli, 2021*)

During Academic Year 2021-2022, nearly 1 in 5 clinical positions in college counseling centers experienced turnover. Hiring new staff for these positions proved difficult; over 78% of counseling enters reported difficulty filling these positions. (*AUCCCD Survey, 2022*)

Faculty on Frontlines: 80% of faculty report dealing with student mental health issues in the past year. Only 51% reported confidence in their ability to identify signs of emotional distress in students. 73% report they want training. (*Role of Faculty in Student Mental Health, 2021*)

Out of the 95,860 students participating in the 2021-2022 Healthy Minds Survey, 44% screened positive for overall depression, 23% for major depression, 37% screened positive for anxiety, and 37% had been engaged in counseling in the past year. (*Healthy Minds Network Annual Survey, 2021-2022*)

WILLIAM JAMES COLLEGE

RUDERMAN FAMILY FOUNDATION

How have students changed since the onset of COVID? What are you seeing now?

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND ENGAGEMENT

Decreased engagement and attendance in classrooms and events

Many participants noted that there has been a dramatic shift in students' ability to connect not only to their academic work, but also with events, clubs, and social interactions. As one participant noted, "I feel I have to add entertainment value to my academic content to keep my students' attention. It's exhausting". Counseling center staff in the training noted the increased difficulty in recruiting students for their group therapy options.

More connected to their own generation through the social media bubble

Participants felt that Generation Z is uniquely connected through social media, creating a tightly-knit digital bubble that enhances their generational identity. However, while they are more connected to one another, this has affected their connection with older generations. Some participants noted that this has led some students to develop a disregard for the wisdom and insights that typically come from older generations.

Rise of cancel culture and calling out behavior

Participants noted seeing students, faculty and staff struggling with cancel culture and calling out behavior. While calling out others can drive positive change and justice, it also has affected students inability to understand the complexities and context of human behavior, and their ability to form authentic connections with one another for fear of being ostracized. Faculty noted that they have witnessed that the depth of classroom discussions have been impacted, although some participants discussed methods they used in their pedagogical practices to help bring safety and depth to discussions.

Challenges in social interactions and increased reports of loneliness

Participants noted that they are witnessing a decrease in social interactions between students. One participant noted, "The dining hall used to be a loud place filled with energy. Now all I witness is this eerie silence with students just staring at their phones when I go in." Participants in the training described increased reports of students who feel lonely, yet anxious about making connections with other students.

Virtual life feeling safe but leading to decreased human interaction:

Participants felt that the rise of virtual life, while creating a sense of safety and convenience, led to a decrease in face-to-face human interaction, resulting in a social skill decline, isolation, and increased mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Participants reported that they felt that virtual life often lacks depth and spontaneity of in-person collaboration.

How have students changed since the onset of COVID? What are you seeing now?

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Discomfort being viewed as a condition

Participants observed that "mental health language" and diagnoses were increasingly being used to describe uncomfortable feelings. Some expressed guilt for second-guessing students' claims of mental health struggles, questioning whether these students genuinely exhibited the necessary symptoms for the diagnoses they reported. Concerns were raised about whether these diagnoses were given by mental health professionals or if students were self-diagnosing based on TikTok videos. Additionally, several participants noted that students are beginning to use the word "safety" to describe their comfort levels, further blurring the lines between genuine mental health issues and everyday discomfort. This trend raises important considerations about the accuracy of self-diagnosis and the evolving language around mental health on college campuses.

Decreased stigma around mental health but a shift in views on time

Participants reported observing a decrease in stigma around mental health. They noted that students now freely discuss their mental health struggles in class and on social media. However, some participants pointed out that this reduction in stigma primarily applies to students from privileged backgrounds, while those from ethnically and racially diverse communities continue to face significant stigma. Mental health professionals in the training sessions expressed frustration over students' expectations for immediate benefits from treatment, rather than understanding that significant improvement takes time.

Need for increased accommodations due to anxiety and emotional dysregulation

Participants working in accessibility departments reported a significant increase in accommodation requests, particularly for anxiety-related issues. Some participants expressed concerns that accommodations, such as medical single living arrangements for students with anxiety, might be clinically contraindicated. They noted that exposure and skill-building are essential for symptom relief, and isolating students might hinder their progress.

Decreased emotional regulation and frustration tolerance

Participants expressed frustration regarding the decline in students' ability to regulate their emotions and manage frustration. Concerns were raised about students appearing more fragile. However, it was also noted that this emotional fragility seems to affect all age groups, with some attributing it to our increasing reliance on technology. One participant mentioned that emotional dysregulation is common in young adulthood because the prefrontal cortex, responsible for executive functions like emotional regulation, continues to develop into the mid-20s, making this a period of heightened vulnerability.

WILLIAM JAMES COLLEGE

RUDERMAN
FAMILY FOUNDATION

How have students changed since the onset of COVID? What are you seeing now?

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING - CONTINUED

Higher acuity and increased hospitalizations for mental health issues

Participants, especially those working in counseling centers, have observed a rise in the severity of symptoms among the students they encounter. Many reported an annual increase in the number of psychiatric hospital admissions, including emergency room visits and inpatient stays. Both participants and national data reveal that more students are expressing suicidal ideations and attempting suicide. Some counseling center staff noted that a significant portion of their time is devoted to treating and stabilizing a small group of highly acute students.

The complicated issue surrounding mental health diagnoses

Participants noted that mental health diagnoses come with various advantages and disadvantages. Mental health diagnoses are beneficial to students because they provide them with a sense of understanding and validation and a common language to discuss their mental health issues. However, participants expressed some concerns around diagnoses including students' tendency to pathologize normal variations in behavior, create an identity and establish friend groups around their mental health issue, affect their self-concept and self-esteem, and create a sense of limitation regarding what they believe they can achieve.

Collective trauma and varying levels of resilience

Participants discussed how students face collective trauma related to issues such as racial and social injustice, the pandemic, economic uncertainty, mass shootings, political polarization, social division, and climate change. Resilience among college students in the face of these collective traumas varies widely, shaped by a complex interplay of individual, social, environmental, and broader societal factors. While some students exhibit high levels of resilience due to strong support systems and effective coping strategies, others struggle due to pre-existing vulnerabilities and lack of resources.

How have students changed since the onset of COVID? What are you seeing now?

EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND SUPPORT

Lack of initiative for higher education and meaning of college

Participants observed that students often lack initiative for higher education, attending college more out of a sense of obligation than personal motivation. One participant wondered if students struggle more because they lack a clear "why" to sustain their hard work. Additionally, participants felt that the purpose of college has shifted from gaining knowledge and learning how to think to primarily preparing for the job market.

Activism and justified anger but also demonstrating avoidant behaviors

One participant observed that while students often express frustration and show a willingness to confront uncomfortable emotions publicly, such as in protests for racial, gender, and LGBTQ+ equality, climate change, and world events, they tend to avoid similar discomfort in personal contexts, including academic demands, social interactions, and receiving critical feedback.

Increased need for accommodation in classrooms

Participants discussed seeing an increased need for accommodations, namely extra time on exams, notetakers, and distraction-reduced test environments. One participant noted seeing an increase in requests for "flexible due dates" for students struggling with anxiety and ADHD. Other participants described students requiring more individualized attention than in previous years.

Shifting responsibility to others

A few participants commented that students often seem less inclined to take responsibility for their actions, sometimes shifting blame or avoiding accountability. They observed that students frequently blame others for their mistakes and expect others to resolve their problems. However, other participants rebutted these observations, pointing out that similar claims have been made about every generation when they were younger. Additionally, it was noted that this is a stereotype and does not apply to all students.

Zoom dominating the educational landscape

Zoom classes in college, which became widespread during the COVID-19 pandemic, offer flexibility and accessibility to students. However, they also come with challenges related to limited social interaction, potential impacts on the quality of education, and equity concerns.

Generational divide and mistrust of older generations and systems

College students increasingly mistrust older generations and established systems, feeling these institutions fail to address their concerns on issues like climate change, social justice, and economic stability. This mistrust, amplified by rapid technological and cultural shifts, drives students to advocate for systemic reforms and use digital platforms to voice their dissent. Higher education staff and faculty face challenges due to this generational divide, with differing values, communication styles, and expectations leading to misunderstandings and friction.

WILLIAM JAMES COLLEGE

Ruderman FAMILY FOUNDATION

Definitions of Mental Illness

In Lisa Damour's book, [The Emotional Lives of Teenagers](), she describes that there is a discrepancy between the **clinical** definition of mental health and the **cultural** definition of mental health. What are these definitions?

CLINICAL DEFINITION OF MENTAL ILLNESS

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) defines a mental disorder as "*a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental underlying mental functioning*". Mental illnesses are diagnosed based on specific criteria outlined in standardized diagnostic manuals such as the DSM-5 or the ICD-11 (International Classification of Diseases). These manuals provide detailed descriptions of various mental health disorders, including their symptoms, duration, and the impact on the individual's functioning.

Oftentimes mental health is characterized by:
- **Significant distress**: The individual experiences substantial emotional pain or suffering that is not typical of normal life stresses.
- **Functional Impairment**: The condition significantly interferes with the individual's ability to perform daily activities, such as work, school, or social interactions.
- **Deviation from the norms**: The thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are markedly different from cultural or societal expectations and norms.
- **Persistence**: Symptoms persist over a period of time, often longer than what is expected for temporary distress or situational responses.

CULTURAL DEFINITION OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Over the past 20 years, mental illness has increasingly been culturally defined by discomfort. We have begun equating mental health with feeling good, calm, relaxed, and happy, rather than understanding it as having emotions that are appropriate to the context and learning to manage those feelings and cope with distress.

WILLIAM JAMES COLLEGE

RUDERMAN FAMILY FOUNDATION

Definitions of Mental Illness

Dr. Damour reports that there are two parts to the understanding of mental health: 1) having feelings that fit the moment, or feelings that are appropriate to the context, and 2)the feelings are managed appropriately.

WHAT'S CAUSING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN THE CLINICAL AND CULTURAL DEFINITIONS OF MENTAL ILLNESS?

Wellness industry: Meanwhile, a booming wellness industry has led many to believe that distress can be entirely avoided, conflating mental health with constant happiness. This narrative can be harmful, as it sets unrealistic expectations and can make individuals feel inadequate when they experience normal, human emotions like sadness or anxiety.

Impact of social media: Social media platforms can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, and anxiety among young people. Constant exposure to curated, idealized images and the pressure to maintain an online persona can lead to a distorted self-image and unhealthy comparisons.

Barriers to accessing help: Despite the growing need for mental health support, there are still significant barriers to accessing help. These include stigma, lack of resources, and difficulty finding an available therapist.

WILLIAM JAMES COLLEGE

RUDERMAN FAMILY FOUNDATION

Definitions of Mental Illness

AVOID THE PULL TO MAKE BINARY ASSUMPTIONS

One of the challenges in discussing cultural versus clinical definitions of mental illness is the tendency to make binary assumptions. For example, some may argue that "young adults are not actually experiencing a mental health crisis; they are just misdiagnosing normal emotions as mental health issues." The reality is that both are happening simultaneously: there is a significant increase in young adults struggling with diagnosable mental health issues, and there is a tendency among some young adults to pathologize normal emotions. It's not an "either-or" situation but an "and" situation.

College counseling centers are dealing with an increase in the acuity of the students they treat. Over recent years, these centers have reported not only a rise in the number of students seeking help but also an increase in the severity of the mental health issues presented. This trend includes more students experiencing significant levels of distress, suicidal ideation, and complex mental health conditions such as severe anxiety, depression, and trauma-related disorders. College counseling centers are therefore facing greater demands for intensive and immediate interventions, requiring more resources, specialized staff, and comprehensive support systems to effectively address these needs.

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE

PODCAST: Lederman, D. (Host). (2023, April 25). *Redefining 'Mental Health' for Today's College Students* [Audio podcast episode]. In The Key. (Inside Higher Ed's podcast).

Kafka, A. C. (2024, August 23). *Fighting the Mental-Health Crisis Narrative.* The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Jennings, R. (2021, September 3). *How Mental Health Became a Social Media Minefield.* Vox.

Murphy Kelly, S. (2023, July 20). *Teens are using social media to diagnose themselves with ADHD, autism and more. Parents are alarmed.* CNN.

WILLIAM JAMES COLLEGE

RUDERMAN FAMILY FOUNDATION

THE REALITY OF THE CULTURAL DEFINITION OF MENTAL HEALTH ON OUR CAMPUSES

Discussion Question: Given this cultural shift in how we view mental health, how do you feel it affects students, parents, and faculty/staff who support students?

The following are themes that emerged from the discussions of all three training groups. Groups noted that many of these issues existed before the pandemic but were exacerbated during it.

Students

Learned Helplessness and Lowered Self-Confidence:

Participants observed that many students seem to have internalized a sense of fragility, often withdrawing from challenging situations that could help them develop resilience and emotional management skills. This avoidance can hinder their ability to confront and navigate difficult emotions. Additionally, participants noted that because many students arrive at college accustomed to receiving support for their emotional struggles, they often expect faculty and staff to provide personal accommodations whenever needed. This reliance on external assistance can further contribute to feelings of helplessness and diminish their confidence in handling challenges independently. Faculty and staff expressed conflicting emotions about balancing the need for academic rigor with the responsibility to provide necessary support.

THE REALITY OF THE CULTURAL DEFINITION OF MENTAL HEALTH ON OUR CAMPUSES: STUDENTS

Expectations of support:

Participants observed that today's college students have elevated expectations for both academic and emotional support from faculty and staff. This reflects a growing consumer mindset that views education as a significant investment. As a result, there is an increasing demand for holistic support that encompasses not only academic resources like tutoring and advising, but also mental health services and career guidance. Students now seek personalized attention and proactive outreach, expecting institutions to recognize their unique needs and provide accessible services. However, many institutions face challenges in meeting these high expectations due to limited resources.

Decreased tolerance for making a mistake:

The decreased tolerance for mistakes among college students mirrors broader societal trends and pressures to succeed, often intensified by the scrutiny of social media. This environment fosters perfectionism and a fear of failure, which can stifle creativity and innovation, as students may avoid taking risks. Additionally, the pathologizing of normal developmental challenges can lead to heightened anxiety and stress, with students feeling overwhelmed by the expectation to be flawless. Participants discussed the challenges of creating a culture of resilience that values mistakes as learning opportunities.

Grade inflation:

Several participants, particularly faculty, noted that concerns about student fragility have contributed to grade inflation. Although grade inflation has been a longstanding issue in universities, the pandemic has intensified discussions around it. Participants expressed worries that grade inflation can devalue academic credentials over time and leave students unprepared for graduate school or the job market. One participant pointed out that grade inflation can exacerbate disparities, as students from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds might not benefit equally from lenient grading policies. While opinions varied on the concept of academic rigor, most participants agreed that clear and transparent communication about grading policies can help manage expectations and perceptions among students and faculty.

Reason for the Struggle:

Participants noted that students often struggle to change their behaviors because they attribute their difficulties to medical or mental health conditions. This perspective shifts the locus of control away from the students themselves, placing it on their illnesses. As a result, this sense of diminished responsibility can lead to a decreased investment in personal growth and change.

WILLIAM JAMES COLLEGE

RUDERMAN
FAMILY FOUNDATION

Parents

Some parents are overinvolved or not involved at all (wide variety):

Participants observed an increase in helicopter parenting, where parents excessively involve themselves in their adult children's lives. This behavior is evident in various forms, such as constant communication (calling and texting multiple times a day), academic interference (arguing with professors over grades), technology-enabled monitoring (using apps like Life 360 to track locations), and involvement in personal matters (intervening in roommate disputes, cleaning dorm rooms). Although often motivated by good intentions, research suggests that this level of involvement can lead to reduced independence, mental health issues, academic challenges, and social difficulties. Participants also discussed the difficulties they encountered in educating parents about maintaining appropriate boundaries. Some noted that, as parents of college students themselves, they could understand the urge to become over-involved, given parental anxiety and societal expectations around intensive parenting. While the focus was on over-involved parents, others highlighted that some parents take the opposite approach, refusing to engage even when their child is clearly struggling.

Parents are dysregulated too:

Participants noted a rise in emotional dysregulation among parents of college students, a phenomenon that became especially pronounced during the pandemic. They observed this dysregulation manifesting as heightened anxiety, overprotectiveness, and difficulty coping with uncertainty, which significantly affected parents' interactions with both their children and the institution. Some participants reported having to manage parental behavior driven by excessive worry about their child's well-being, leading to increased demands for constant updates and reassurance from faculty and staff. Others faced the challenge of balancing their own stressors—such as job insecurity and health concerns—while trying to support their college-aged children, sometimes resulting in overreactions or withdrawal from involvement. Overall, participants felt that this parental dysregulation created challenges for institutions in managing expectations and communication effectively.

Faculty and Staff

Faculty and Staff Stretched Thin and Invisible Labor:

Participants discussed how student mental health issues are contributing to feelings of burnout, as faculty and staff face increasing demands to address students' psychological needs alongside their academic responsibilities. Participants discussed that they often find themselves managing disengaged classes, responding to political attacks on academic freedom, and navigating the threat of budget cuts, all of which add to their stress. Furthermore, the burden of providing student support disproportionately falls on women, particularly women of color, who often engage in unacknowledged "invisible labor." One participant discussed the concept of "performance punishment" where those who are recognized for their effectiveness in supporting students may become overwhelmed by heightened expectations without adequate acknowledgment, support, or compensation. As a result, the combination of these pressures is stretching faculty thin, ultimately impacting their well-being and ability to serve their students effectively.

Fear:

Participants discussed how student mental health challenges create a pervasive sense of fear among faculty and staff responsible for providing support. Many expressed concern that their actions might unintentionally worsen a student's situation, leading to severe consequences for both the student and themselves. This fear causes faculty and staff to approach interactions with great caution. Additionally, participants noted apprehension about potential backlash if their support is perceived as inadequate. Worries about negative social media attention and poor course evaluations weigh heavily, as these could affect career progression and tenure prospects. This fear of professional consequences can discourage faculty from fully engaging with students in need, ultimately hindering their ability to provide effective support.

Need for Pedagogical Change:

Some participants highlighted the necessity for pedagogical changes to better support today's more vulnerable students, advocating for the integration of concepts such as social-emotional learning and edutainment into teaching approaches. While they observed that some faculty members were open to adapting their methods, others showed resistance to these changes.
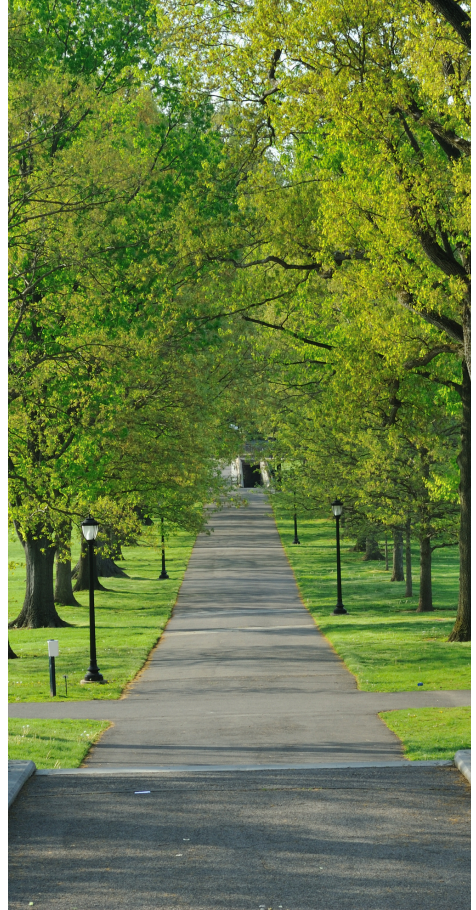
THE REALITY OF THE CULTURAL DEFINITION OF MENTAL HEALTH ON OUR CAMPUSES: FACULTY AND STAFF

"Curricula Crisis":

Participants discussed the challenges in balancing student fragility with academic rigor. One faculty member noted a misalignment in how professors and students perceive rigor—professors view it in terms of cognitive demands and critical thinking, while students often associate it with workload and stress. This misalignment frequently results in students reporting burnout. Some participants highlighted the importance of "scaffolding," where rigor is introduced gradually within the curriculum to help students build resilience. Despite these strategies, participants expressed concern that without sufficient challenge, students may not be adequately prepared for the demands of the "real world."

Difficult Conversations:

Participants felt that the concept of student fragility significantly hinders faculty and staff from engaging in difficult conversations with students. Faculty often feel increased anxiety about approaching sensitive topics, fearing that their words might exacerbate a student's emotional state. This perception leads to overly cautious communication, which can prevent them from addressing core issues effectively. Many educators also feel unprepared for these discussions, and concerns about boundary challenges and misinterpretation further inhibit open dialogue. As a result, participants felt that this ultimately limits faculty's ability to provide critical support and feedback to students.

WILLIAM JAMES COLLEGE

RUDERMAN
FAMILY FOUNDATION

ENJOYABLE, UNCOMFORTABLE, AND UNMANAGEABLE STRESS

Lisa Damour, a clinical psychologist and author of "The Emotional Lives of Teenagers," suggests that universities can play an important role in addressing the misconception that discomfort equates to mental illness by improving their messaging. Dr. Damour states that experiences for college students are going to arrive in three categories: enjoyable, uncomfortable and unmanageable. Here are the differences between the three categories:

	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES	BENEFITS/CONSEQUENCES
Enjoyable Stress	Associated with positive, exciting challenges that are stimulating and invigorating. It can include activities that stretch one's abilities but are ultimately fulfilling and rewarding.	Preparing for a big event, taking on a new hobby, or engaging in competitive sports	Enjoyable stress can boost motivation, increase resilience, and contribute to personal growth and a sense of accomplishment
Uncomfortable Stress	Involves situations that are challenging and can cause discomfort or anxiety, but are manageable and can be beneficial in the long run.	Studying for exams, giving a public presentation, or adjusting to a new environment.	Uncomfortable stress helps develop coping skills, build resilience, and adapt to new situations. It pushes individuals out of their comfort zones, fostering growth and learning.
Unmanageable Stress	Occurs when challenges and demands exceed an individual's ability to cope effectively. It can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed, and prolonged exposure to unmanageable stress can have negative effects on mental and physical health.	Chronic academic pressure without support, experiencing a traumatic event, or dealing with ongoing interpersonal conflicts	Unmanageable stress can lead to burnout, anxiety disorders, depression, and other health issues. It is crucial to recognize and address unmanageable stress to prevent these negative outcomes

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN UNCOMFORTABLE AND UNMANAGEABLE IN THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE:

Undergraduate education often involves periods of discomfort, a natural part of the growth and learning process for students. By introducing categories to help distinguish between different levels of discomfort, universities can help students better tolerate and understand this experience. Observing a student's discomfort is crucial because unmanageable stress typically develops gradually. By normalizing discomfort and closely monitoring students, universities can simultaneously reassure students that discomfort is a normal aspect of college life while also preventing it from escalating into unmanageable stress. This dual approach ensures that students feel supported and understood while being safeguarded against severe stress.

DRAINERS AND CHARGERS

A **drainer** refers to tasks, responsibilities, or interactions that consume a significant amount of a person's energy, time, and mental resources, often leading to feelings of exhaustion, frustration, or burnout.

A **charger** refers to tasks, responsibilities, or interactions that invigorate, energize, and motivate an individual. These activities are fulfilling, enjoyable, and contribute positively to one's job satisfaction and overall well-being.

In our work in higher education, conversations often revolve around the student experience, and oftentimes the needs of faculty and staff can be overlooked. **However, students cannot thrive unless faculty and staff are equally well.** Therefore, it is incredibly important for faculty and staff to manage their relationship with their job, as higher ed environments tend to be challenging to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Faculty and staff need to learn how to foster a harmonious relationship with work, values, and self-care.

During the Ruderman Fellowship training, participants engaged in a meaningful exercise, identifying their **Drainers** and **Chargers**.

This reflective process allowed participants to understand their roles more comprehensively, examining how specific aspects of their work impacted their well-being. Additionally, they categorized their drainers into three groups: those that can be easily changed, those that are challenging but manageable, and those that are permanent fixtures of their roles.

Based on the discussions from all three sections, the following pages are a list of Chargers and Drainers that affect the participants' work. Use this list to help plan your week, semester, or academic year. Be sure to incorporate "charger" activities to maintain balance throughout your day.

WILLIAM JAMES COLLEGE

RUDERMAN
FAMILY FOUNDATION

CHARGERS

WORKING WITH STUDENTS:

- Being surrounded by potential
- Working with diverse and engaged students
- Helping students work through problems
- Providing scholarship assistance
- Appreciating student gratitude
- Celebrating students' successes
- Witnessing students thrive
- Building long-term relationships with students
- Supporting individualism and curiosity
- Recognizing student enthusiasm and initiative

COMMUNITY & COLLABORATION

- Networking with peers
- Collaborating with diverse co-workers
- Working as a team
- Engaging in campus partnerships
- Being a consultant for others
- Celebrating achievements together
- Embracing a team approach to student issues
- Building a community of practice

WORKING ENVIRONMENT

- Cultivating creativity
- Embracing autonomy
- Valuing flexibility
- Maintaining integrity in work
- Balancing humor in the workplace
- Being authentic and real in interactions

PERSONAL FULFILLMENT AND GROWTH

- Experiencing the power of group therapy
- Embracing vulnerability as a privilege
- Being the support one wishes to have
- Feeling effective in one's role
- Witnessing student growth and contributing to it
- Finding joy in small recognitions

DRAINERS

TIME MANAGEMENT AND WORKLOAD

- Very little time for enjoyable activities
- Unmanageable workload/caseload
- Boundaries not being respected
- On-call duties
- Overpacked schedules leading to memory issues

ADMINISTRATIVE CHALLENGES

- Disconnection between administration and reality
- Lack of follow-through on acknowledged needs
- Interference between senior administration and staff/students
- Double messaging around power and discrimination
- Dealing with people who think they know better

INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

- Institutional instability
- Job eliminations leading to increased workload
- Siloes between student affairs, academic affairs, and administration
- Misinformation and resistance to change
- Higher education institutions closing across the country

INTERPERSONAL DYNAMICS

- Increased competition among colleagues
- Waiting for others to fulfill their responsibilities
- Low morale among staff
- Dealing with entitled students and parents
- Being the bearer of both hope and bad news

CHALLENGES IN COLLEGE MENTAL HEALTH

- Media misperceptions about higher education and mental health
- Real or imagined fragility of students' mental health
- Academic dishonesty caused by AI
- Frustration with the political climate

WILLIAM JAMES COLLEGE

19

RUDERMAN
FAMILY FOUNDATION

INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE

In higher education, **institutional resilience** is the ability of colleges and universities to anticipate, prepare for, respond to, and adapt to changes and disruptions while maintaining essential functions. This resilience is vital for long-term sustainability and effectiveness, particularly amid challenges like natural disasters, economic crises, and technological changes. It involves proactive planning, continuous learning, and integrating resilience into daily operations and decision-making, ensuring institutions can continue to fulfill their educational missions and support their communities despite significant challenges. In the exercise in our training, we examined institutional resilience through the lens of source (internal versus external) and speed (rapid versus slow).

THE FOLLOWING ARE THEMES THAT EMERGED FROM DISCUSSIONS OF ALL THREE TRAINING GROUPS

01

DEMOGRAPHIC AND STUDENT CHANGES

Demographic Cliff of 2025 :

Also known as the enrollment cliff, this is a term used to describe the expected decline in the number of traditional college-aged students in the United States after 2025. This decline is due to the significant drop in number of births following the Great Recession in 2008, and more students choosing to enter the workforce directly instead of going to college.

To learn more:

Drozdowski, M.J.(1/27/2023). *Looming Enrollment Cliff Poses Serious Threat to Colleges.* Best Colleges.

Bauman, D. (2/7/2024). *Colleges Were Already Bracing For An Enrollment Cliff: Now There Might Be Another One.* Chronicle of Higher Education.

Unknown future and uncertainty:

The future of higher education is uncertain, with challenges due to increasing use of digital learning technologies, rising costs and affordability, changing workforce needs, demographic shifts, and increasing reliance on tuition and endowments for revenue.

To learn more:

Mallach, A.(2/29/2024). *Higher Education on the Edge.* US News and World Report.

Damanio, M.(1/29/2019). *Boston's Colleges Are Going Broke – and We May All Have to Pay.* Boston Magazine.

Students more career focused:

In recent years, there has been a trend towards college students being more career-focused in their educational and extracurricular pursuits. They now select their majors and coursework with an eye towards future job prospects and earning potential. They are more attuned to the potential return on investment due to concerns about student debt.

To learn more:

Fischer, K.(8/10/2022). *The Path from College to Career.* Chronicle of Higher Education.

Marcus, J. (11/24/2024). *College leaders refocus attention on their students' top priority: Jobs after graduation.* The Hechinger Report.

More first-gen students and an increased need for support:

A first-generation college student is an undergraduate whose parents did not complete a four-year degree program. According to NASPA, 56% of all college students in the US have parents who don't hold bachelor's degrees. Rhode Island has seen the largest increase in first gen students (57.56%). They often need more support because they may not have the same level of familiarity with campus resources, academic expectations, and may experience feelings of self-doubt, isolation and not belonging. Supporting first-generation college students is crucial for their success and retention by offering culturally competent mentorship programs, academic advising, and financial aid resources.

To learn more:

Guerrero, J. (9/18/23). Column: *What First-Generation College Students Actually Need.* Los Angeles Times.

Whitley, S., & Tymiak, A. (7/19/2022). *The Support Your First-Generation Need To Be Successful.* Harvard Business Publishing.

WILLIAM JAMES COLLEGE

RUDERMAN FAMILY FOUNDATION

More complex student needs:

The needs of college students have been evolving over time, influenced by mental health challenges, financial concerns, diversity, equity and inclusion, technology (online learning and AI), and career preparation. As a result of this continuous adaptation to better support diverse and changing needs, faculty and staff report experiencing increased workload and stress, need for new skills and training, burnout and personnel retention challenges, and shifting institutional priorities. However, higher ed environments oftentimes struggle with the ability to change.

To learn more:

Rosenberg, B. (9/24/2023). *Higher Ed's Ruinous Resistance to Change.* Chronicle of Higher Education.

Student demographic changes: Are staff/faculty makeup adjusting with the change?

COVID has accelerated changes in higher education, as highlighted by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Between spring 2020 and 2021, overall postsecondary enrollment dropped by 4.2%, while online enrollment increased by 7%. The traditional student demographic is shrinking, with a 7.2% decline in 18-20-year-olds and only a 1.2% decline among students aged 25 and older. Female enrollment continues to surpass male enrollment, and there has been a rise in students identifying as Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, or multiracial. These shifts require expanded student support services tailored to non-traditional and first-generation students. Faculty and staff workloads are also impacted, necessitating adjustments in staffing and resource allocation to meet the needs of a more diverse student population. Institutions may need to revise policies and practices to ensure equity and access for all students.

To learn more:

Student Trends and Enrollment Projections Dashboard. Sorenson Impact Center.

Older employees who cannot retire:

Many older faculty and staff in higher education are delaying retirement due to insufficient retirement savings or a desire to keep working, resulting in a workforce with a larger proportion of older employees. While their deep institutional knowledge is valuable, it also presents challenges for knowledge transfer when they do retire. Concerns about age-related discrimination or biases, such as assumptions about technological skills or adaptability, are also present. The mix of younger and older employees can create challenges and opportunities due to differing work styles, technological familiarity, and perspectives, making intergenerational collaboration essential.

To learn more:

Pritchard, A., et al. (August 2019). *The Challenges of an Aging Higher Ed Workforce.* College and University Professional Association for Human Resources.

02
POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

Title IX changes:

Frequent changes to Title IX policies have created instability in higher education. Title IX, which prohibits sex-based discrimination, has been repeatedly revised under different presidential administrations, leading to regulatory uncertainty. This makes it difficult for colleges to maintain consistent compliance practices and can cause confusion and undermine trust in how sexual misconduct cases are handled. Given the partisan divide, these changes are likely to continue with each new administration, keeping colleges in a constant state of adaptation and hindering the establishment of consistent, long-term policies.

To learn more:
Rura, N. (5/14/2024). A Closer Look at the New Title IX Regulations. The Harvard Gazette.

Knott, K., & Blake, J. (7/17/2024). *Nearly 700 More Colleges Don't Have to Comply With New Title IX Rule.* Inside Higher Ed.

Increased volume of medical leaves of absence:

The rise in stress and mental health issues among students has led to an increase in temporary medical leaves, making it difficult for many to manage academic demands. This trend can result in higher student attrition, delayed graduations, and negatively impact enrollment and completion rates. Medical leaves also have financial consequences, including lost tuition revenue, delayed degrees, and higher costs for support services, putting pressure on institutional budgets. To address this, colleges may need to adopt more flexible, asynchronous, and self-paced learning options. Additionally, policymakers and accrediting bodies may introduce new regulations to ensure adequate support for students with health-related needs.

To learn more:
Ruderman Family Foundation. Taking a Leave of Absence: A Guide for Campus Leadership, Faculty and Staff.

Difficulty hiring employees and retaining them:

The hiring and retention challenges facing higher education institutions have become increasingly pronounced in recent years. Colleges and universities are struggling to attract and keep talented employees, hampered by a highly competitive job market, tight budgetary constraints, and burnout stemming from heavy workloads and work-life imbalance. Changing workforce expectations, particularly among younger generations, have exacerbated these issues, as have concerns over a lack of diversity and inclusion at many institutions. The inability to fill critical roles and high employee turnover can disrupt institutional operations, erode institutional knowledge, and undermine an institution's competitiveness. To address these challenges, higher education leaders must find ways to offer more competitive compensation, provide better work-life balance and professional development, and cultivate more inclusive and supportive work cultures.

To learn more:
CUPA-HR. (Fall 2023). The Higher Ed Employee Retention Crisis - And What To Do About It.

Zahneis, M. (9/14/2023). *Higher Ed' Workforce-Retention-Problems Aren't Going Away.* Chronicle of Higher Education.

Hotaling, M. (2023). *Let's Talk: Senior Leadership, Student Mental Health, and Counseling Centers.* American Council on Education.

Artificial Intelligence:

Artificial intelligence, particularly generative AI like ChatGPT, has rapidly disrupted college classrooms and higher education, challenging traditional policies and practices. While AI tools have existed for years, the introduction of ChatGPT in late 2022 accelerated AI adoption, though many colleges have yet to update their policies on its use. Professors express concern over students using AI to cheat, complicating academic integrity issues. However, some educators see potential in using AI for teaching, ethical learning, and personalized support. Colleges are also leveraging AI for administrative efficiency. As AI continues to evolve, higher education must address critical questions about its role and develop AI literacy among faculty and staff. Meanwhile, social media algorithms, powered by AI, can amplify feelings of inadequacy and anxiety by curating content that promotes unrealistic standards and ideals. This constant exposure to filtered realities can contribute to issues like depression, body image concerns, and social isolation. Moreover, AI chatbots and virtual assistants, while useful, may inadvertently replace meaningful human interactions, leading to a sense of loneliness and disconnection. Additionally, the pressure to perform academically or socially, coupled with the fear of missing out (FOMO) driven by AI-powered platforms, can exacerbate stress levels. The lack of clear guidance on how to use AI tools ethically and responsibly

also leaves young people vulnerable to misuse, potentially leading to academic dishonesty or unhealthy dependence on AI for decision-making.

To learn more:

Aoun, J. (7/1/2024). *How Higher Ed Can Adapt To The Challenges of AI.* Chronical of Higher Education.

Rutgers School of Communication and Information. (2/28/2024). *How Is Artificial Intelligence Impacting Higher Education?*

Klein, A. (3/29/24) *Teachers Worry About What AI May Do To Student Mental Health.* Government Technology.

Swaak, T. (2/26/2024). *AI Will Shake Up Higher Ed. Are Colleges Ready?* Chronicle of Higher Education.

WILLIAM JAMES
COLLEGE

RUDERMAN
FAMILY FOUNDATION

03

FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONCERNS

High cost of tuition in higher education:

The rising costs of tuition and fees are making college education less accessible, especially for students from lower-income backgrounds, worsening educational inequality and social mobility. High costs may deter prospective students, leading to declining enrollment and threatening the financial sustainability of some institutions. In response, more colleges may explore innovative, technology-enabled education models like online learning and competency-based programs.

To learn more:

Gardner, L. (5/16/2022). *Why Does College Cost So Much? The Reasons Aren't That Simple.* Chronicle of Higher Education.

Devaluation of a degree:

The perceived devaluation of the college degree in recent years is a complex issue driven by factors such as credential inflation, the growing emphasis on skills-based hiring, the rising costs of higher education, concerns about the relevance of academic curricula, and the emergence of alternative educational pathways. As degrees have become more commonplace, their exclusivity and competitive advantage have diminished, leading to questions about their true worth. Meanwhile, the financial burden of a college education and debates around whether it adequately prepares graduates for the workforce have further eroded the perceived value of a degree. This devaluation could have significant implications, potentially leading to declining enrollment and increased pressure on institutions to demonstrate the tangible benefits of their programs and forge stronger connections with employers.

To learn more:

Tough, P. (9/5/2023). Americans Are Losing Faith in the Value of College. Whose Fault is That? New York Times.

"Edutainment epidemic":

Edutainment is reshaping higher education by making learning more engaging, accessible, and interactive. By blending education with entertainment, it captures students' attention, improves knowledge retention, and caters to diverse learning styles. This trend is driving innovation in teaching methods, as institutions respond to the demand for more dynamic educational experiences. However, the challenge lies in balancing entertainment with academic rigor to ensure that educational quality is not compromised. The integration of edutainment and technology in higher education significantly impacts faculty and staff, who must adapt to new teaching methods, increased workloads, and evolving roles, while institutions navigate cultural shifts and the need for ongoing professional development and support.

To learn more:

Mr. G. (8/8/2022). *Edutainment: Overcoming an Overwhelming Issue in Mathematics Education.* Math Ed Corner.

WILLIAM JAMES COLLEGE

RUDERMAN FAMILY FOUNDATION

Embedding mental health and social emotional learning in pedagogical practices:

College professors are increasingly incorporating mental health and social-emotional learning (SEL) principles into their teaching practices. This shift reflects a recognition of the significant mental health challenges facing many students, as well as a desire to support the holistic development of the "whole student" in alignment with employer demands for graduates with strong interpersonal and problem-solving skills. Strategies include embedding mindfulness, stress management, and emotional intelligence training into course content, designing collaborative activities that foster teamwork and empathy, and modeling self-care. While the extent of integration varies, this trend signals a broader movement in higher education to create more conducive learning environments that enhance student success, both academically and in preparing them for the complexities of the modern world. The integration of mental health and social-emotional learning (SEL) concepts into higher education signals a cultural transformation, where student well-being becomes a central part of the university's mission and core values. This shift will require institutions to adopt more holistic, student-centered approaches, expand support services, and evolve faculty roles, ultimately aiming to enhance student success, retention, and preparation for the modern world.

To learn more:
Woolf, N. (3/8/2023). *SEL in Higher Education: An Overview.* Inside SEL(website).

Gallagher, K., & Stocker, S. (2017). *A Guide to Incorporating Social Emotional Learning in the College Classroom: Busting Anxiety, Boosting Ability.* Society for the Teaching of Psychology.

Attention to wellness as part of the institutional narrative:

Many universities are increasingly emphasizing mental health and emotional wellness as part of their narrative around educating and preparing students for the "real world." This reflects a growing recognition of the significant mental health challenges facing students, as well as a desire to develop well-rounded graduates with strong interpersonal and self-management skills sought by employers. By positioning themselves as providers of holistic support, universities aim to differentiate themselves in a competitive landscape, enhance their reputation as caring institutions, and align with societal concerns about student well-being. However, this shift raises questions about universities' capacity to deliver comprehensive mental health support without compromising academic rigor and learning outcomes. Ultimately, the incorporation of mental health and emotional wellness into the higher education narrative signals a broader shift toward supporting the whole student in preparing them for the complexities of the modern world.

To learn more:
Scherer, L., & Leshner, A. (1/13/2021). *Mental Health, Substance Use, and Wellbeing in Higher Education: Supporting the Whole Student.*

Responding to student mental health as a community:

The integration of mental health and social-emotional learning into higher education is driving a transformative shift, as universities adopt a collaborative, campus-wide approach. This involves cross-functional initiatives to embed well-being into the broader culture, empower peer support, enhance faculty/staff capacity, and forge community partnerships. The goal is to create a more integrated, responsive environment that addresses the holistic needs of students, fostering their success in alignment with modern expectations. This holistic focus on the "whole student" is reshaping institutional priorities, support systems, faculty roles, and graduate outcomes, as universities prepare learners with the social-emotional competencies required for the evolving workforce.

To learn more:
Abrams, Z. (10/12/2022). *Student mental health is in crisis. Campuses are rethinking their approach.* Monitor on Psychology.

Outsourcing / Increasing use of 3rd party vendors to support student mental health:

Utilizing third-party telehealth vendors is a way that universities attempt to expand their mental health resources for students. This approach is seen as cost-effective service delivery, and as a result, an increasing number of administrators are favoring this over in-person care. However, this approach has significant drawbacks, including a lack of specialization in young adult development,

unfamiliarity with campus culture, and confidentiality concerns. Additionally, these vendors may restrict access to individual provider communication, posing legal challenges for institutions. Schools must weigh these risks carefully, as the commoditization of mental health services could undermine the quality of care and jeopardize student well-being.

To Learn More:
Matherly, C. (1/12/2024). *Colleges Can't Keep Up With Students' Mental Health Needs. Teletherapy Companies Are Filling the Gaps.* Chronicle of Higher Education.

Rosenbaum, P., & Webb, R. (11/14/2022). Outsourcing Counseling Comes At A Cost To The Community. Inside Higher Ed.

WILLIAM JAMES COLLEGE

RUDERMAN FAMILY FOUNDATION

Increased use of peer support programs:

Peer counseling programs are emerging as a valuable complement to universities' mental health services, leveraging the relatability and trust of student-to-student support to reduce stigma and expand access. These programs harness the leadership development of peer counselors while supplementing the capacity of professional staff. However, careful training, supervision, and integration with the broader mental health infrastructure are critical to ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of these initiatives. By empowering the campus community to support one another, peer counseling represents a promising strategy for universities to holistically address the student mental health crisis.

To Learn More:

Ruderman Family Foundation and Mary Christie Institute (2022). *Peer Programs in College Student Mental Health.*

Carrasco, M. (1/23/2022). *Students Embrace Peer Mental Health Counseling.* Inside Higher Ed.

Increased use of embedded therapists:

The integration of embedded therapists on college campuses is an emerging strategy to improve student access to mental health support, foster early intervention, and destigmatize help-seeking. By placing clinicians directly within the university environment, this model enhances convenience, collaboration, and specialized understanding of the unique challenges facing the student population. However, universities must carefully navigate confidentiality concerns, clinician burnout, and coordination with external providers to ensure the embedded therapist approach is sustainable and effectively meets the holistic well-being needs of the campus community.

To Learn More:

Bellows, K. (4/21/2023). *A University's New Approach to Student Mental Health: Put Therapists in the Dorms.* Chronicle of Higher Education.

Karaffa, K., Bradtke, J., & Hancock, T. (October 2020). *Embedded Student Counseling Services: Insights From Veterinary Mental Health Practitioners.* Journal of College Counseling.

05

CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Upcoming election and world events:

The upcoming presidential election could significantly impact higher education institutions, primarily through changes in federal policies and funding. Depending on the election outcome, there may be shifts in policies related to student loan forgiveness, Title IX regulations, and funding for research and public universities. The approach to issues such as free college tuition, Pell Grants, and support for minority-serving institutions may also change. Additionally, the election could influence immigration policies, affecting international student enrollment and the diversity of campus populations. Institutions will need to adapt to these potential changes, which could affect everything from financial aid to campus culture.

To Learn More:

Holdaway, A. (8/29/24). *Election 2024: Trump vs. Harris on Higher Education.* The Globe.

Knott, K. (7/11/2024). *Project 2025 Would Radically Overhaul Higher Ed. Here's How.* Inside Higher Ed.

Focus on managing difficult dialogues:

The difficulty to effectively navigate tense conversations on college campuses is having a detrimental impact on the academic environment. It is stifling open discourse and contributing to a polarized climate, as faculty and students entrench themselves in opposing ideological camps rather than engaging in robust, respectful debate. This, in turn, is hampering student development and taking a toll on mental health, with rising rates of stress and burnout affecting both learners and educators. Highly publicized incidents of campus unrest have also damaged the reputations of individual institutions and the higher education sector more broadly, further eroding the trust between students, faculty, and administration. Addressing these challenges through improved dialogue facilitation and a renewed focus on fostering mutual understanding is crucial for preserving the integrity and effectiveness of colleges and universities.

To Learn More:

Difficult Dialogues Guide. Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching.

WEBINAR: *Preparing for the Election: Practical Strategies for Campus Leaders to Foster Community.* Constructive Dialogue Institute.

INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE

INITIATIVES

After discussing the gaps in supporting student mental health and faculty/staff wellness, participants brainstormed solutions to address these challenges. The following ideas were generated during each of the three training groups:

When creating an initiative, it's crucial to align it with overarching support structures, such as your **university's strategic plan** or **mission statement**. Consider the **campus partnerships** needed to launch and sustain the initiative, and explore **potential funding sources**, such as alumni donations or grants, to support its development.

- Linking initiatives to the Okanagan Charter for health promoting universities
- Connecting with JED Campus for support
- Using the Healthy Minds "Return on Investment" Calculator for advocacy around funding
- Engaged Scholar Review for employee evaluation process for consideration of promotion or tenure to help incorporate elements of invisible labor
- Eliminate the "exceeding expectations" category in employee evaluations and incorporate criteria that emphasize employee wellness.
- Create a Mentorship Program (example: RANDSTAD Mentorship Program)
- Cross training sessions between departments
- Adding non-leaders to leadership initiatives
- Partnering in division-wide relationships to map out shared responsibilities and communication issues.

- Create a Real Self Care program with attention to boundaries for faculty and librarians (Rhode Island College initiative)
- Create training curriculum for de-escalation and crisis identification for faculty/librarians
- Create and run a Faculty Advisory Board
- JEDI Community of Practice, REJI (Racial Equity Justice Initiative at Bridgewater State and MGH Inst of Health), JEDI Fellows Program
- New hire orientation (MH, boundaries)
- Faculty Learning Community (faculty only) or Professional Learning Community for staff and faculty
- MH Roundtable event with keynote and panel presentation with panel with keynote for Student Affairs
- Developing a closer partnership with media and marketing
- Partnering Counseling center staff with faculty
- Create an Integrated CARE form through an app with feedback loop to those who submit reports