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Report: College campus counseling center usage and staffing

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6–7 minutes

Counseling services are a key element of student retention in higher education due to [elevated numbers of students reporting mental health conditions](#), but creating a sustainable practice that addresses students and staff needs remains a challenge, according to survey data from the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD).

The association's [annual report](#), published Feb. 25, highlights a tapering off of the increased demand for mental health services from students, but continued pressure to support clinician and nonclinical staff members through challenging work conditions.

Methodology

The survey includes responses from 367 counseling center directors from the U.S. and its territories and 14 from other countries. The majority of respondents work at four-year institutions and urban campuses. The reporting period ranges from July 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024.

Student engagement: While students continue to [report high levels of mental health concerns](#), some counseling centers are seeing a decline in

student demand.

The majority of respondents at four-year institutions reported a decline or no change in the number of unique clients seen (68 percent) and the number of appointments provided (58 percent). Among two-year colleges, 33 percent reported a decrease in the number of unique clients seen and 43 percent reported a decrease in overall appointments provided.

One in four counseling center directors (24 percent) indicated their centers did not have trouble meeting demand for services.

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Around 11 percent of students at four-year institutions accessed counseling services, and just under 5 percent of students at community colleges received counseling center support. “Centers at smaller schools served, on average, much larger proportions (8 to 19 percent) of their enrolled populations than centers at larger schools (7 to 8 percent),” according to the report.

Student data indicated a correlation between student success and counseling center usage: 73 percent of clients reported that counseling services positively [impacted their academic performance](#), and 71 percent said it [helped them stay in school](#).

Staffing: The four-year college had 9.2 full-time-equivalent clinical employees, while the average for community colleges was 4.5 employees. Around 2 percent of centers were staffed by only one person, but this was a decline compared to the year prior, when 3.5 percent of directors indicated they were a one-person center.

Diversity of directors who completed the survey continues to rise, with

30 percent of respondents identifying as a person of color, up from 16 percent in the 2012–13 survey.

Staff turnover remains a concern for college counseling centers, with 12 percent of all nontrainee clinical positions and 10 percent of all nontrainee positions turning over in the past fiscal year. The top reasons staff left their roles were low salary (48 percent) and work conditions (32 percent), though fewer staff cited leaving the field as a reason for departure this year, compared to prior surveys.

[Embedded counseling services](#) remain limited, with around 30 percent of institutions utilizing counselors assigned to work within other departments. Athletics was the most frequently reported area where embedded clinicians work, followed by a specific school, student affairs office and residence life.

Services: Most clinical sessions were delivered in person (81 percent), followed by video (15 percent) and phone (3 percent). This mirrors the [Center for Collegiate Mental Health's data](#), published earlier this year, which found 64 percent of clients received exclusively in-person counseling and 13 percent received video-only care.

While a slight majority of centers do not have formal session limits (55 percent), 43 percent of institutions limit the number sessions a student can access by year, with some flexibility in the model. Only 0.6 percent of respondents indicated their campus has a hard session limit with no exceptions.

Teletherapy continues to be a popular offering among institutions, with 53 percent of four-year institutions and 35 percent of community colleges employing a third-party vendor to provide services. Use by students varies widely, even among similarly sized institutions, but the average number of participating students was 453.

“Overall, regardless of the type of service provided by a third-party vendor, the majority of directors reported utilization was less than hoped for or met their expectations,” according to the report.

The number of unique students who attended a crisis appointment averaged across centers was 125, and the average number of crisis appointments was 166. A majority (65 percent) offered psychiatric services within the counseling center, elsewhere on campus or in both locations.

In addition, a majority of respondents indicated their center provides formal or informal consultation services to the community.

Looking ahead: While the report focuses on the previous fiscal year, there remains a need to continue to provide accessible and high-quality counseling services, says Cindy M. Bruns, survey coordinator for AUCCCD. “By fostering a supportive campus culture and ensuring that mental health resources are available, colleges can help students navigate political and social environments while promoting resilience and well-being.”

Some counseling directors have noticed students are experiencing “elevated levels of anxiety, uncertainty, threats to their sense of safety and belonging on campus” due to federal action under the second Trump administration, Bruns says, which could prompt an increase in the number of students seeking services.

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