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**AUCCCD**

**Association for University and College  
Counseling Center Directors**

# Essential: The Roles and Impacts of the University and College Counseling Center

# MESSAGE FROM AUCCCD

As our last paper, *Navigating a Path Forward*, was being finished, it became clear to those of us who were authors, as well as others on the AUCCCD Board of Directors, that it was merely the start of a conversation, one that we needed to continue. That paper helped describe and explain a moment in college counseling's history, providing a rationale to help us all understand why many of our colleagues were leaving the profession. It also started to lay the groundwork for how we could begin to forge a new way forward.



*Essential: The Roles and Impacts of the University and College Counseling Center* shines a light on the horizon of what our future can and, perhaps, should be— and helps all of us, including our campus partners, understand the ways in which college counseling center professionals are essential to the ecosystem of a campus community.

In order to walk away from the mental health crisis narrative of the last decade, we have to choose to be intentional and proactive, instead of reactive— to resist turning inward and instead reach out to form or build upon connections and collaborations. We have to stop thinking that we are not doing enough and instead start thinking about how to start doing things differently and more intentionally, utilizing the collective ecology of our campuses to help us make our campuses healthier for students, faculty, and staff. This paper talks about the ways that college counseling staff can contribute to that collective ecology.

A lot has changed in our world from two years ago when the initial thoughts of this paper began, and yet the content of this paper is as relevant as ever. College mental health is a specialty that, for the sake of our students and campuses, needs to continue to grow and evolve. Similarly, the expertise that college mental health professionals bring to our campuses needs to be maximized on our campuses.

I hope that this paper encourages you to carve out time to evaluate your campus and vision with campus partners to find a new way forward. I also hope that it inspires us to see the other offices and departments on our campuses in a similar way - asking, in what ways can, and do we contribute to the collective ecology of campus? We represent one of many professional disciplines on campus that are essential to our success as institutions of higher education. Hopefully this paper helps us all to envision the ways that we can fully live into our collective work.

THE ORGANIZATIONS LISTED BELOW HAVE OFFERED  
THEIR SUPPORT FOR THIS POSITION PAPER.

WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR THEIR REVIEW AND COMMENTS.



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**HEADS OF UNIVERSITY  
COUNSELLING SERVICES  
(HUCS)**

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AUCCCD IS A PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY THAT FOSTERS DIRECTOR DEVELOPMENT AND SUCCESS. TO ADVANCE THE MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION, WE INNOVATE, EDUCATE AND ADVOCATE FOR COLLEGIATE MENTAL HEALTH. WE ARE COMMITTED TO INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE AND THE PROMOTION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE.

In the previous AUCCCD position paper, *Navigating a Path Forward* (Gorman et al. 2023), the authors reviewed the pressures on counseling centers- and higher education more generally- around the provision of mental health services. Focusing on the need for setting rational expectations and strategic action around the concept of “meeting demand” for services, working with vendors, and rational approaches to compensation, that paper highlighted how deeply the world of college mental health has changed in the last decade. The authors of *this* position paper extend those observations and recommendations. More specifically, we aim to articulate the essential roles that counseling centers play in addressing the mental health needs of the collegiate ecosystem. This includes attention to the integrated and coordinated services a counseling center offers to a campus community through *clinical services, outreach and consultation, education and training, and partnership with colleagues* across the campus communities they serve.

The forces shaping higher education — enrollment challenges, demographic shifts, expectations for the college experience, and questions around value and affordability— will shape higher education over the next decade. Although seemingly unrelated, on the surface, these and other challenges facing higher education also involve an approaching paradigm shift in how “mental health” is defined and addressed. This necessitates clarifying the essence of the roles and functions of the college counseling center in the broader college ecosystem. As we observed in our last position paper, “attempting to be everything for everyone only reinforces for campus constituents the erroneous belief that meeting all needs is possible” (Gorman, et al, 2023, p.9). A recent article by Sharon Mitchell captured this in closing with the sentiment, “to borrow from the title of a recent Academy Award-winning film, college counseling centers can no longer be expected to be ‘everything, everywhere, all at once.’” (Mitchell, 2023, p. 1132). But not being everything cannot simply involve asserting boundaries; instead, it must involve being a *critical part* of a larger system, making it even more important to articulate what critical functions and expertise counseling centers do offer the college communities they serve.

In such a system, it is important to keep a focus on the special knowledge and skills that a counseling center and a counseling center director bring to a community. For many years, as Counseling Centers evolved in response to the challenges of increased demand and acuity, systems emerged that resulted in all students with “mental health concerns” being funneled to on-campus clinical resources. Moving forward in an era where mental health is a term with ever-broadening use, this is no longer a viable strategy. Removing this expectation that the center handles all of “mental health concerns” actually allows centers to focus on and optimize the specific functions that they do perform and the specific expertise and training that clinicians in a center bring to a collegiate community. In *this* position paper, the authors will illustrate how counseling centers - through clinical services, outreach and consultation, risk management, and education and training - fill essential functions that lead to healthy, sustainable, and effective mental health focused collegiate ecosystems.

# THE VALUE OF INTEGRATED-COORDINATED SERVICE

An often unrecognized (but, perhaps, the most critical) role of the college counseling center is that of campus partner within the communities they serve. This role, in the context of the higher education setting, is necessary in order to highlight the growing recognition that mental health and wellbeing is a campus-wide endeavor. Therefore, to fully understand the unique contributions of the campus counseling center, it is necessary to acknowledge and articulate how integral the roles and functions of campus partners are to the work of counseling centers.

Whether in the service of an individual student or in macro-level endeavors to inform policies and practices across the campus, the service of colleagues across the campus is not only valuable but also necessary for a counseling center to best serve students. Partners in residence life departments (from RA's to professional staff); campus police and other safety mechanisms such as threat assessment or behavioral intervention teams; health services and health promotion; case management; student activities and student leadership development; campus cultural centers and professionals promoting inclusion and belonging, diversity, and equity; academic advising; career service centers; faculty and academic department chairs; teams organizing new student orientation and family weekends, and senior leadership throughout Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, Enrollment Services are all part of an interdependent endeavor that is connected to the function of the campus counseling center. This value on integrated service represents a shift from the more individual-focus of traditional psychotherapy toward one that incorporates a public health approach and is informed by systemic and interdisciplinary analysis.

Counseling center professionals benefit from the multiple interdisciplinary perspectives that inform a college or university, while also providing campus partners with the expertise, data, and caring that is unique to the services they provide. This coordinated interdependence is what most distinguishes the counseling center clinicians from their counterparts in the private practice sector or the vendors in the surging mental health industry that centers the need to provide services to individual students as demand for services often eclipses needed attention to the nuances of what and how those services are delivered. Those providers, while offering needed clinical services that can fill gaps in suites of services, lack the interconnections that come from routine work with campus partners that informs the delivery of services grounded in understanding the needs of students on any unique campus. Providers employed by vendors are also not physically present in ways that facilitate knowledge of the numerous resources and structures across a campus that can support students and that lead to positive partnerships with other departments also supporting students in one manner or another.

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# CLINICAL SERVICES

The clinical services role of the college counseling center is likely the most recognized (and most demanded) part of what a Counseling Center offers a university or college community. The presence of accreditation bodies that are specific to higher education settings, such as the International Accreditation of Counseling Services (IACS) and the Counseling Services component of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), speaks to the unique value and necessity of clinical services and their complexity (Brunner et al., 2017).

Counseling Centers provide essential direct clinical service to students, and that service is delivered through various formats, including:

- Individual counseling
- Group counseling (process groups, special topics/support groups, and psychoeducational groups)
- Non-clinical or wellness programs, including life skills and self-management activities
- Crisis counseling (daytime and after hours)
- Clinical Consultation (responding to phone calls from concerned friends/peers, faculty, staff and parents/guardians)
- Case management services (to provide referral assistance to other services)

## THE HEART OF CLINICAL SERVICES

The list of various modalities of clinical services, however, fails to capture the essence of what those services provide to a college or university campus, best captured in terms of the impact on the students being served. While there is a great deal of attention given to these services in the dominant crisis narrative, which emphasizes the struggles and tragedies of college students, there is far more to the impact of a Counseling Center's clinical services that is not captured by that narrative.

The clinical services of the campus counseling center reach students on a wide range of challenges, from the developmentally expected challenges of college life to more severe mental illness. This includes the myriad experiences that exist in the wide and nuanced spectrum between these two ends of the mental health continuum. Most providers in campus counseling centers, especially those who have been in their roles for several years, have a collection of handwritten cards or emails expressing gratitude for the impact that counselor has had on that student. Some of these messages describe the counseling experience as among the most meaningful in their time at the college, while others reference the greater sense of Self or courage or insight into what matters to them and share a greater awareness of what they have to offer in their relationships and their communities. Most profoundly, perhaps, are those that include the word “literally” when declaring that the services and care they received “saved my life.”



## OBJECTIVE DATA ON CLINICAL SERVICES

In addition to the more personal anecdotes that almost never emerge in the national coverage of college mental health, there is also objective data demonstrating the impact of clinical services (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2018). Much of the data on the effectiveness of clinical interventions points to the model of clinical intervention, usually determined more by resource allocation to counseling centers than clinical expertise. Nevertheless, McAleavey et al., (2019) found that counseling center clients experience improvement in their presenting concerns at a rate that is equivalent to those in random clinical trials, in spite of the fact that the naturalistic setting with greater complexity of clients in a dynamic college student population would likely undermine effectiveness, relative to the context of a well-controlled clinical trial.

The impact of counseling center clinical services is particularly salient, given the setting of the college campus and the inherent relevance of academic impacts of counseling services. For example, various research points to the role that clinical services of the campus counseling center play in improving retention and graduation (Bishop, 2010, Sharkin, 2004, and Turner & Berry, 2000). Additionally, Kivlighan et al. (2021) offer data pointing to how reductions in psychosocial distress from receiving counseling services are associated with positive changes in their GPA over time. This research does point to complexity in these findings, in that, for more severely impaired students or those with more chronic conditions, those struggles can negatively impact the graduation rate and academic performance of students as well. In these circumstances, however, the clinical services of the center play a role in helping those students for whom their wellbeing, and often their actual safety, needs to be prioritized over their academic goals. In these situations, counseling centers play a role in facilitating the necessary medical leaves that are often necessary for a student's safety or ability to continue academically.





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The complexity of “clinical services” can be under-recognized if understood simply in terms of meeting demand for counseling sessions. The various modalities of clinical services should not be understood simply in terms of how many appointments are offered, which is a common reactive emphasis in the current pressure facing counseling centers to keep up with the demand for clinical appointments. Rather, the clinical services role of the college Counseling Center must be understood as also providing a particular expertise regarding student mental health needs, specific to *higher education settings*. Mitchell, Oakley, and Dunkle (2019) offer a succinct review of how, in the early days of what we now regard as “college mental health,” there were distinct services offering treatment in mental health clinics, in contrast to counseling centers that emerged to address students’ “adjustment issues, vocational training and employment, and social and personal effectiveness” (p.2). Today, the boundary between these two services and the range of issues they provided has all but disappeared, and the demands for the entire range of clinical services typically falls on one counseling center under a variety of names across the national college mental health landscape. Nevertheless, the notion of “mental health issues” has become so broad that it encompasses a wide range of student needs to address various forms of mental illness on one end and, on the other, the developmentally expected challenges of college life and emerging adulthood—or career transition periods for non- traditional aged students (Brunner et al., 2014; Novotney, 2014; Rosenbaum and Liebert, 2015). The expertise counseling center professionals carry does not simply inform delivery of clinical services; it informs various constituents across the higher education landscape about the myriad experiences and needs of the ever-evolving student body.

The clinical service role of the college counseling center also offers the necessary discretion many students need in order to get the help they need. The cost of services through providers in private practice (and to access parents’ insurance to pay for those costs) often requires family members to learn about the need for services. This lack of discretion functions as an insurmountable barrier to receiving care for many students.

This spectrum of services and expertise also distinguishes campus services from those provided by off-campus providers in the community or vendors. As noted earlier, more institutions recognize the need for a campus-wide approach to student wellbeing, and all campus faculty/staff—with varying degrees of skill and comfort in responding to mental health concerns—are involved in supporting students. In this ecosystem, the campus counseling center provides expertise as consultants in responding to the concerns of students as well as to the concerns of faculty, staff, and parents concerned about those students. When off-campus providers or 3<sup>rd</sup> party vendors offer clinical services, they tend to serve only the individual client. While counseling center clinical services also serve individual students, this service is often integrated with consultation to the campus community and the support systems in the students’ day to day lives.



This includes those students receiving counseling services and those not yet connected to resources *but whose struggles are impacting the campus community*. Off-campus providers do not have the knowledge of the resources and do not have relationships with others on campus to enhance the wellbeing of students in this multifaceted approach.

## BEYOND THE COUNSELING CENTER'S WALLS

Additionally, many centers extend beyond the walls of the counseling center to reach those students needing (but are unlikely to seek) services at the main campus counseling center. A growing trend is to offer services through various embedded counselors across different campus locations (Schreier et al., 2023). While stigma around mental health services has lessened, cultural norms for many communities remain a barrier to help-seeking through formal appointments. Campus counseling centers, as part of the campus community, can provide services in more informal counseling arenas as part of the college or university support system (Banks, 2018; Choy & Alon, 2018; Mier et al. 2008; Shadick & Akhter, 2014). This is a particularly important distinction at this moment of political polarization and intensifying social tensions that impact campus culture and, naturally, the mental wellbeing of students (Ballard et al, 2022; Hope et al. 2018), especially students that are marginalized by social forces and structures but also may under-utilize services. Clinicians from the campus counseling center have the skills and expertise to navigate the casualties of the culture wars, particularly around the identities and impacts of race, sexual orientation, gender, and socio-economic diversity. They help individual students but also provide clinical data about the needs and experiences of students to campus partners and administrative leadership, doing so in terms that transcend the political debates that are hyper-focused on the language of opposing ideologies. Counseling centers play a role in documenting the clinical distress, if not threats to safety, associated with micro-aggressions, marginalization, intergenerational trauma, and assaults on particular identities of students. Doing so, in constructs of psychological functioning and academic capacity, represents a critical dimension of Clinical Services that informs counseling interventions, the goals of student-facing campus partners, and decision-making administrators who must function in the broader social, political, and economic arenas. With unique expertise and skill employed, counseling center clinicians with deep familiarity of the campus environment can play a role in helping the campus navigate more macro-level conflicts toward resolution and community healing and growth.

Clinical Services also includes providing consultative expertise to various administrative teams on campuses that range from supporting students of concern (Care Teams, Students of Concern Committees, etc.) to better understanding those posing potential threats to the campus community, such as Behavioral Intervention or Threat Assessment Teams (Eells & Rockland-Miller, 2010; Pollard et al., 2015). All of these efforts support the academic mission and the needs of the community impacting and impacted by struggling students (i.e., family members, peers, professors, significant others, etc.). While confidentiality for individual clients is maintained, the greater needs of the community are also served by counseling center professionals.

## CONTRIBUTING TO UNDERSTANDING A POPULATION

There is another role that clinical services of the campus counseling center plays but one that has not yet been fully realized to benefit the campuses they serve: collecting and reporting data on the students they serve. This is important not only as it informs delivery of counseling services but also as it informs the consultation that counseling centers provide to campus partners. Aggregate data on the students that utilize counseling services provides local clinical data that can inform the needs assessment of the entire campus, across departments and through various levels of administrative leadership regarding the strengths, challenges, and trajectories of clients, representing an increasing proportion of the student body.

Furthermore, there are organizations specifically dedicated to college counseling center professionals that collect and share data providing critical observations on the national level to inform the overall field of college mental health. For example, The Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) collects and analyzes data from students across the United States who receive services at counseling centers regarding clinical concerns, histories, specific student populations, and variables of particular interest to the academic environment. This data set includes information from intake, during treatment, and at the termination of treatment, collected from clients and the clinicians assessing their needs and implementing services. Such data is important for discerning student trends so that centers can maneuver or pivot their services to meet those needs, also informing campus partners who may also play a role in addressing the various needs of students. Additionally, information from national surveys of AUCCCD and partner organizations inform counseling centers on concerns that are critical for college campuses, from clinical information to utilization trends to staffing issues to trends for particular student populations and communities. This ability to collect, study, and report on data that is specific to higher education settings represents a culminating distinction from off campus providers and corporate vendors increasingly marketing their services to higher education administrators. Clinicians in private practice and companies providing telehealth counseling services are less likely to pursue such data because they provide adjunct services to individual students and are not also serving the campus communities in which these data streams hold meaning and inform a wider range of constituents across the college or university setting.



## SUPPORTING THE ACADEMIC MISSION

Finally, a role of clinical services that is seldom articulated in the current mental-health-crisis narrative refers to a defining element in the mission of the college counseling center: to support the academic mission of the institution. On a more surface level, counseling center clinicians recognize that, often, it is not student struggles with depression or anxiety or some difficult situation that, in and of the struggles themselves, prompts them to seek counseling; rather, *it is when those struggles impact their academic performance, specifically their grades, that they reach out for help*. Whether helping clients explore the meaning associated with grades or clarify career aspirations related to academic struggles, a unique dimension of clinical services in counseling centers is the capacity to integrate goals that help students not only heal and grow but also experience genuine learning—in their self-development as well as with mindsets that enhance their academic engagement.

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Additionally, counseling center professionals are familiar with the unique impacts of the academic calendar. Given the ebb-and-flow of semesters and quarters that come with periodic interruptions, counseling center professionals tailor their interventions in a manner informed by the academic context. When long-term or in-depth therapy is not feasible, counseling centers help students restore and enhance their level of functioning toward helping them capitalize on the educational experience that defines their reasons for being in college. While this may not yet be a proclaimed role of college counseling centers and a formalized specialty area, campuses and college counseling professionals have much to gain from a more intentional approach to college counseling center services that explicitly integrate the student experience into the clinical conceptualization and the treatment outcomes they aim to provide, in alignment with the scope of care appropriate for college and university settings.





## A SUPPORTIVE ECOLOGY OF RESOURCES

The variety of clinical services becomes more strategically advantageous as stepped care approaches, group therapy, and individual counseling options allow clinical services to be delivered in line with student needs. This will become increasingly important as the current global realities and national concerns, which have already begun to manifest in counseling centers, continue to emerge in the students that will be admitted to college campuses in the coming years. These realities and concerns will present unique needs of college students that arrive with both the traumas and perseverance of uncommon struggle. The immigrant experience (or the experience of being raised by family members that navigated such experiences); the inevitably increasing number of refugee experiences for many fleeing from unfathomable violence; mass shootings survivors; natural disaster witnesses; and survivors of increasingly violent crimes of hate and political/social polarization will impact students in a way that clinical services as part of a supportive ecology of resources will be needed. As students with such concerns are already arriving, increasingly, they will be showing up in residence halls, classrooms, student social organizations, and, inevitably, in the college counseling center needing help navigating the multiple arenas that make college enriching and, nevertheless, stressful—potentially triggering for survivors of increasingly various forms of trauma. The expertise of clinical services, clearly, will evolve into a role that includes providing therapy but, even more so, providing consultation and data to enable campuses to provide resources at the scale needed in this evolving landscape.



# OUTREACH & CONSULTATION

Among the more defining features of a college or university counseling center is the role they fill in developing and delivering outreach efforts. While outreach comes in many forms, this particular function of college counseling centers represents the extension of the wisdom and expertise of the center to the entire campus community. Research consistently shows that the most predictive variable in counseling outcomes is the relationship between the client and the counselor; counseling center outreach represents the relationship between the counseling center and the campus community it serves, and the quality of that relationship is reflected in the trust and respect the center earns. This is especially noteworthy, given how much of the heart of clinical services remains confidential and, therefore, less visible to the campus community. Whether in the form of delivering presentations or psycho-educational workshops, passive programming, tabling and marketing efforts, informative and supportive consultative relationships, or providing training sessions and materials to campus partners, outreach is one of the key functions that distinguishes center professionals from clinicians whose work is more completely defined by providing clinical services via scheduled appointments. In short, counseling center outreach prepares and empowers campus partners, which includes student leaders, to play a role in promoting student well-being and maintaining a campus safety net. Counseling Center outreach efforts engage the entire college or university community, as a whole and also toward particular constituents. This includes all students (not simply those receiving clinical services), faculty, staff, administrators, parents or family members of students, student leaders, and (on some campuses) prospective students through programming during recruitment efforts of the admissions offices.



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## THE HEART OF OUTREACH

When counseling centers were first introduced as part of the broad services provided by colleges and universities, the primary function of outreach was to communicate the role and availability of this new resource, including increased utilization to struggling students who would benefit from counseling center services. Additionally, this has involved challenging the stigma that discourages students from seeking services when they are needed to restore and maintain academic engagement or personal wellbeing. Outreach also represents the counseling center's priority to invest particular attention to communities that have historically under-utilized services due to oppressive and systemic realities that undermined help-seeking and trusting of institutional resources. In this way, outreach plays a critical role on college campuses to address the many negative impacts on students' mental health from various and intersecting elements of injustice. Whether promoting healing, enhancing belonging, or deepening positive self-concept through layers of student identity, counseling center outreach helps the entire institution realize its aspirations to live up to its values.

Unlike mental health professionals in private practice or employed by large companies that deliver online services, the counseling center's outreach mission also, inherently, includes responding to psychological and emotional needs that emerge in the campus community. Whether this is related to any given crisis impacting a community (such as the death of a student or a natural disaster impacting many students) or is related to any identifiable pattern of behaviors suggesting emotional or psychological vulnerability impacting the campus community (such as high incidence of substance abuse or disordered eating facing a group, team, or community), counseling center professionals are there for the entire student body, not merely individual students who might seek clinical services. Given the pervasiveness of mental health challenges in society, counseling center outreach also engages in prevention or early detection of issues facing the campus community via various screening activities to detect students at risk of harm or significant impairment in functioning.





## BUILDING COMMUNITY & CHANGING CULTURE

While much of outreach entails delivery of programming, whether through presentations or facilitated experiential activities, counseling centers also provide informative materials and programs to campus student communities aimed at facilitating personal, interpersonal, and social development. More traditionally through brochures and handouts and, increasingly, via social media and online resources, counseling centers function to better inform the community about mental health, personal effectiveness, interpersonal connections, and to facilitate development of life skills in these areas. Additionally, they provide information about mental illness or psychological distress toward helping connect those who are struggling with resources, doing so in a way that aims to create a more empathetic and supportive community.

Since the early days of counseling that focused on marketing the counseling center toward broad utilization of counseling services, outreach has evolved to include more nuanced goals that play a crucial role in further defining the unique role of the counseling center on college campuses. In the same way that outreach addresses systemic realities associated with social justice, counseling center outreach employs the skills used in therapy that prompt reflection and lead to student insight into other toxic and pervasive norms that result in student struggle. Whether challenging struggles related to hyper-competitiveness, preoccupation with grades, hyper-masculinity, conformity pressures related to substance abuse or sexual decision-making, or unhealthy pursuits of poorly defined notions of success, outreach addresses the macro-level issues that result in pervasive individual student stress and distress. In this way, college counseling center outreach also informs the social landscape of its clients, in effect, delivering some of the benefits of individual therapy to communities on campus, influencing the entire campus with therapeutic impact.



## STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH OUTREACH

In recent decades, as mental health struggles have been mounting across campuses, the outreach role of the counseling center has, increasingly, required a more coordinated and strategic manner toward creating and supporting an overall climate of compassionate and therapeutic support on their campuses. This involves:

- Increasing empathetic understanding of issues in the campus community and providing skills training in response to distressed students.
- Providing training to student leaders who often serve in paraprofessional counseling roles (RA's, peer advisors, etc.) and other student affairs professionals.
- Prompting conversation and/or reflection on intrapersonal and social experiences toward facilitating supportive and “therapeutic” connections that naturally exist in the community, orchestrating less reliance on formal clinical mental health service delivery (often in the form of trained peer counselors or peer-support systems).
- Providing consultation to administrators regarding how campus environment, institutional structures and values, and policies and practices can inform and/or impact the students experiences and well-being.

Taken as a whole, outreach efforts play an identifiable role in improving students' skills in self-management, personal and professional interaction, and ethical community engagement. This, capitalizes on the foundational role of counseling center outreach: to collaborate with campus partners who make up the coordinated network of resources and professionals that comprise the college or university community.





# EDUCATION & TRAINING PROGRAMS

Given the clearly unique role and expertise of the college counseling center, it is vital to continue to train generations of masters and doctoral clinicians who understand and value the work of college counseling centers. Recent membership surveys by AUCCCD demonstrate that hiring difficulties prior to covid (LeViness, et al., 2019) were exacerbated post-covid by the Great Resignation and continued hiring challenges (Gorman et al., 2023; Bruns, et al., 2024). These hiring challenges have affected both master's and doctoral degree searches but are particularly striking for psychologist searches. The AUCCCD Directors Survey covering fiscal year 23 found that searches for psychologist candidates yielded a mean of 2.1 applicants per position (range 0-13), while master's clinician position searches had a mean of 7.5 applicants per position with a range of zero to forty-four (Bruns, et al., 2024).

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The difficulty of hiring psychologists strains the ability of counseling centers to maintain doctoral internships, meaning fewer mental health professionals are being trained in the vital work of college counseling, further reducing future applicant pools. Counseling centers with training programs and those they serve benefit from a diversity of clinician types and the lens of analysis counselors, social workers, and psychologists bring to the work. Capitalizing and building on this variety of college counseling center training programs will ensure continued service by an interdisciplinary field of professionals who understand and value the unique work of counseling centers and can commit their careers to this work.



## THE HEART OF TRAINING

Several unique factors make education and training of future mental health providers integral to the mission and function of university and college counseling centers. First, centers are situated in institutions whose missions are to provide advanced education for the public good. While this mission is typically thought of in terms of the students enrolled in the institution, the wider scholarly activities of universities and colleges supports a wider application of the educational mission to include counseling center training programs. Many counseling centers exist on campuses with master's and doctoral programs that educate future mental health professionals, providing important practicum and internship experiences for students from their own institutions.

The work conducted at university and college counseling centers combines knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) across several specialty domains. This includes developmental, educational, multicultural, clinical, counseling, community, and organizational psychology; various individual, relationship and group interventions; risk assessment and management; consultation and outreach; and public health and general research principles. Most clinicians not only possess KSAs across multiple domains but also must possess the flexibility to transition quickly between different skill sets. In a routine day, a clinician might counsel a homesick student, provide psychotherapy to a trauma survivor, deliver a workshop on overcoming procrastination, facilitate the hospitalization of a student with severe suicidal intent, attend a university committee meeting to provide psychological expertise, and end the day facilitating a support space for BIPOC students in collaboration with their institution's multicultural center. Counseling center clinicians must be able to apply their knowledge, skills, and abilities with a wide range of identities, communities, and demographics, individualizing their approaches based on lifespan development, social justice and cultural factors, and a number of other factors. While many other practicum and internship sites provide training in a subset of these KSAs, none fully encompass the wide spectrum that university and college counseling centers do.

## TRAINING & THE FUTURE OF COUNSELING CENTERS

University and college counseling center work is arguably a specialization that requires unique and comprehensive training. This specialization makes education and training essential to the counseling center's mission and daily function. The presence of practicum and internship programs are often justified by characterizing clinicians-in-training as service extenders. While this is an important function of these positions, it is not and cannot be the primary reason for the existence of training programs. Rather, *training programs are vital to the continued existence of university and college counseling centers*. The uniquely wide-ranging knowledge, skills, and abilities needed by counseling center providers means that hiring clinicians who have trained in other contexts requires significant additional training during onboarding processes. The likelihood of frustration and burnout in new hires increases, as the transition to the counseling center environment can be quite overwhelming for those coming from other contexts.

# CONCLUSION

In articulating the unique and essential roles that college counseling centers play on college campuses, there is a risk of describing an ideal that can be inspiring in spirit but overwhelming (if not unrealistic) in practice for some centers. Given the challenges associated with burn-out of existing counseling center professionals, higher than usual rates of clinicians leaving counseling center settings, and challenges associated with filling vacant positions, a sustainable understanding of the role of counseling centers is critical.

*...there is much to gain by envisioning the counseling center... beyond a mentality of simply providing services, toward a more integrative role that is defined by being of service to our campus communities.*

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPERTISE

The most pronounced and recognized role of the college counseling center has been that of providing direct clinical services to the campus community. It is important to acknowledge that some of the roles described in this paper, beyond direct clinical services, are not reflected in all, or perhaps even most, of the counseling centers on college campuses, much less consider essential. As we navigate a path forward, there is much to gain by envisioning the counseling center roles in a manner that moves beyond a mentality of simply providing services, toward a more integrative role that is defined by being of service to our campus communities. More specifically, this involves shifting from an over-emphasis on providing clinical services in a manner that eclipses recognition of a potentially more critical role: providing expertise.

The clinical expertise of college counseling center professionals, as articulated throughout this document, is an expertise that is unique to the college counseling center professionals. That expertise is informed by interdisciplinary perspectives, the experience and expertise of campus colleagues, and the perpetual ebb and flow of trends common to the college campus, with each emerging generation and each evolving social and global context. Like our off-campus colleagues, college counseling center professionals have clinical expertise to address the pervasive forms of depression, anxiety, disordered eating, trauma, and family distress. However, the role of the college counseling center requires that student challenges are understood with an intricate nuance that routinely recognizes how these struggles are uniquely informed by the classroom experience, the residence hall culture, the choice of selecting a major, the social club or Greek Life organization encounters, the academic advising sessions, the financial aid letters and myriad other elements unique to being enrolled in college or university.

Further, college counseling centers also comprehend the unique therapeutic interventions suitable for clients that live in a particular rhythm that is specific to the college experiences: interruptions from Fall and Spring breaks, transitions between semesters or quarters, and the amplification of symptoms that emerge in the season of mid-term and final exam periods. While providers in the private practice sector or those employed by vendors, like college counseling center professionals, must operate as generalists to address the wide range of concerns that students bring, they simply cannot apply services with the same attention to the multifaceted and dynamic elements of a college community.

*Finally, another aspect of counseling center expertise introduces an additional, and critical function that counseling centers perform: risk management. While this is often in the form of assessments related to self-harm and suicide, risk management is a thread woven throughout all of the functions a center performs. As noted above, with expertise specific to a community, counseling centers contribute in ongoing ways to multiple processes- students of concern teams, gatekeeper training, community education and outreach, consultation with faculty & staff, and so on- that all reduce risk for an institution in significant ways. It would not be an exaggeration to say that counseling centers are essential to effective risk management strategies for the institutions they serve.*

## EMBRACING OUR SPECIAL FUNCTIONS

The goal of articulating the various essential roles of the college counseling center emerged from the need for a ***unifying comprehension of the work that counseling centers have provided*** over the years, especially necessary in the current chaos emerging from the dominant narrative of an ongoing “college mental health crisis.” However, it would be insufficient to merely rely on what counseling centers have provided, and, therefore, this document also serves as a call for more ***purposeful*** efforts, moving forward, to more fully realize the functions we ***can*** offer a community.

While the intended audience of this document clearly includes colleagues and administrators outside the counseling center, there are many more staff and administrative leaders currently in counseling centers that are new to this profession than in previous years, and they are as high a priority an audience as those who have been in this profession for much longer.

As we acknowledge where we are, at this present moment in the trajectory of college counseling center history, it is also important to acknowledge that, on many campuses over the past several decades, college counseling centers were not as engaged as this document calls for. In fact, many of us in the college counseling center profession often refrained, with insistence, from participation beyond the clinical hour. Usually this has been asserted in the service of confidentiality and in the spirit of protecting the therapeutic relationship by limiting it to the 50-minute hours and the privacy of the counselors’ offices. Even on campuses that have already shifted from such a stance, the tone of such boundary-emphasized rapport remains ingrained in the understanding of the role of the counseling center on many campuses. Therefore, it is incumbent on those of us in the counseling center profession in the present and coming years to more intentionally and explicitly own the functions articulated in this document. We can approach this with an eye to the future, informed by our history and with an enhanced attention to a cooperative and collaborative ***practice***, beyond a primarily collegial ***spirit***. This is especially critical as we recognize that, like so many in the counseling center profession, there is also immense fatigue, struggles with staffing, and more challenging hiring efforts ***among our colleagues across the university settings*** in which we all work.



## A CALL TO HIGHER PURPOSE

As summarized in the Navigating a Path Forward, the previous paper offered by AUCCCD, there remains a tension between demands for more counseling services from campus communities on one hand and responding to protests that declare “we can’t be everything to everyone” from exhausted counseling center professionals on the other. We must recognize and acknowledge that this is also true for many of our colleagues throughout the colleges and universities we serve. While it remains important to recognize that counseling centers cannot be “everything, everywhere, all at once,” the aim of articulating the essential roles of the college counseling center is to provide a review of the value of centers and also inform how campuses can prudently channel this valuable campus resource. In other words, Counseling Centers can be several things to numerous partners across the community in a purposeful prioritizing and sequencing of efforts. This involves attention to these essential roles, hopefully helping counseling center directors and higher education administrators address the needs of students, providing services and expertise within the scope of actually available resources.

Perhaps, as we invite discussion on the functions of college counseling centers, it is necessary to state a somewhat obvious observation seldom heard in the din of the “college mental health crisis.” We face a deeper concern in the potential for harmful fatigue and a threatening loss of meaning in the work demanded from all higher education professionals, which is also facing the students we all serve (often narrated in terms of their mental health struggles). Given the multiple arenas across college settings that counseling centers serve in, and the parallel issues facing our colleagues across our campuses, it may be important to consider that we are facing less of a “college mental health crisis” and more of a “higher education crisis.” In the same manner necessitating a more nuanced understanding of what counseling centers’ role and purpose are, a morally courageous reassessment of what the role of college is (and needs to be) is also warranted.

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*...it may be important to consider that we are facing less of a “college mental health crisis” and more of a “higher education crisis.”*

As a starting place, an intentional analysis is needed of the multiple misalignments between what colleges and universities seem to offer and what the students actually receive. These are the misalignments, between learning and grades, between the process inherent in curriculum and promised outcomes associated with degrees, and between mandates of poorly defined success and the harmful stress of perpetually avoiding failure. These misalignments routinely manifest in the struggles that students bring to their therapy sessions, understood with nuanced expertise by the professionals they confide in, and captured in the aggregate data that counseling centers hold. As we continue to navigate a path forward, those services, that expertise, and the data can—and must—play a more coordinated role in alignment with the services, expertise, and data of our colleagues throughout our campuses and throughout the professions across Higher Education. And we, as college counseling center professionals ---in ongoing partnership with our many campus partners--- can fully embrace our role, not only as clinicians and healers but also, and perhaps most importantly, as Educators.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Lynn Braun (she/her) has almost 30 years of experience working in the field of mental health. Over half of that experience has been in college counseling centers, with the rest of her experience coming from community mental health and secondary schools. She has been the Director of Counseling Services at SUNY Oswego since January, 2023. Prior to coming to SUNY Oswego, she was the Assistant Dean of Campus Wellness and Director of Counseling & Accessibility Services for over 11 years. She is the current President of The Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD). Her experience and interests are in improving the development of college counseling centers and their directors, and in helping centers to show the positive impact they have on campus. One of her areas of expertise has been in college counseling centers' impact on retention management. More recently, she's been working to help campuses create comprehensive, campus-wide strategic plans to positively impact campus mental health and wellness through a diversity, equity and inclusion, as well as a trauma lens. Case conceptualization and therapeutic intentionality are her areas of interest in clinical supervision.

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David has over 25 years in higher education, having most recently served as Director of the Counseling Center & Lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Hamilton College. He has worked in three very different higher ed contexts- mid-sized public, large public, and small private liberal arts- in a variety of clinical and administrative roles, and has served as a consultant for numerous institutions ranging in size and context from 1,500 to 30,000 students. David is also a dad, husband, private practice psychologist & consultant, musician, and pilot. In another life, he worked in radio as a weather and news anchor!

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