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## HEALTH & WELLNESS

# With Therapists in Short Supply, College Students Counsel Each Other

Some colleges train undergrads to help fellow students as demand for mental-health services rises

By *Andrea Petersen* [Follow](#) | *Photographs by Lauren Petracca for The Wall Street Journal*

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Clinton, N.Y.—Hamilton College has found one answer to the growing number of students seeking mental-health care on campus: Send them to other students.

The school trains about a dozen undergrads a year to serve as peer counselors, a role that entails being a good listener to other students. The counselors go through about three days of training per year and attend weekly meetings to review peer conversations with the school counseling center’s professional therapists.

Peer counselors, who provide a supportive ear and not actual therapy, relieve some of the demand on the licensed therapists at the campus counseling center, where offerings range from therapy to “mindful movement” classes. The center serves about 40% of the 2,000-member student body a year, up from around 13% a decade ago, says David Walden, director of Hamilton’s counseling center and a clinical psychologist.

Hamilton has also increased the number of professional therapists to 10, including full- and part-time, from three in 2014. Peer counselors refer students with more serious problems to the professional therapists.



David Walden, director of Hamilton College's counseling center, meeting with a peer counselor, 21-year-old senior Anthony Thompson.

Dr. Walden says peer counselors are part of Hamilton's response to what he sees as the expanding definition of mental-health problems to now include everything from sadness over breakups to test anxiety.

"If everyone has a mental-health condition and if every mental-health condition needs a licensed mental-health therapist, there simply aren't enough therapists," he says.

## Rising mental-health demands

Hamilton's problem is America's writ small. There aren't enough therapists to meet the country's rising mental-health needs, particularly among children and young adults, and traditional therapy isn't a realistic option for many people because of cost and time. People are seeking help from a growing range of alternatives, some with untested or questionable effectiveness, including Reddit threads, Instagram wellness influencers and supplement companies, psychologists say.

Peer counseling is growing on campus and off. More colleges are launching and expanding programs, says Marcus Hotaling, president of the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors.

One risk: Peer counselors could face a problem they aren't equipped to deal with and fail to flag it to the professionals.

"We need to be mindful what we are putting onto our students," Dr. Hotaling says.



At a recent session, peer counselor Anthony Thompson, left, listened while senior Austin Pineau talked through his potential post-graduation plans.

Companies like ShareWell and TimelyMD have recently launched online peer-support services. Togetherall, which operates a digital mental-health peer-support community overseen and moderated by licensed mental-health clinicians, is now available for students at about 400 college campuses in the U.S. and elsewhere, up from about 200 in 2019. There are also professional peer-support workers who assist veterans and others dealing with serious mental illness and addiction.

Studies measuring the effectiveness of peer support have yielded mixed results. One-on-one peer support didn't reduce symptoms of psychiatric conditions, according to a review of research published in 2020 in the journal *BMC Psychiatry*. Another scientific review found that peer support was linked to greater happiness and self-esteem and a reduction in symptoms of depression, anxiety and loneliness among young adults, according to an analysis of 17 studies published in 2022 in the journal *BMJ Open*.

## Student support

On a recent evening at Hamilton, peer counselor Anthony Thompson, 21 years old, was conducting a session with Austin Pineau, 22, a senior majoring in math. Mr. Pineau was telling Mr. Thompson, a senior who wants to become a therapist, that he was struggling to decide what to do after graduation: Go straight to graduate school to become a math professor, or find a job, maybe as a high-school math teacher.



Anthony Thompson says he plans to attend graduate school to become a therapist.

“So what would be the situation for you in which you feel like you’d get the most out of,” Mr. Thompson asked Mr. Pineau.

“Part of me visualizes how nice it would be to have a weekend off. To be able to, you know, watch some sports games with friends,” said Mr. Pineau. “Like I haven’t had a weekend off in four years.”

Robust training and oversight is key, says Dr. Walden, 45, who has worked at Hamilton’s counseling center since 2008. Peer counselors are taught how to spot risk and notify clinical staff if a student is having suicidal thoughts or other severe mental-health issues. Licensed therapists then take over. Peer counselors aren’t paid but can receive course credits for their participation in the program.

On such a small campus, peer counselors are bound to run into students they are counseling. Counselors are coached to ask their peers how they want to handle these run-ins: Say ‘hi,’ or pretend I don’t know you. Peer counselors say they are sometimes approached on campus when they aren’t working, by students wanting to hash out problems. (Make an appointment, the counselors are advised to say.)



Audrey Alix came to the decision to quit Hamilton’s field-hockey team, which she realized was a major source of her stress, through conversations with a peer counselor.

Audrey Alix’s friends on the Hamilton field-hockey team suggested she see a peer counselor last fall after the 19-year-old sophomore admitted she was having trouble sleeping, was feeling buried with school work and was distressed by how little playing time she was getting as a goalie.



Mac Behrhorst, a Hamilton peer counselor, says students talk to him about academic stress and social anxiety.

Ms. Alix, who also has a longtime therapist, was initially skeptical about peer counseling. “At first, I was, like, how is another student going to help me?,” she said.

She chose to see Mac Behrhorst, a 22-year-old senior and lacrosse player, because she figured he could relate to her as a student athlete.

“I got so much off my chest,” Ms. Alix says. “He just kind of put things out there for me to think about and helped me dig deeper.” She found herself revealing more than she does with friends, since she knew the talks with Mr. Behrhorst were confidential.

During one session, Mr. Behrhorst asked her: If her coach said she could quit field hockey now, what would Ms. Alix do?

She realized that a lot of her stress was coming from field hockey, and ultimately decided to quit the team. “Now I’m a lot happier,” Ms. Alix said.

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