



## Policy Brief: Expanding Mental Health Opportunities for College Students

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### Who We Are

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### Summary

Current and proposed policies to tackle the growing rates of mental illness among college students are limited to certain groups. To address this need, we urge the United States Congress to: (1) amend and pass the United States Higher Education Mental Health Act of 2021 to solely focus on the experiences of Latinx students and (2) to add a provision to Title V of the Higher Education Act (HEA) to include Latinx students at BIPOC institutions of higher education (IHEs). Both measures would improve access to mental health related services and reduce the mental health problem among college students in the nation.

### The Need

Mental health and well-being concerns on university campuses are on the rise. In the last six years, student anxiety in IHEs jumped from 17% to 31%.<sup>1</sup> College students experience much higher rates of mental illness in comparison to the general public. While there is a significant prevalence of mental health problems among college students, there is a lack of availability of services, knowledge, resources, and access to information about where

counseling services exist. There is no real national database where parents and students can search to find the best college wellness centers. Of those college students who have received counseling, only 30% have used services provided by their college or university.<sup>2</sup>

More often than not, college and university students struggling with their mental health tend to be either low-income, first-generation, students of color, or all of the above.

“First-Generation Students of Color (FGSOC) face increased psychological and social difficulties in college when compared to students in other groups, resulting from cultural differences, lack of academic preparedness, stigma surrounding socioeconomic status, racial discrimination, and marginalization.”<sup>3</sup> For the nearly 30% of college students who are FGSOC, possessing the intersectional identity of being both a first-generation college student and a racial minority often results in exacerbated impacts on their mental health.

In California, the Legislative Analyst’s Office at the California Legislature provided an overview of available mental health services for college students in December 2021.<sup>4</sup>

“**Campuses primarily provide short-term counseling** in individual and sometimes group settings. Campus policies vary on the exact number of counseling sessions students may receive, with some campuses setting a limit (commonly between six to twelve sessions per year).”

While college campuses may offer temporary or short-term services, students do not have the equitable access to attain this year-round or often do not know that these resources are available to them.

Colleges with high concentrations of BIPOC are not the only institutions that suffer. Students from PWIs also suffer from mental illness as college has increasingly become a leading cause of anxiety and depression.<sup>5</sup> This is a nation-wide issue for college students across all socioeconomic statuses and backgrounds, and collegiate institutions must be aware of addressing the needs of all their students as a collective.

## Background

While H.R. 5654 aims to create a roadmap for improving the mental health services available at colleges and universities across the United States, the legislation fails to specifically address the disparities that are experienced by BIPOC students who are often also first-generation, low-income, or otherwise minoritized and underrepresented in different ways. In addition, while Title V of the HEA is one of the primary sources of institutional support to minority-serving institutions, the eligibility requirements prevent Latinx students attending PWIs, like the University of Southern California and the University of Michigan, from receiving any type of aid specific to their demographic. The University of Southern California has a Hispanic demographic of 15.3%<sup>6</sup> and the University of Michigan has a Hispanic demographic of 6%.<sup>7</sup> While we support both H.R. 5654 and Title V of the HEA, we believe that there needs to be certain amendments and provisions added to these two pieces of legislation to expand the number of mental health resources for BIPOC students.

Latinx college students at IHEs are already at a disadvantage attending universities if they are first-generation, low-income students, and lacking equitable access to mental health services further exacerbates the existing pressure, concerns, and harm for this population of students. With 73% of all students in the United States reporting that they experience some sort of mental health crisis during college, it is imperative that

the federal government make it a priority to find solutions on how to address mental health disparities, especially for vulnerable groups.<sup>8</sup> Both the Title V of the HEA and the proposed United States Higher Education Mental Health Act of 2021<sup>9</sup> aim to provide IHEs with detailed recommendations that the United States could take to improve the overall mental health of college students. The proposed H.R. 5654 would establish a national commission to study the mental health concerns facing students at IHEs and provide a report to Congress with information on the services available to students with mental health conditions and the current policies in place to assist these students to remain in school and complete their degrees. In addition, while the HEA was primarily intended to assist families in the financing of attending an IHE, the addition of Title V in 1998 to the HEA has provided grants and related assistance to Hispanic-serving institutions to enable such institutions to improve and expand their capacity to serve Hispanic students and other low-income individuals and increased the quantity and quality of core matriculation services, including orientation, counseling, advising, and other education planning services.<sup>10</sup>

In order to qualify for Title V aid, an institution must be a Hispanic Serving Institution. In other words, these institutions need to have an enrollment of undergraduate students that is at least 25% Hispanic students. For reference, out of all the IHE in the United States, only 559 institutions identify as Hispanic Serving Institutions.<sup>11</sup>

## Ask

- **Pass H.R. 5654 with an amendment to ensure that the commission, report, and roadmap focus on needs and solutions of all students and include a specific focus on the needs and solutions for BIPOC students.**
- **Amend Title V of the Higher Education Act and include the following provisions:** Amend Title V to create a set-aside of new money for students at schools that do not meet the 25% threshold. Starting October 1st, the new fiscal year, 30% of new money above the FY23 appropriated level will be directed to eligible PWIs to support BIPOC students in their schools.

## Impact

Overall, the literature suggests that BIPOC college students, specifically Latinx students, face significant challenges related to their mental health, and there is a need for culturally sensitive interventions and support to address these issues. While white and Asian students are graduating college at rates of 62% and 63.2% respectively, Hispanic and Black students are graduating college at rates of 45.8% and 38% respectively.<sup>12</sup> IHEs are generally doing a good job recruiting these students but are unfortunately not doing enough to ensure these students feel a sense of belonging. Expanding mental health opportunities for BIPOC students can help these students succeed and graduate with a degree.

## Endnotes

- 1 Roberts, Razan. "How Universities Support Student Mental Health and Wellbeing." World Economic Forum, March 15, 2022. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/03/education-institutions-and-fostering-a-true-culture-of-care/>.
- 2 Leonhardt, Megan. "Crisis on Campus: 60% of College Kids Have Mental Health Disorders, and Schools Are Unprepared." Fortune, July 12, 2022. <https://fortune.com/well/2022/07/12/mental-health-crisis-college-schools-unprepared/>.
- 3 Schuyler, Sophie, et al. "Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color: The Importance of Academic, Transitional Adjustment, and Mental Health Supports" 6, no. 1 (2021).
- 4 Budget and Policy Post. "Overview of Mental Health Services for College Students." Legislative Analyst's Office, December 10, 2021. <https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4481>
- 5 Druckenmiller, Reese. "College Students and Depression." Mayo Clinic Health System, July 19, 2022. <https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/college-students-and-depression>.
- 6 University of Southern California. "Facts and Figures." About USC. Accessed March 13, 2023. <https://about.usc.edu/facts/>.
- 7 University of Michigan. "Data & Reports." Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (blog). Accessed March 13, 2023. <https://diversity.umich.edu/data-reports/>.
- 8 Abdu-Glass, Eliza, et al. "The College Mental Health Crisis: A Call for Cultural Change - Part 2." MGH Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds, March 6, 2017. <https://www.mghclaycenter.org/parenting-concerns/college-mental-health-crisis-call-cultural-change-part-2/>.
- 9 Trone, Reps David, Brian Fitzpatrick, and Susan Wild. "Higher Education Mental Health Act of 2021," 2021. <http://trone.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/One-Page-Higher-Ed-Mental-Health-Act.pdf>.
- 10 Congressional Research Service. "The Higher Education Act (HEA): A Primer," August 17, 2021. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R43351.pdf>.
- 11 "HSIs - Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities." Accessed March 13, 2023. <https://www.hacu.net/hacu/HSIs.asp>.
- 12 NSC Research Center. "Completing College - National by Race and Ethnicity - 2017." National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, April 26, 2017. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport12-supplement-2/>.