Best Practices Sub-Committee Report

The Best Practices Sub-Committee was tasked with examining best practices for counseling services in the community and technical college system and how the colleges meet the mental health needs of students. We organized our work into three areas: a review of the literature on this topic; lessons learned from the California community college system experience; and collection of emerging, promising, and excellent practices through a survey of Washington state community and technical colleges conducted in September, 2020.

Recommendations
To be added...

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature summary is to highlight current research on effective practices in mental health counseling in the community college setting as well as key considerations when supporting mental health professionals and students. They key themes found were the importance of creating transparency and structure in mental health services, an understanding that counselors are in need of additional support, and the effectiveness of leveraging student voices and engagement to promote an inclusive mental health culture on campus (ACCA, 2013; NASPA, 2020; Nutt, 2018).

In 2013 the American College Counseling Association shared the most recent data from the community college taskforce survey which captured data from nearly 200 two-year institutions throughout the United States. Researchers found that the majority of counselors felt overwhelmed with their job duties and don't have the necessary resources to wear multiple hats. Counselors reported that they had limited time to provide personal and mental health counseling services.

Researchers found that by establishing a transparent and inclusive counseling structure, within the community college setting, can lead to an increase student awareness and access to counseling services (Jed Foundation, 2016; NASPA, 2020). The guiding principles to create an effective counseling department include:

1. Clearly defining the scope of practice by providing clear and transparent communication on what types of counseling services are available to students.
2. Providing no wrong door to access of care. Making sure all departments are being properly trained to refer and identify students to counseling services no matter where the student goes on campus.
3. Leveraging student voices by integrating student voice into departmental planning. Promoting student led mental health clubs and activities to help normalize mental health at the college (NASPA, 2020).

Lastly, several researchers have found that involving students in the promotion and engagement of mental health on the college campus increases student awareness and help seeking behavior (Active Minds, 2015; Nutt, 2018). Researchers found that student peer organizations can also play an important role in shifting the campus culture towards mental health (Nutt, 2018). “Starting a conversation about
mental health on a student-to-student level could change our approach to mental health, change the landscape and climate,” (Malmon, 2018 para. 8).


Lessons from California

While researching other states’ best practices around meeting community college students’ needs, we found California’s lessons learned to be helpful in our work.

In 1994, the California community college system was struggling to find ways to meet students’ needs in what they considered more effective and financially responsible ways. The state decided to institute paraprofessionals and faculty advisors to do the tasks that were formerly done by faculty counselors and to significantly decrease the number of faculty counselors employed. They tried various versions of this with little success until 2012 when California returned to the utilization of faculty counselors since students’ need for career, academic, and personal counseling extended beyond the scope of paraprofessional and faculty advisors. The community college system retained the paraprofessionals and faculty advisors but instituted clear guidelines among the three groups. They found that faculty counselors had more extensive training to handle crisis intervention, career exploration, and advising, and utilization of faculty counselors provided the most effective avenue for training and support for paraprofessional and faculty.

Best Practices at Washington state Community and Technical Colleges Survey Results

The survey of community and technical colleges included a section asking colleges to identify practices and self-rate them based on criteria in the Rubric for Excellent Practice. A total of 31 colleges responded in this section of the survey, listing 120 practices. The remainder of this section is based on those responses and subsequent analysis of the data.
Responses were categorized into nine categorical themes that emerged in the data. A tenth category, “Other”, was created for practices that didn’t fall neatly into the nine themes. The following table depicts the 120 responses by theme and by college self-ratings of whether the practices were Emerging, Promising, or Excellent.

### Emerging, Promising, and Excellent Practices by Categorical Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Emerging</th>
<th>Promising</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Counseling</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Counseling Approaches</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walk-in Hours/Flexible Scheduling</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Outreach/Promotion of Services</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific, Targeted Outreach to Students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with Campus/Community Partners</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARE/BIT Team Involvement</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Assessment &amp; Improvement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshops, Classes, &amp; Classroom Presentations</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
<td><strong>120</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table above shows, the practices that were listed the most often were specific counseling approaches, workshops/classes/classroom presentations, and individual counseling. Interestingly, respondents also had the highest confidence in these three practices, with the highest number of responses rated either Excellent or Promising. A fourth practice, relationships with campus and community partners, also reflected a relatively high degree of confidence. Perhaps the most surprising finding was the generally high confidence colleges placed in their counseling practices overall: a full one-third of responses were self-rated as Excellent, and three-fourths of responses were rated as either Excellent or Promising. The following paragraphs provide more detailed information about the practices.

**Individual Counseling and Specific Counseling Approaches**

Especially when viewed together, it is clear that individual counseling sessions and specific counseling approaches are the practices colleges most rely on and feel most confident in to respond to the mental health needs of students. Some examples of specific counseling approaches are use of licensed mental health counselors, focus on crisis intervention, brief solutions-focused intervention, and a variety of proven, evidence-based therapeutic interventions such as cognitive behaviors therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy, and motivational interviewing. Some group counseling practices were placed in this category as well, for example group therapy and psycho-educational wellness groups.

[Text Box: “Having counselors dedicated to mental health is practice that affirms to students that their mental health is important and prioritized.”]
Students are assigned a faculty counselor for the duration of their program who provides academic support and guidance for students in 1:1 appointments.”

Workshops, Classes and Classroom Presentations

Most colleges reported promising to emerging practices in the area of Workshops, Classes, and Classroom Presentations. Specific examples include training of faculty and staff in recognizing and referring students in crisis, as well as, suicide prevention training. Responses also highlighted workshops to combat anxiety, stress, and depression among the student population. Many responses emphasize the important role workshops play in prevention, specifically in the areas of promoting healthy relationships, overall wellbeing, exam preparation, and mindfulness. Other workshops that should also be highlighted are promoting help seeking behavior in students, mental health screening, and substance abuse support.

We provide a counseling services overview in classes to reduce stigma and connect students to counseling.”

We offer monthly well-being sessions to respond to mental health needs of students.”

Campus and Community Partnerships

Colleges indicated a high level of confidence in the areas of campus and community partnerships. Responses ranged from collaboration at the campus level to strong connections in the community. Responses included mental health referrals, as well as, training from community agencies. Colleges also indicated strong ties between mental health counselors and various departments on campus. Counselors also rely on each other for continuous consultation regarding student appointments and support.

We provide resource referrals for ongoing counseling needs or to meet student equity needs.”

Crisis intervention and referral: a rubric and educational campaign is underway to assist staff and faculty across the college in recognizing different levels of student crisis, and when/how to refer to the counseling team.”

Other Responses of Note

Some practices identified by colleges do not fit neatly into the nine themes that emerged in the data. This section briefly highlights a few of them.

- Demographics: one college reported that its counseling staff closely matches the demographics of the student population
- Sustainability: one college reported that it maintains a staff of 5 district-funded, tenured faculty counselors
- Pandemic Response: a few colleges identified promising practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; for example, one college highlighted COVID-19 group conversations focused on student mental health
• Academic Department Liaisons: one college assigns counselors as liaisons to specific academic programs to serve students

• Passport Program: one college highlighted its effective Passport to College program for students who were in foster care or have experienced homelessness

[Lessons Learned Textboxes]

[Mental health counseling professionals who have worked with a diverse clientele and have a practical, hands-on, working knowledge of the issues our students face are a definite advantage in effectively serving students]

[Reach out to others who have implemented these practices. Assess and evaluate them once they are implemented. Adjust as needed, being open to eliminating the practice or meeting the student need in a completely different format.]

[Don't wait for students to come to you--meet students where they are with a robust outreach model]

[Be willing and ready to learn approaches that meet the client's needs rather than trying to make the clinician's approach one size fits all]

[The college needs to believe that serving the mental health needs of students is essential to access, retention, and equity]

[Systematic advising support and interventions require a whole campus approach, beginning with strong executive leadership and clarity of vision and intended outcomes....collaborations between and across Instruction and Student Services help strengthen our commitments to Guided Pathways implementation]

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\[1\] Rubric for Excellent Practice, Research and Planning Commission, Washington state Community and Technical Colleges, 20??

\[2\] Passport to College is Washington state’s publicly-funded scholarship and support program for students from foster care and those who have experienced homelessness