



To: Institutions of Higher Education
From: Office of the Secretary of Higher Education
Date: August 23, 2023
Subject: Deadline Extension: Mental Health Support Professional Focus Groups and Student Survey

The Disaster and Terrorism Branch (DTB) under the New Jersey Department of Human Services, Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) has received grant funding through the American Rescue Plan to contribute toward promoting, supporting, and sustaining a culture of wellness on college and university campuses in New Jersey. DTB has partnered with Rutgers University Behavioral Health, with the support of the Office of Secretary of Higher Education, to conduct a series of confidential, virtual focus groups with individuals providing mental health support on campuses. DTB also plans to distribute an online survey to students to evaluate their knowledge and awareness of mental health services on campus and to learn more about the challenges that students are facing.

To ensure all campuses have the opportunity to participate, **the deadline to provide feedback on this initiative was extended to this Friday, August 25, 2023.** Please email your input on these issues and point of contact information to DMHAS-Campuscares@dhs.nj.gov, with "feedback" as the subject.

More information about this initiative as well as the current draft of focus group questions can be found in the attached PDF documents. Please feel free to direct any questions or feedback to DMHAS-Campuscares@dhs.nj.gov.



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August 14, 2023

Dear Colleagues,

Following Governor Murphy's recent call to address youth mental health needs in the State, the New Jersey Department of Human Services, Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) is scanning the higher education landscape for innovative programs and areas of need. To that end, DMHAS is partnering with Rutgers University to conduct a series of focus groups with colleges and universities throughout the State. An online survey will also be distributed statewide to identify strengths and assess needs in the higher education community.

The DMHAS is the State Mental Health Authority and the Single State Agency for substance use disorders designated by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). DMHAS oversees planning and funding of a broad range of community mental health and substance use disorder services throughout the State. DMHAS contracts with various entities to provide and support community-based prevention, early intervention, treatment, education, and recovery support services, including for at-risk and special populations.

The focus groups will convene those professionals who provide mental health supports on campuses. The goal of the focus groups will be to educate DMHAS on existing programs and initiatives on campuses and to identify opportunities for DMHAS to support colleges and universities in strengthening existing and developing new initiatives that will enhance a culture of student wellness. Through the focus groups, DMHAS would like to learn:

1. Which resources and tools students find most useful in managing stress, anxiety, and depression;
2. What opportunities exist to augment promising practices, develop additional programs, and promote peer supports and resources; and
3. How DMHAS can assist in addressing gaps by developing and promoting additional peer programs.

These 75- to 90-minute virtual focus groups will include Counseling and Psychological Services staff, Resident Assistants, Mental Health Ambassadors, Academic Advisors, Professors, Coaches, and leaders in Faith-based groups.

In addition to these focus groups, an online survey will be distributed to New Jersey college and university students. Survey responses will be anonymous and confidential. Attached are the current drafts of questions that will be posed in both the focus groups and online surveys. We

anticipate beginning the focus groups and distributing the survey when students return for Fall 2023 semester in late August/early September.

Ultimately, the aim of these two approaches is to promote, support, and sustain a culture of wellness on campuses throughout New Jersey with regional student-led initiatives. These initiatives and events will utilize best and promising practices to promote wellness and provide ongoing support to address student mental health and wellness needs.

We intend to be as accommodating as possible when conducting the focus groups. Therefore, we respectfully request your thoughts on the best process for recruiting focus group participants as well as the best strategy for distributing the survey to students. Additionally, it would be helpful to have a specific contact person at each college/university. Please email your input on these issues and point of contact information to: DMHAS-Campuscares@dhs.nj.gov, with “feedback” as the subject, **by Friday, August 25, 2023.**

Again, we emphasize that participant confidentiality will be maintained. Participants can log into the virtual focus groups using non-identifying information and students can complete the survey anonymously. Once the focus groups and survey are completed, we will distribute the results in the aggregate to all participating schools through the designated contact persons.

Please feel free to contact DMHAS with any questions you may have using the aforementioned email address. Thank you very much for your time.



Katie Comanto, Esq.
Deputy Secretary of Higher Education



Valerie Mielke
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Disaster and Terrorism Branch Focus Group Questions

July 18, 2023

Peer Focus Groups

- 1-1½ Hour Focus Group
- 12 people
- Five to Six questions that lead to an open-ended discussion
- Peer/Student Support

- Potential people who deal with Mental Health on Campus:
 - CAP - Counseling & Psychological Services
 - Resident Assistants
 - Mental Health Ambassadors (peers/students)
 - Academic Advisors
 - Professors
 - Coaches
 - Religious/ Faith based groups
 - Etc.

Below is a draft of questions that will be discussed during the Focus Groups.

Questions

The bullet points are to serve as reference to what could possibly be discussed during the Focus Group. The questions are intended to lead to an open-ended discussion.

1. What are the most typical mental health concerns for which you see student/peers seek help? (See some examples below)
 - a. Loss of friend(s) or family due to COVID

- b. Missing milestones / celebrations / gathering due to COVID
 - c. Fluctuating between online to in-person learning
 - d. Financial loss or struggles (family or personal)
 - e. Feelings of anxiety, isolation, or depression
 - f. Increased drug and/or alcohol use
 - g. Changes in physical health, physical activity, appearance, diet, or sleep
 - h. Balancing school and personal life
 - i. Academic pressure
 - j. Interpersonal violence
 - k. Loss or lack of interpersonal relationships / intimacy
 - l. Other: _____
2. Have your peers expressed that the mental health concerns that they are facing is impacting their daily life? Or have you noticed any changes?
- Yes / No
- 2b. From what you are seeing, what areas of daily life are most impacted by mental health concerns?
- a. Campus Involvement
 - b. Focus/Concentration
 - c. Relationship conflicts (friends, family, or romantic)
 - d. Academics
 - e. Social Life
 - f. Gym/Exercise
 - g. Job
 - h. Other
3. What approach do you find your peers to be most receptive to?
- a. Online vs in-person
 - b. Self help
 - c. Meditations
 - d. Traditional therapy (1-1)
 - e. Group therapy
 - f. Journaling
 - g. Friends or family
 - h. Other
4. Have you found your students/peers to be engaging in unhealthy coping skills rather than seeking mental health wellness?
5. What differences do you notice in your peers/students now and pre-covid?
- a. Levels of anxiety (low, moderate, severe)

6. For your peers that don't want to pursue mental health services, what are some of the reasons as to why?
 - a. Hardships
 - b. Cost of accessing supports / services
 - c. Fear of being judged
 - d. Religious / spiritual beliefs
 - e. Cultural concerns / not prioritizing mental health
 - f. Stigma / Fear of being labeled or marginalized
 - g. Lack of access to needed supports / counseling services
 - h. Lack of knowledge about available resources
 - i. Lack of time
 - j. Other _____

7. Are there any similarities amongst the students that are reaching out to seek help?

- 7a. Are there any similarities amongst the students that are not reaching out to seek help?
 - a. Commuters, athletes, male/female, LGBTQ, Greek life, similar culture or religion, roommates, etc.

8. Are there additional trainings or resources that you think would be beneficial towards gaining more knowledge to be better in your role towards assisting students/peers?