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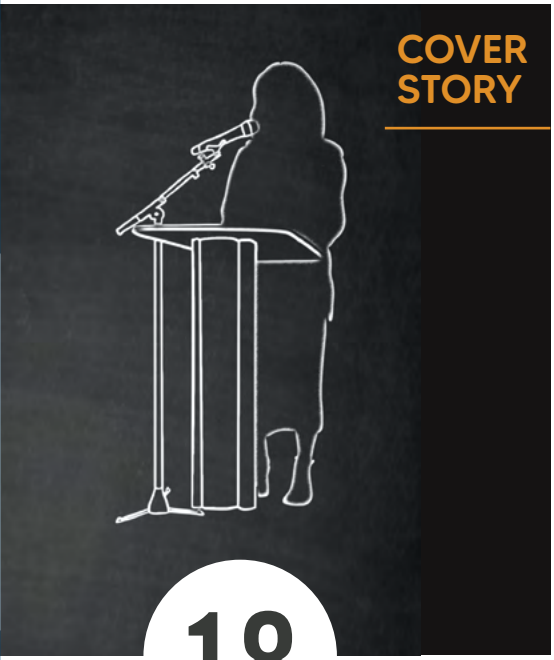
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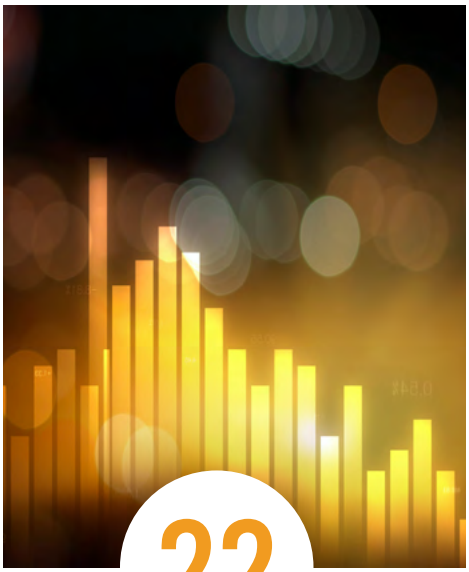
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RIT and AI

We're Future Focused, Always Looking Ahead



"Institutionally, my personal goal is to help position RIT as a national leader in AI in higher education."



Those words are from **Christopher Collison**. He knows a thing or two about Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies and higher education. He is the director of RIT's Artificial Intelligence Hub. The mission? To develop solutions for teaching and learning and promote AI focused innovations for use campus wide.

As a leading technology university with world class experts, Collison says RIT is ahead of the curve when it comes to AI and higher education.

" We were early in recognizing AI's importance, and we have extraordinary talent across disciplines, among faculty, staff and students. If we align our efforts strategically, we have the opportunity not just to participate in the AI transformation, but to shape it."

Much of that "shaping" happens within the AI Hub, Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), and Wallace Library with a focus on providing meaningful exposure to explore AI tools and critical evaluation skills.



Jenna Sadue leads a team doing just that. She is the assistant director of Learning Design and Technology in the CTL and an educational technology leader in higher ed. She works with instructional technologists and designers who seek out, survey and listen to RIT faculty to identify teaching and learning needs. They use that feedback to provide support and problem-solve.

" The CTL helps faculty through the development and facilitation of general and customized workshops, focused faculty programming, management of educational technology platforms, and through individualized consultations. Our goal is to provide a neutral space for faculty to explore AI in teaching."

In addition, RIT also created the AI Foundry, an innovation engine where RIT builds its own tools for use with AI. To help stay ahead of the AI curve, Collison points out the need for higher education institutions to be self-sufficient.

"While we partner with external platforms, we are also developing internal tools like TutorBot and other tools built at the AI Foundry. That approach builds institutional resilience, leverages our student talent, and avoids over-dependence on commercial tools for which current low prices will surely surge once users are hooked!"

Artificial Intelligence is here to stay. Collison says, "Our responsibility in higher education is to prepare students not just to use AI, but to understand it, question it, and apply it in ways that benefit society."

Sadue adds, " AI is impacting all industries; it is vital that faculty are preparing students to enter their respective fields with solid discipline-area competencies and the ability to articulate the value they add to any work completed with AI."

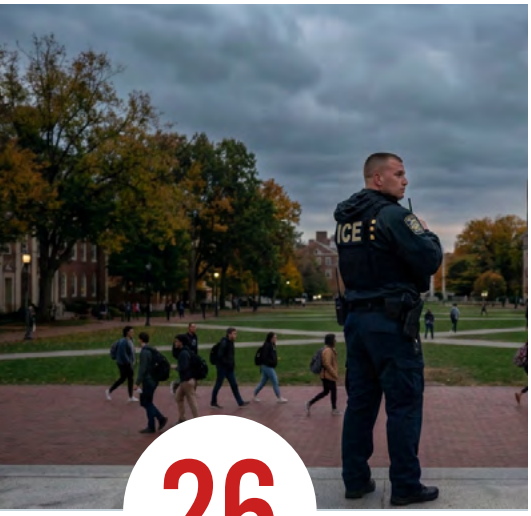
To learn more about RIT's AI HUB and the Center for Teaching and Learning, visit www.rit.edu/ai and www.rit.edu/teaching

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California Moves to Direct Admissions to Increase Enrollment

California has made it official. Eligible high school seniors will begin to receive acceptance letters from California State University (CSU) campuses without ever filling out an application.

Governor Gavin Newsom signed SB 640 into law in October 2025, requiring CSU campuses to automatically admit qualifying students beginning with the fall 2027 admissions cycle. Under the program, students are identified through academic records and notified of their admission to campuses with available enrollment capacity—bypassing the traditional application process entirely.

The legislation builds on a pilot program launched in 2024 with Riverside County, where more than 17,000 high school seniors received direct admission mailers. Of those, 13,200 completed the required enrollment paperwork—an early sign that removing the application barrier can translate into real commitment.

CSU also reported a 15% increase in first-time freshman applications from Riverside County compared to the prior year, along with a 43% jump in students who committed to attending.

The logic behind direct admissions is straightforward. Many college-eligible students never apply, not because they are unqualified, but because the process itself—with its deadlines, fees, and uncertainty—can discourage them. By flipping the model and sending acceptance letters proactively, institutions are trying to reach students who might otherwise fall through the cracks.

Research from other states backs up the approach. A 2022 study of Idaho's direct admissions program which launched in 2015, found it increased first-time undergraduate enrollment by 4% to 8% per campus and boosted in-state enrollment by 8% to 15%.

A separate study of a Common App initiative found direct admissions increased application rates among Black, Latinx, first-generation, and low-income students.

California is not alone in moving in this direction. North Carolina extended direct admission offers to 62,000 public high school students this year through its NC College Connect Program. Illinois passed comparable legislation in 2025 covering nine public universities, with implementation planned for the 2027-28 academic year. Minnesota, Wisconsin, Hawaii, Connecticut, and several other states have similar programs.

For CSU schools, the stakes are practical as well as philosophical. Several of its 23 campuses have faced significant enrollment declines in recent years. Seventeen campuses will participate in the new admissions program in the fall 2027 cycle. CSU Fullerton, CSU Long Beach, San Diego State, San José State, and CSU San Luis Obispo are not currently part of the program.

The question now is whether the early momentum from Riverside County will continue at scale.

University of Denver Merges Five Colleges Into Two

The University of Denver (DU) will consolidate five schools and colleges into two larger units, the latest in a wave of structural overhauls sweeping higher education as enrollment pressures mount nationwide.

Provost Elizabeth Loboa, PhD, announced the plan June 9 in a letter to faculty and staff, following approval by the board of trustees. The Graduate School of Social Work, the Graduate School of Professional Psychology, and the Morgridge College of Education will merge into one behavioral and clinical sciences college.

Separately, the Ritchie School of Engineering and Computer Science, the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, and the Kinesiology and Sport Studies program will combine into a science, engineering, and health innovation college.

Two departments, Religious Studies and Electrical and Computer Engineering, will also close, though Loboa said no degree programs are being cut. Current and incoming students can still complete those degrees. Up to 23 affected faculty members are being offered options including relocation to other units or buyouts.

University leaders frame the restructuring as an effort to reduce administrative silos rather than just a cost-cutting effort. Chancellor Jeremy Haefner told CBS Colorado the goal is making the university "nimble and agile" by removing bureaucratic barriers.

Still, financial pressures loom large. DU's enrollment fell from 14,130 in fall 2021 to 11,499 in fall 2025, with graduate enrollment dropping by more than 500 students. The university needed to close a $20 million to $30 million budget gap ahead of the fiscal year beginning July 1. Roughly 10% of staff have taken buyouts over the past two years.

Loboa's letter cited several pressures behind the decision, including the national enrollment cliff, reduced federal funding, declining job placements for graduates, and changes to U.S. News & World Report's ranking criteria that have hit private universities hard. She also noted that DU's 10 existing colleges and schools vary widely in size, calling that structure inefficient amid shrinking class sizes.

DU also plans several interdisciplinary hubs, including an integrated mental health clinic, a health-focused program linking kinesiology and pre-health offerings, and a new institute for interdisciplinary majors within the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Music, theater, and performing arts programming will combine into one unit as well.

Haefner maintains the university remains financially stable, pointing to its roughly $1 billion endowment.

DEI Doesn't Need to Survive This Moment. It Needs to Get Stronger.



By Katrina Caldwell, PhD

I have spent 31 years in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work. I have survived budget cuts, skeptical boards, hostile political climates, and the whiplash of institutional commitments made and quietly abandoned. I have never seriously considered walking away. Until now.

This is not a resignation letter. It is context. Because if this moment is making a 31-year veteran reconsider her path, I have to believe it is doing the same to practitioners and institutional leaders across higher education and the nonprofit sector. What I want to argue is that the feeling underneath that doubt, the exhaustion of building things that keep getting dismantled, points to exactly the wrong strategy.

The answer is not to build sturdier walls. The answer is to stop building for resilience altogether.

The Playbook Is Old, the Funding Behind It Is New

This cycle did not begin with executive orders. It began during Jim Crow, continued through Proposition 209 in 1996, the Michigan ban on admissions a decade later, and has arrived again on a scale and with funding issues that previous cycles lacked.

As writer Kali Holloway has documented, this wave has already produced more than 800 anti-"critical race theory" measures, over 200 anti-protest bills, and 14 laws restricting DEI programs in education, capped by the Supreme Court's decision to end race-conscious admissions.

When Kamala Harris, a sitting U.S. vice president, can be dismissed as a "DEI hire" despite a distinguished legal and political career, or a mayor gets labeled the "DEI Mayor" for handling a civic tragedy with competence and grace, we are not having a debate about program effectiveness. That is political weaponization. Naming it clearly is not defensive. It is accurate.

At the same time, critics did find something real to point to after 2020. Higher education leaders rushed to create chief diversity officer positions and diversity programs without giving practitioners the authority, resources, or accountability infrastructure to do the work properly.

The people hired into those roles were often set up to "perform" DEI rather than practice it. That failure belongs to leadership, not to the practitioners who showed up and tried to build something meaningful inside organizations that had not actually committed to change.

When the political tide shifted, those same leaders moved quickly to dismantle what they had never truly invested in. The people who paid the price were the ones who had believed the commitment was real.

Resilience Is the Wrong Goal

Nassim Nicholas Taleb drew a distinction in his 2012 book Antifragile that has stayed with me since this current wave began. Resilience, he argues, is just the capacity to absorb a shock and return to the prior state. It is neutral. Anti-fragility is something else entirely: the property of systems that actually get stronger when they are stressed. He put it plainly. Wind extinguishes a candle and energizes fire.

DEI programs built for resilience are built to survive attacks by going smaller, quieter, and harder to see. Some institutions are doing exactly that right now by renaming offices, softening language, and letting strategic roadmaps expire without replacement. They are building for resilience, but they will discover that a smaller, quieter target is still a target.

Anti-fragile DEI work operates differently. It treats political pressure as information, uses scrutiny to sharpen its evidence base, and builds structures so embedded in institutional operations that dismantling them would visibly damage the organization's performance. It does not go underground when challenged. It gets more specific, more measurable, and harder to dismiss.

What This Looks Like in Practice

The organizations I work with that are moving in this direction share a few concrete habits. Their DEI goals are tied to institutional outcomes that leadership already cares about: research productivity, student retention, staff turnover, and donor relationships.

Not because equity is only worth pursuing when it is financially convenient, but because that connection makes the work structurally protected in ways that values statements are not.

Their programming has shifted away from what I would call "training" altogether. Training implies a fixed set of instructions to memorize and perform. What actually builds capacity is workshop-based dialogue in which participants bring their own experiences into conversations with one another.

Programs built on appreciative inquiry and explicit attention to religious and political viewpoint diversity alongside racial and gender identity reach people that conventional

DEI formats never reach. That is not a concession to critics. It is a better practice and produces a more defensible record.

Several institutions have also begun building what I call a pluralism-informed DEI practice, which integrates the logic of viewpoint diversity directly into equity work rather than treating pluralism as a threat to it. The research on this is consistent: organizations that bring genuinely different perspectives into structured dialogue produce more social cohesion, not less. The argument that pluralism and equity are in conflict is not serious, but it lands when institutions cannot demonstrate otherwise.

What Is at Stake

The leaders I advise sometimes need a reminder that the stakes extend well beyond their offices. Diverse research teams generate more innovative solutions than homogeneous ones, and in fields like healthcare and AI, the questions researchers choose to ask are shaped by who is in the room. Higher education's claim on public trust has always rested in part on its ability to produce graduates who can engage across differences. Abandon that under pressure, and you lose more than a department.

For nonprofits and higher ed-adjacent organizations, the stakes are more immediate. The communities they serve notice when institutional commitment turns conditional. That trust does not come back easily, and it rarely comes back on the organization's timeline.

What I Tell My Clients

When I sit down with a college president or board chair trying to hold on to this work without becoming a target, I start by asking them whether they are building for survival or building for strength. Those are different projects.

Building for survival looks like protection. It delays the reckoning while eroding the confidence of the people whose commitment you most need. Building for anti-fragility means reviewing your strategic goals not just for progress but also for what they produce when challenged.

This means creating feedback loops between DEI leadership and institutional strategy so that scrutiny improves the work rather than shuts it down. It means being able to tell your board exactly what you are doing, why it works, and what the evidence shows, not because you are under attack, but because you built the work that way from the beginning.

Thirty-one years in, the current moment has clarified something for me. DEI was never meant to be a standalone function, and the organizations that treated it that way are the ones most exposed right now.

The leaders I work with who are holding their ground are the ones who long ago wove equity into how they develop talent, manage teams, build culture, and make decisions.

In my own practice, I have expanded well beyond DEI strategy to encompass the full range of leadership competencies that institutional and nonprofit leaders actually need: organizational development, team management, professional development, and HR practices.

DEI belongs in that conversation, not above it or apart from it. When it is embedded there, it is not a target. It is infrastructure.

That is anti-fragile DEI. And if we are honest about what this work has always been up against, it is the only version we should have been building all along.●

Katrina Caldwell, PhD, is CEO and founder of All In Consulting Group, a leadership consulting and coaching firm serving higher education institutions and nonprofits. Previously, she served as vice provost for diversity and inclusion and chief diversity officer at Johns Hopkins University.

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Belonging Is Not a Given: What I've Learned Advising International Students



By Ling LeBeau, PhD

Wang, a first-year international undergraduate student from China, stopped by my office on a Monday afternoon. She appeared sad, tired, and gloomy.

Wang arrived on our campus one month ago excited, hyper, happy, and full of hope for her academic journey. She was also engaged in my pre-arrival onboarding weekly sessions online, asking good questions and adding comments.

She appeared confident, intelligent, and spoke fluent English. Based on my experiences interacting with international students along with my instincts, I knew Wang would adjust to the new academic environment quickly and excel.

But what I heard that day was: "I don't like my life on campus. Nobody reached out to me for meals; nobody invited me for social outings; nobody wanted to talk to me in classes; professors did not look at me." Wang felt no sense of belonging. She was struggling, but the good news was she learned to ask for help!

International students like Wang grow up and receive education in various cultures, and they hold different expectations of U.S. higher education. For example, international students from the culture of collectivism may overestimate the availability of friendship and support from the hosting institution in a culture of individualism.

Most international students hesitate to approach faculty members to ask academic and research questions, in part because of communication barriers or because they are unsure how to do so appropriately.

Based on anecdotes, these students, especially introverted ones, shared experiences of exclusion from group discussions in classes, being ignored by faculty members, or feeling unwelcome by fellow students.

Social isolation and a lack of sense of belonging are the biggest challenges for international students. Institutions that are not fully aware of these issues or do not take proactive measures to create a supportive environment will face negative feedback from them, which may lead to low retention and graduation rates.

Well-meaning institutions have new international student orientation and an office of international services which offer visa assistance and social engagement activities. These offices focus on transactional functions.

However, they fail to meet international students' real needs. Belonging and well-being are two of the critical issues. For example, orientation is a one-time event. It doesn't promote sustained relationships, nor a sense of belonging. Authoritative tone and policing actions regarding visa paperwork may make students feel distant from the international services office.

We need a holistic and comprehensive approach to working with these students.

To increase their sense of belonging and well-being, a systematic, normalized, proactive, relational, and intentional approach needs to be embedded across academic and student affairs units.

Faculty, advisors, resident directors, counselors, peer mentors, and others should all be included in the process. Communication and peer mentoring, two pillars of the International Student Success model created by LeBeau and Schaffling in 2023, are designed to cultivate students' perseverance, motivation, emotional engagement, and academic performance.

The model demonstrates a structural integration of academic and social initiatives associated with positive outcomes for international students across multiple dimensions: academic persistence, career readiness, well-being, and belonging. Institutions may adopt the communication and peer mentoring pillars and adjust them to their institutional context.

Utilize multiple communication channels and have an open, honest, transparent, and personable tone, and communicate with international students regularly. They will know you truly care about them. Develop a manageable peer mentor program to pair with upper-class students and to facilitate personal connections.

After listening to Wang's struggles, I connected her to her peer mentor, introduced to her to a few small but friendly groups, gave her tips on how to interact with her American peers and professors, and suggested frequent check-ins.

Two months later Wang returned to my office with a big sunny smile: "I love this campus!"

Every international student deserves what Wang eventually found: a campus that notices before a student has to ask. That is the work ahead of us.●

Ling G. LeBeau, PhD is director of International Student Success at Syracuse University and a member of the Insight Into Academia Editorial Board. Read more about LeBeau's and Schaffling's Syracuse University International Student Success Model at artsandsciences.syracuse.edu.


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Reimagining the Academic Department

For more than a century, the academic affairs department has been the foundation of how colleges and universities organize teaching, research, and faculty governance. Departments have long defined institutional identity, serving as the administrative homes for disciplines ranging from biology and history to philosophy and journalism.

Today, however, that familiar model is undergoing a quiet but significant transformation.

Across higher education, institutions are consolidating departments, merging colleges, creating interdisciplinary schools, and reorganizing academic units around broader themes rather than traditional disciplines.

While some restructurings have been prompted by budget shortfalls or enrollment declines, others are part of long-term strategic efforts to encourage collaboration, reduce administrative complexity, and better position institutions for emerging fields such as artificial intelligence, data science, and sustainability.

The movement extends across the spectrum of higher education. Public flagships, regional universities, and private liberal arts colleges alike are rethinking academic structures as they navigate today's environment.

According to Deloitte's 2026 Higher Education Trends report, colleges and universities are confronting a convergence of challenges unlike any in recent decades. Declining numbers of traditional college-age students, uncertainty surrounding federal research funding, rising operating costs, technological disruption, and increasing public skepticism about the value of a college degree are forcing institutions to reconsider longstanding conventions in how they operate.

Among those is the traditional academic department.

Financial Pressure Is Only Part of the Story

Budget constraints are often the most visible catalyst for academic restructuring.

Deloitte projects U.S. college enrollment will decline approximately 13% between 2025 and 2041, while many private institutions were already operating with structural deficits before recent changes to federal policies added new financial pressures.

As colleges search for long-term sustainability, many have concluded that organizational changes may prove more effective than repeated rounds of across-the-board budget cuts.

Yet, institutional leaders increasingly emphasize that restructuring is not simply about reducing costs. They are trying to strike a difficult balance between acting early and overreacting to an uncertain future.

"How do we hope for the best and plan for the worst?" said Robert Kelchen, PhD, professor and head of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Tennessee. "Nobody wants to be the leader that makes a cut that turns out to be unnecessary. But also nobody wants to be the one who didn't make cuts and ends up forcing drastic moves later on."

The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), in its report Academic Reorganization: How Strategy Drives Structure, argues that organizational design should follow institutional mission rather than tradition.

Instead of asking how to preserve existing departments, colleges are evaluating whether current structures support the kinds of teaching, scholarship, and student experiences they hope to foster.

That distinction is shaping how many institutions approach reorganization.

Rather than eliminating disciplines, some colleges are grouping related programs into broader schools or divisions that encourage faculty collaboration while reducing administrative layers. The goal is often to preserve academic offerings while creating structures that are more adaptable to future challenges.

Breaking Down Disciplinary Boundaries

One of the strongest themes emerging from the Deloitte and CIC reports is the growing emphasis on interdisciplinary work.

Many of today's most pressing issues—including artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, climate resilience, public health, and data analytics—do not fit neatly within traditional academic disciplines. Colleges increasingly acknowledge that their organizational structures should reflect that reality.

The University of Wisconsin–Madison, for example, recently announced plans to establish a new College of Computing and Artificial Intelligence by converging programs in computer science, statistics, and the Information School.

Rather than creating an entirely new discipline, the university is reorganizing existing expertise into a structure designed to encourage collaboration across departments.

Others have pursued even broader changes.

Marymount University replaced 26 traditional academic departments with 10 interdisciplinary schools. The University of North Texas is reorganizing roughly 60 departments into larger academic schools, while Indiana University of Pennsylvania consolidated four colleges into two as part of a larger academic realignment emphasizing health sciences and STEM disciplines.

These transformations reflect organizational structures that facilitate collaboration and, the schools believe, will better prepare students for the fields they plan to enter.

The Strategy is Not That New

Although recent financial pressures have accelerated restructuring efforts, the idea itself is not new.

The CIC report highlights several institutions that began redesigning their academic structures years before today's challenges intensified.

Berea College reorganized approximately 30 academic departments into six interdisciplinary divisions beginning in 2008. According to the institution, the new model increased interdisciplinary hiring, collaborative teaching, external grant activity, and active-learning initiatives while

maintaining disciplinary expertise within broader organizational units.

Arizona State University similarly responded to financial strains following the Great Recession. Rather than simply reducing budgets, the university created larger schools centered around emerging fields, including the School of Sustainability and the School for the Future of Innovation in Society, while streamlining administrative operations.

Plymouth State University took perhaps the most unconventional approach by replacing traditional departments with interdisciplinary "clusters" planned around regional challenges and institutional strengths. Their model reflects the university's belief that smaller institutions cannot—and should not—attempt to replicate the organizational structure of every comprehensive university.

"It's too difficult to identify places to excel when everyone looks the same. Where are your actual strengths?" says Donald Birx, PhD, president of Plymouth State University. "If you need a good physics department, I can find 50 that are better than we are right down the street. But by putting disciplines together the way we are to solve tomorrow's challenges—there, we can be one of the best."

Other colleges have focused less on curriculum and more on governance.

Trinity University reorganized dozens of departments and interdisciplinary programs into four academic schools in an effort to simplify decision-making and improve communication across campus.

Ohio Wesleyan University similarly explored divisional leadership models intended to reduce administrative duplication while encouraging collaboration among departments that retained their disciplinary identities.

At Warren Wilson College, restructuring combined an academic remodel with broader curricular and governance reforms intended to streamline institutional operations while promoting interdisciplinary learning.

Collectively, these examples suggest that academic restructuring has evolved from an emergency response into a strategic planning tool.

Preserving Identity While Embracing Change

Even when institutions insist that majors and degree requirements will remain unchanged, reorganizing academic departments often raises concerns among faculty and students.

Departments are more than administrative units. They shape hiring decisions, tenure and promotion processes, curriculum development, faculty governance, and professional identity.

Departments are more than administrative units. They shape hiring decisions, tenure and promotion processes, curriculum development, faculty governance, and professional identity. Consolidating or replacing them with broader schools inevitably prompts questions about whether specialized disciplines will lose visibility or influence.

Colleges have sought to reassure campus communities that restructuring does not necessarily mean eliminating academic programs.

When the University of Memphis announced the creation of its new School of Communication and Media by combining several communication-related departments, university officials emphasized that student degree requirements, scholarships, and assistantships would remain intact during the transition.

Similarly, the University of Denver stated that students enrolled in programs affected by its changes would still be able to complete their degrees, despite the closure of several departments as part of a broader academic reorganization.

Even Harvard University has undertaken significant administrative change within its Faculty of Arts and Sciences, grouping departments into larger clusters while consolidating support services as the institution addresses long-term budget pressures.

These examples underscore that restructuring is increasingly being presented as organizational redesign rather than academic retrenchment.

Redefining the Institution

Whether these new structures ultimately achieve their intended goals remains an open question.

Institutions frequently cite improved collaboration, greater operational efficiency, stronger interdisciplinary research, and better alignment with workforce needs as reasons for restructuring. Some early adopters, such as Berea College, report measurable gains in interdisciplinary teaching and research activity.

Still, the broader trend is unmistakable.

Rather than treating the traditional academic department as a permanent fixture, colleges and universities are increasingly viewing them as something that can—and perhaps should—evolve alongside institutional priorities.

Financial pressures may have accelerated that conversation, but they are not its sole cause. Advances in technology, shifting student interests, changing research agendas, and growing demands for institutional agility are all prompting leaders to reconsider how universities are organized.

For institutions seeking to navigate an increasingly uncertain future, the question is no longer simply which programs to offer. It's whether the century-old organizational blueprint of a university remains the best way to deliver them.



New Workforce Pell Grants Show Early Growing Pains

By Erik Cliburn

Workforce Pell, the biggest expansion of Pell Grant eligibility in years, opened to students on July 1—though for many colleges and states, the program is still more of a work in progress than a fully operating benefit. The U.S. Department of Education's (ED) rule takes effect on July 20; the earlier date was available only to institutions willing to opt into early implementation, which required states to already have their eligibility criteria worked out.

Not all of them did.

By late June, only a dozen had published the frameworks defining which occupations or programs count as "high-skill, high-wage, or in-demand," and the resulting lists varied widely.

Florida named a relatively narrow set of roughly 30 career certificate programs, including phlebotomy and commercial driving, while Michigan published a list of more than 260 eligible occupations and left it to individual colleges to decide which of their offerings fit.

At some community colleges, the gap between a published occupations list and an actual approved program has meant there isn't a single Workforce Pell offering ready to enroll students yet, even as administrators say they expect to build qualifying programs over time.

Where approvals have come through, the early examples tend to be hands-on and practical: a nursing assistant class in Minnesota, a handful of welding and HVAC programs at a community college in Idaho. That fits the design of the underlying law, which covers programs of 150 to 599 hours running 8 to 14 weeks, requires completion and job-placement rates of at least 70%, and demands that graduates' earnings outpace the cost of the program.

The policy was created by the reconciliation bill President Trump signed on July 4, 2025, and finalized through an ED rule issued in May 2026. Education Secretary Linda McMahon has described the broader goal as an effort to "shift away from high-cost, low-value programs," while Acting Labor Secretary Keith Sonderling has framed the change as ending a false choice between expensive degrees and no training.

Notably, the idea predates this administration. Jobs for the Future and other groups pushed similar proposals across multiple Congresses, and ED piloted a shorter-program Pell expansion from 2012 to 2017—a trial that boosted enrollment and completion without producing a clear lasting effect on earnings.

That mixed history helps explain why implementation, not just eligibility, has become the main focus of conversation. A Center for American Progress report lays out nine recommendations for state governors, centered on building shared data systems that link education records to wage outcomes, standardizing definitions of "high-wage" and "in-demand" work across states, and banning commission-based recruiting that could push students into low-value programs.

The Lumina Foundation has raised a related concern. The advising, transportation, child care, and food assistance that many colleges already provide to degree-seeking students are often unavailable to those in these shorter noncredit programs, even at the same institutions. One Lumina analyst summed up the uncertainty by calling the program's potential "magical," while acknowledging that no one yet knows how that potential will be realized.

Federal estimates cited by education officials and the Congressional Budget Office suggest the program could reach 100,000 or more students by the 2027-28 academic year—a modest slice of the roughly 7.5 million who receive traditional Pell Grants annually, but some advocates hope will grow as more states finish building the infrastructure the law assumed was already in place.

For now, Workforce Pell is less a finished program than a live experiment: the statute is in effect, the funding is technically available, and the harder work of proving it can actually connect students to good jobs is only just getting underway.



Keeping the People Who Keep Campuses Running

Retaining professional staff could be a college's competitive advantage

By Misty Evans

For years, colleges and universities have invested heavily in recruiting world-class faculty and visionary presidents. Far less attention has been paid to another workforce challenge unfolding behind the scenes: retaining the professional staff who guide students from application to graduation.

Across the country, institutions are struggling to keep academic advisors, financial aid counselors, registrars, information technology professionals, residence life staff, admissions counselors, and other student support specialists. Their departure is becoming more than a human resources issue. Increasingly, it is an enrollment, student success, and institutional competitiveness issue.

These employees often serve as students' first and most frequent point of contact with an institution. They answer financial aid questions, troubleshoot technology problems, coordinate housing assignments, maintain academic records, provide career guidance, and help students navigate personal and academic challenges. When those positions remain vacant or experience constant turnover, the effects ripple across nearly every aspect of campus life.

According to the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR), voluntary turnover among higher education employees rose sharply following the COVID-19 pandemic before gradually declining. Although turnover rates have moderated, they remain elevated in several employee groups compared with pre-pandemic levels, particularly among nonexempt and part-time staff, continuing to strain institutions already operating with lean workforces.

The Consequences for Student Success

Professional staff may work behind the scenes, but their impact on student success is highly visible.

An academic advisor with an overwhelming caseload may not have time to proactively reach someone who is struggling. A financial aid office experiencing staffing shortages can take longer to process awards or answer questions from families trying to make enrollment decisions. Residence life departments with unfilled positions often ask current staff to shoulder additional responsibilities, increasing the likelihood of burnout and further turnover. These operational challenges ultimately become student experience challenges.

As colleges compete for a shrinking pool of traditional-age students, every interaction matters. Students increasingly expect timely

communication, accessible services, and personalized support throughout their educational journey.

Delays in admissions processing, registration, financial aid, advising, or housing can influence whether or not prospective students enroll and if current students persist to graduation.

Research has consistently shown that advising, student engagement, and support services play a significant role in student retention. Maintaining experienced professional staff in these areas is becoming an essential component of institutional success.

Why Employees Are Leaving

Compensation remains one of the most frequently cited reasons employees leave higher education, but it is far from the only one.

CUPA-HR's 2025 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey found that nearly one-quarter of nonfaculty employees indicated they were likely to seek another position within the following year. Beyond salary, respondents identified workload, limited opportunities for advancement, workplace flexibility, organizational culture, leadership, and not feeling valued as significant factors influencing their decision.

The survey also found that those who reported stronger connections to their institution's mission and greater confidence in leadership were substantially more likely to remain.

Gallup's workplace research reaches similar conclusions across industries. Employees who feel engaged, supported by their managers, and connected to meaningful work are significantly less likely to leave their organizations. They have consistently identified managers as one of the strongest influencers on employee engagement and retention.

Many higher education staffers also describe what has become known as "responsibility creep." As positions remain vacant because of budget constraints or hiring challenges, those remaining frequently absorb additional responsibilities without corresponding increases in support or compensation. Over time, the result can be chronic burnout, declining morale, and additional departures.

Admissions offices illustrate how quickly staffing challenges can affect institutional performance.

According to CUPA-HR, 71% of admissions coordinators and counselors have been in their current positions for three years or less, reflecting significant turnover in one of the most student-facing functions. These professionals are responsible for cultivating relationships with prospective students and families while serving as the institution's public face throughout the recruitment process.

Frequent turnover means campuses continually invest time and resources in recruiting and training new employees while losing experienced professionals who possess valuable institutional knowledge and relationships. Retaining experienced enrollment professionals may prove just as important as recruiting the next incoming class.

The staffing challenge extends well beyond student affairs offices.

Information technology personnel remain among the most sought-after employees across every sector of the economy, leaving colleges and universities competing with private companies that often offer substantially higher salaries and greater workplace flexibility.

At the same time, technology has become inseparable from the student experience. Learning management systems, cybersecurity, AI usage, digital accessibility, registration systems, and classroom technology all depend on highly skilled professionals.

The National Association for Student Affairs Professionals (NASPA) identified cybersecurity and AI governance among the most pressing issues facing student affairs leaders in 2025, underscoring how essential experienced technology professionals have become to institutional resilience.

Leading Institutions Are Rethinking Retention

Forward-looking institutions are beginning to recognize that employee retention is not simply an HR responsibility but a strategic investment.

For example, Towson University has worked to strengthen retention by emphasizing workforce planning, improving onboarding practices, expanding professional development opportunities, and creating clearer career pathways for difficult-to-fill positions.

Rather than treating turnover as inevitable, university leadership has framed retention as an operational priority that protects institutional knowledge and improves organizational effectiveness.

Across higher education, similar approaches are gaining momentum. Colleges are reevaluating compensation structures, expanding hybrid work options for eligible positions, investing in supervisor training, recognizing and rewarding employee achievements, and creating more intentional opportunities for career advancement.

These efforts reflect a growing understanding that investing in their current workforce is more cost-effective than repeatedly recruiting, hiring, and training replacements.

Higher education has spent decades discussing faculty recruitment and retention as a strategic priority. However, overlooking staff is missing half the picture.

For years, many institutions viewed these employees primarily as an operational expense. That assumption is becoming increasingly difficult to defend. The institutions that successfully recruit, develop, and retain exceptional staff are discovering that the people who keep campuses running are also the people who help them thrive.

The Era of the Interim President



By Misty Evans

In 2022, the average college president had been on the job for 5.9 years—2.6 years less than in 2006. More than half expected to leave their positions within five years, including one-quarter who planned to depart within a year or two.

Those findings from the American Council on Education's 2023 American College President Study, based on responses from more than 1,000 presidents, point to more than a passing wave of retirements. Presidential transition is becoming a recurring pattern in higher education.

As turnover accelerates, colleges and universities are also reconsidering what happens between permanent roles. Interim presidents, once expected primarily to keep institutions operating until a successor arrived, are increasingly being appointed for longer periods and given mandates to stabilize finances, restructure operations, rebuild trust, or clarify institutional priorities.

"Today's interim president is often less a placeholder and more a change agent," said Robin Mamlet, a senior partner in the education practice at executive search firm WittKieffer. "Some boards are hiring a wartime leader before they hire their peacetime leader."

No comprehensive national database tracks the number or duration of interim presidencies, making it difficult to quantify the shift. Mamlet's assessment comes from advising governing boards and search committees across higher education. What is clear from national data, however, is that today's presidents are newer to their positions and many more departures are approaching.

Why Presidents Keep Leaving

Presidential turnover has no single cause. It reflects the accumulation of responsibilities, scrutiny, and institutional risks attached to a role that has become increasingly difficult to perform.

The modern president is expected to serve as an academic leader, fundraiser, financial strategist, political communicator, crisis manager, and public representative. The president answers to trustees, faculty members, students, employees, donors, alumni, lawmakers, accreditors, and local communities, constituencies that may hold incompatible expectations.

A decision involving a campus protest, academic program, diversity initiative, donor, or faculty member can become a national controversy within hours. At public institutions, legislative intervention and political conflict can further narrow a president's room to govern.

Financial conditions compound those pressures. Many institutions face rising costs, deferred maintenance, changing student demographics, and limited ability to raise tuition.

The State Higher Education Executive Officers Association reported that inflation-adjusted total revenue per full-time-equivalent student at public institutions declined 1.9% from fiscal 2024 to fiscal 2025. This was the third consecutive annual decline.

Enrollment growth also outpaced increases in state and local appropriations, producing the first reduction in per-student public funding since 2012. Dropping international enrollment also has had an impact. After several years of post-pandemic growth, according to the Institute of International Education's Fall 2025 Snapshot, new international student enrollment declined 17%, while overall international enrollment fell 1%, the first annual decline since the pandemic recovery began.

"Financial uncertainty is the thread that runs through almost every challenge facing higher education today," Mamlet said. "Enrollment concerns, political pressures, public skepticism, and executive burnout all eventually show up on the balance sheet."

Turnover can take several forms. Some presidents retire after long careers. Others leave for institutions with stronger finances or more supportive boards. Some are pushed out after controversies, changing political landscapes, enrollment declines, or disagreements over strategy. Still others conclude that the responsibility of the presidency is not matched with sufficient authority, resources, or trustee support.

That mismatch can be particularly exhausting. Presidents may be held accountable for closing a deficit while facing resistance to program reductions, staffing changes, or tuition increases. They may be expected to respond decisively to a crisis while receiving conflicting direction from trustees. Continuous public exposure, fundraising demands, and crisis-driven schedules can make the position personally unsustainable.

The presidency has also become less forgiving. Trustees and campuses expect measurable results within a few years even when financial, enrollment, or cultural problems have developed over decades.

"In today's environment, every president is expected to be a chief strategy officer and a chief revenue officer," Mamlet said. "The modern presidency is increasingly measured by a leader's ability to generate revenue and manage change."

Job Candidates Are Now Evaluating the Board

Frequent vacancies do not guarantee deep applicant pools. Although there is no national dataset establishing that every presidential search is attracting fewer candidates, Mamlet said the strongest prospects are becoming more selective about which positions they'll even consider.

They are evaluating whether trustees agree on institutional priorities, if the president will have authority to act, and if the campus is prepared to support difficult decisions. They are also examining why the previous leader left.

"The question top candidates are asking isn't whether a campus has challenges," Mamlet said. "It's whether the institution has the will to address them. Top candidates aren't looking for easy jobs. They're looking for winnable jobs."

A prominent institution can struggle to attract candidates if its board is divided, financial conditions are unclear, or expectations are contradictory. Conversely, candidates may embrace a difficult assignment if trustees acknowledge the problems, establish realistic goals, and demonstrate that

they will support the next leader.

Mamlet emphasized that selectivity should not be mistaken for a weakening commitment to higher education. Mission-driven candidates want to know that they can protect that mission by building a sustainable institution.

Candor, in that environment, becomes a recruitment advantage. Attempting to minimize well-documented financial or governance problems may damage a search more than if they openly acknowledge them.

The Strategic Interim

A longer interim period can give an institution time to answer questions that should precede a permanent search. What does the college need from its next president? Which problems require immediate attention? What conditions would allow a new leader to succeed?

"I wouldn't characterize it as slowing down the search process," Mamlet said. "I would characterize it as increasing the probability of getting the next presidency right."

Tennessee State University offers one illustration of an interim leader receiving a defined operational assignment. When its board of trustees appointed Ronald Johnson interim president in July 2024, it tasked him with responding to financial and operational challenges.

In the report on his first 100 days, Johnson outlined work involving fiscal controls, enrollment, organizational effectiveness, student housing, and infrastructure.

This example does not establish one universal model, but it demonstrates the difference between occupying an office and receiving a mandate.

"The strongest interim presidencies begin with clarity," Mamlet said. "The board knows what needs to be accomplished, the interim president has authority to act, and everyone understands the assignment."

A strategic interim can address urgent problems before a permanent candidate arrives. That may make a difficult presidency more viable and give the board a better understanding of the experience the institution needs next.

The model also carries risks. An interim assigned to make cuts may absorb the political consequences of decisions that trustees or permanent leaders were unwilling to make. An expedited restructuring can weaken shared governance if faculty members and employees are excluded. Boards can also use temporary leadership to postpone decisions rather than confront them.

The distinction lies in authority, transparency, and purpose.

"People can accept temporary leadership," Mamlet said. "What they won't accept is uncertain leadership."

Before appointing an interim, trustees should establish a written mandate, expected duration, decision-making authority, performance measures, and communication plan. They should also clarify whether the interim may apply for the permanent position. Leaving that question unresolved can undermine trust and discourage other candidates.

An interim presidency should be, in Mamlet's words, "a bridge to a strategy, not a bridge to a foggy horizon."

Reduced Structure, Bigger Roles

Institutions are also restructuring the leadership surrounding the president. Some are combining finance and operations, enrollment and student affairs, or advancement and external relations.

The rationale can be strategic. Enrollment, for example, is inseparable from tuition revenue, academic planning, student support, marketing, and retention. Integrating related responsibilities can improve coordination.

Other consolidations are principally financial. Institutions reducing faculty and staff positions may determine that administrative structures must contract as well.

"We're seeing institutions move from bigger leadership teams to more integrated leadership teams," Mamlet said. "Colleges are asking whether every organizational boundary still makes sense."

Consolidation is not automatically efficiency. Combining two demanding portfolios can create an executive "super job," dilute specialized expertise, and intensify the burnout already contributing to leadership turnover. Boards and presidents must determine whether a merger removes a genuine organizational barrier or simply gives one person two full-time positions.

From Vacancy Management to Governance

Strategic interim leadership can strengthen an institution, but repeated short-term appointments might signal deeper dysfunction. Constant turnover can interrupt fundraising, delay strategic initiatives, destabilize cabinets, and erode confidence among employees and donors.

Boards must therefore look beyond the mechanics of filling a vacancy. They should examine whether their governance practices contributed to the departure, if expectations for the previous president were realistic, and how the next leader will receive consistent authority and support.

"The biggest mistake is assuming alignment when it doesn't exist," Mamlet said. "Successful presidential searches begin with board alignment, not candidate recruitment."

The traditional presidency is unlikely to return to a simpler form. Academic credibility remains important, but boards and institutions need leaders who can manage increasingly complex change, interpret financial risk, generate revenue, communicate effectively, and maintain confidence across divided constituencies.

Interim leadership is not simply filling the growing spaces between presidents. It is becoming part of institutional strategy. In an era of shorter tenures and greater volatility, colleges can no longer assume that continuity will come from one long-serving leader. They must build it into their governance, cabinets, transition plans, and institutional culture.

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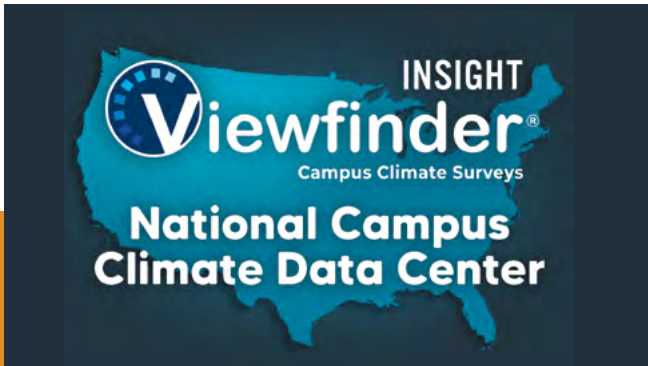
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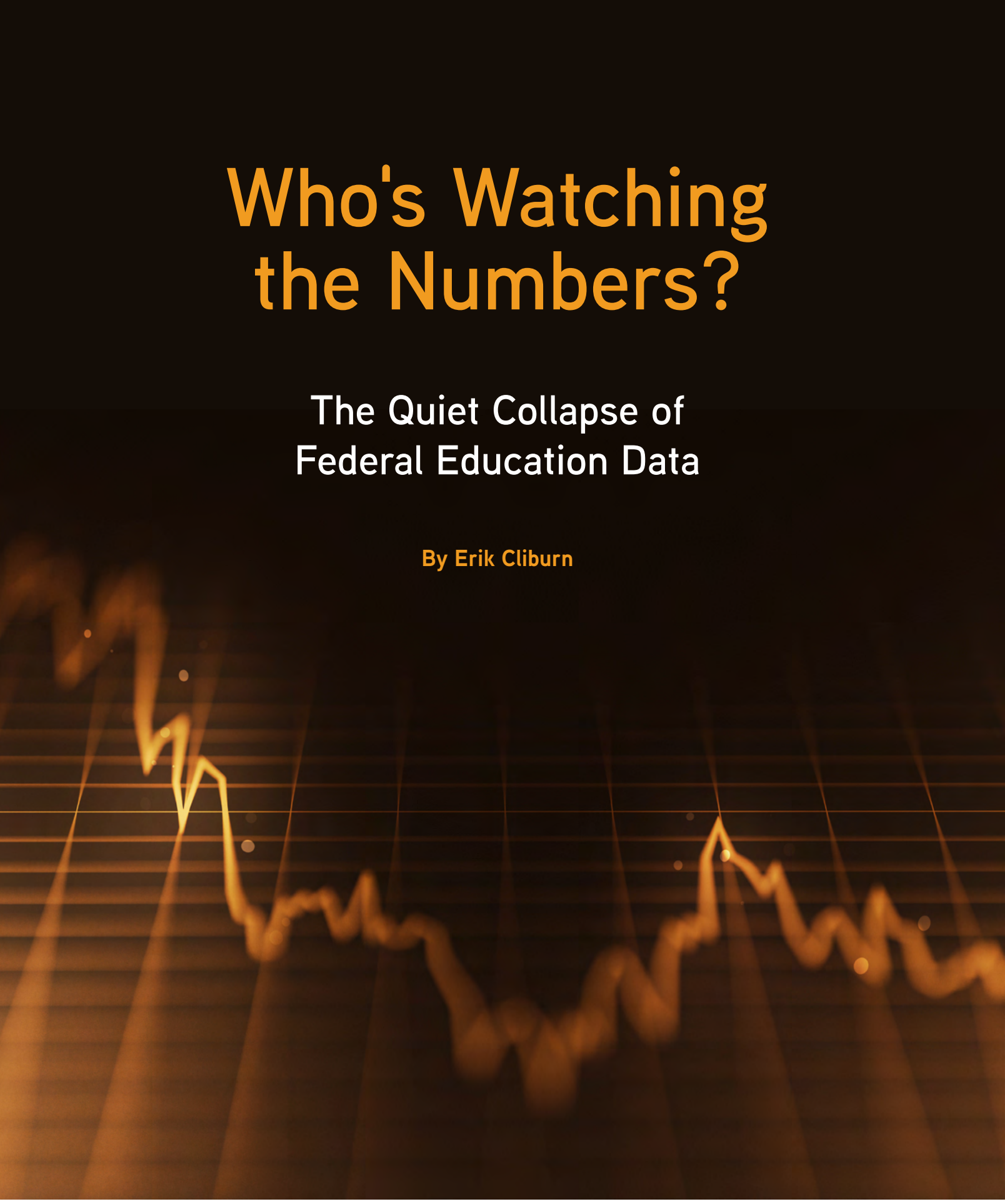


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Who's Watching the Numbers?

The Quiet Collapse of Federal Education Data

By Erik Cliburn



For decades, the numbers that shaped higher education policy—enrollment trends, completion rates, graduate earnings, and financial aid patterns—flowed from two federal offices most Americans have never heard of: the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and its parent agency, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). That flow has slowed to a trickle, and the people who rely on it are beginning to sound alarms.

Beginning in early 2025, the Trump administration cut IES staffing by roughly 90 percent, reducing NCES from a workforce of more than 160 to single digits, while abruptly revoking nearly $900 million in research contracts covering issues like school safety, early childhood education, and postsecondary outcomes.

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) also placed the NCES commissioner on administrative leave, dismantled the National Board for Education Sciences—IES's outside advisory panel—and froze new restricted-use data licenses that outside researchers depend on to study federal education records.

Twelve education research associations representing a combined 40,000 members warned congressional leaders in a March 2025 letter that the fallout would extend well beyond the education field.

Without the center's data infrastructure, the groups wrote, "much of the education research in America will come to a halt." The same letter noted that the department's Office for Civil Rights, which tracks disparities by race, gender, and disability status through a biannual survey, lost 243 of its 562 employees—cuts that could complicate enforcement of civil rights law as much as academic research.

The response so far has played out mostly in court. The American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness sued the Department in April 2025, arguing the dismantling of IES was unlawful.

An early bid for a preliminary injunction failed to fully halt the cuts, and the case has moved slowly since then. In March 2026, AERA's legal team filed a motion for summary judgment asking a judge to rule outright that the 2025 contract cancellations and staff terminations violated the law. AERA Executive Director Tabbye Chavous told members the filing draws on sworn testimony and internal ED records gathered over months of litigation.

For colleges and universities, the consequences are practical, not abstract. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, known as IPEDS, underpins institutional reporting used by prospective students when comparing schools, by accreditors evaluating outcomes, and by federal regulators enforcing financial aid rules.

ED has said tools like the College Scorecard were spared from the IES contract cuts, but higher education officials—including New York's state education department—have flagged a real risk of reporting delays and data-quality problems as a skeleton NCES staff tries to keep IPEDS running.

That risk sits awkwardly alongside a new mandate from the Trump administration. Under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, degree programs will soon face an earnings test: graduates' incomes must outpace those of high-school-educated workers in the same state, tracked through federal wage data, or programs risk losing access to federal student loans.

The first earnings calculations are due in 2027, with loan eligibility on the line by 2028—a system that depends on precisely the kind of federal data capacity the administration has spent the past year dismantling.

The retreat isn't confined to education. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has documented a broader pullback across federal statistics: the defunding of a decades-old food security survey, a hiring freeze that slowed Consumer Price Index data collection, and the disbanding of outside advisory committees at both the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

William Beach, a former BLS commissioner appointed by Trump during his first term, said the president's abrupt firing of BLS Commissioner Erika McEntarfer in August 2025 "sets a dangerous precedent" for the agency's independence.

For now, the legal fight over IES continues, and the practical fallout is still unfolding. Institutions filing federally mandated reports into a system with far fewer people checking them, researchers waiting on data licenses that are no longer being issued, and a new accountability regime approaching its first deadlines while the data infrastructure meant to support it is in pieces.

Whether the courts, Congress or the ED itself resolves that mismatch before the earnings test takes full effect in 2028 is still an open question—and one that university administrators, researchers and policymakers say they're watching closely.

HBCUs Consider a Sense of Belonging Part of Mental Health Care

By DeMario Easley

Most colleges measure belonging through surveys.

On a February morning at Morehouse College, Sitovea Williams noticed a student who looked overwhelmed. She wasn't his professor, an academic advisor, or a counselor. She works in the college's accounting department, where much of her day is spent helping students navigate the financial side of college life. Still, something about the student's demeanor gave her pause.

Later that day, Williams sent him an email.

"When I saw you this morning," she wrote, "I wished that there was something I could do in that moment to lift your spirits." She shared words of encouragement, told him she had prayed for him, and reminded him that he was not alone. The email offered no quick solutions and no promises that everything would suddenly be okay. It simply acknowledged that someone had seen his struggle and cared enough to reach out.

Hours later, the student responded.

"Thank you for praying for me in my hour of need," he wrote. "Your words of encouragement have given me strength. I was able to think with a more calm and collected head after we spoke."

This one exchange between a staff member and a student cannot explain why Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) consistently report stronger feelings of belonging than higher education as a whole. Research is built on patterns, not individual moments. But stories like this reveal what those patterns look like in practice.

Across the country, colleges and universities continue grappling with a student mental health crisis. Institutions have expanded counseling centers, hired more therapists, launched wellness initiatives, and invested in telehealth and digital mental health platforms. Those efforts are both necessary and overdue. Yet even as campuses devote increasing resources to treatment and crisis intervention, another question deserves equal attention: What helps students feel like they matter before they ever reach a point of crisis?

That question sits at the heart of the HBCU Mental Health Survey, conducted by The Steve Fund, UNCF, and the Healthy Minds Network. While the report documents many of the same mental health challenges affecting students across higher education, it also highlights a meaningful difference in how students experience their campus communities.

The survey found that 83% of those attending HBCUs and Predominantly Black Institutions reported a strong sense of belonging, compared with 73% of students nationally. Nearly 45% were classified as flourishing, compared with only 36% of students across higher education.

The findings do not suggest that HBCU students experience fewer mental health challenges. Forty percent screened positive for depression, 32% for anxiety, 17% reported suicidal ideation, and 9% screened were at risk for an eating disorder. Like students everywhere, they navigate financial pressures, academic demands, family responsibilities, and uncertainty about the future.

The difference is not the absence of struggle; it is the presence of connection.

Researchers increasingly recognize belonging as a protective factor associated with persistence, help-seeking, academic engagement, and overall well-being. Feeling connected cannot eliminate hardship, but it can influence how students experience it and whether they feel supported enough to seek help when they need it.

If belonging has such a profound impact on student well-being, the question becomes not whether it matters, but how institutions create it.

Although Williams works outside traditional student support services, she doesn't see caring for them as something separate from her job.

"Implicitly, yes," she said when asked whether supporting students is part of her responsibility. "The mission of Morehouse College is to develop men with disciplined minds who will lead lives of leadership and service. I agreed to that mission when I accepted my job offer, and a foundation to achieving that mission is care."

For her, this isn't an extra responsibility layered onto her position. It is woven into it. Every employee, regardless of title, contributes to the environment students experience each day.

That perspective reflects one of the survey's central themes. Students who reported stronger feelings of belonging also described their campuses as places where they felt supported, respected, and connected. Rather than viewing mental health solely through the lens of treatment, the findings suggest that campus culture itself plays an

important role in their well-being.

Mental health services remain essential, but HBCUs point toward an additional lesson. Counseling alone cannot create belonging.

Belonging is built long before a student schedules an appointment. It develops when faculty members learn their names, when advisors recognize that a missed meeting may signal something deeper than poor time management, when financial aid staff understand that conversations about tuition often carry emotional weight, and when employees across campus see students as people before they see them as records, account numbers, or graduation statistics.

Those moments rarely appear in institutional dashboards, yet they shape how students experience college every day. For many, an HBCU is more than a place to earn a degree. It is an environment where identity is affirmed rather than questioned, where cultural experiences are reflected in classrooms and campus traditions, and where they often encounter faculty and staff who see their success as a shared responsibility.

That does not mean every student's experience is the same, nor does it suggest that HBCUs are without challenges. These institutions continue to navigate limited resources, financial pressures, and growing demand for mental health services. The HBCU Mental Health Survey makes that clear.

A student who believes they belong may be more willing to ask for help, confide in a trusted faculty member, lean on classmates, or visit a counseling center before a crisis escalates. Those relationships cannot replace professional mental health care, but they can make it easier for students to access that care in the first place.

One of higher education's most common assumptions is that student well-being belongs primarily to counseling centers or student affairs divisions. The reality is that well-being is an institutional responsibility.

Culture is often discussed in broad terms, but students experience it through ordinary interactions. They experience it when someone remembers their name or asks how they're doing and genuinely waits for the answer. When they feel safe enough to admit they are struggling or when they believe there are people on campus who are invested not only in their academic success, but in their well-being as human beings.

Those moments communicate something no marketing campaign or orientation program can manufacture: They tell students they belong.

By expanding access to counseling and other mental health resources, HBCUs remind us that support does not begin when a student reaches a therapist's office. It begins much earlier.

For colleges looking to strengthen student well-being, the lesson is not that every institution should try to replicate the HBCU experience. The history, mission, and cultural significance of HBCUs are unique. Their legacy was forged through generations of educating, empowering, and affirming Black students in ways that many other institutions never had to consider.

What can be replicated, however, is the intentionality behind their culture. Culture is not built through a single initiative. It is built through people.

For Williams, that philosophy is neither revolutionary nor extraordinary. It is simply part of the commitment she made when she accepted her position at Morehouse College. Caring for students is not separate from her work. It is central to it.

"Our job, no matter what our titles are, is to graduate students," said Williams. "We must care about the things that impact them in graduating: intellectually, socially, financially, physically, spiritually, emotionally, and environmentally. Supporting their wellness holistically is simply a part of the job."

"Our job, no matter what our titles are, is to graduate students. We must care about the things that impact them in graduating: intellectually, socially, financially, physically, spiritually, emotionally, and environmentally. Supporting their wellness holistically is simply a part of the job."

Sitovea Williams

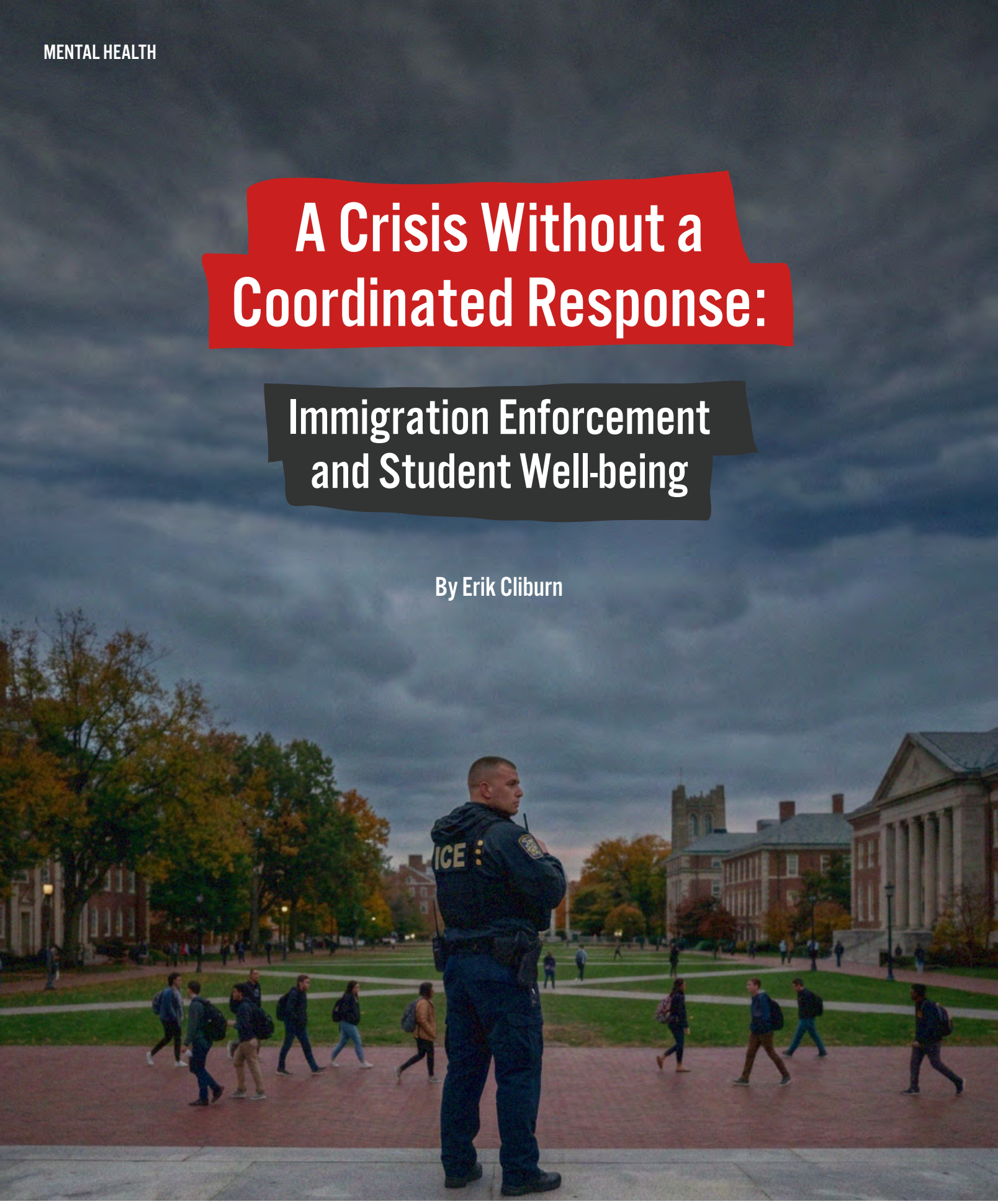
The email she sent that February morning did not solve the student's problems. It wasn't meant to. What it offered was something every student deserves: the reassurance that someone saw them, cared enough to reach out, and believed they mattered.

Higher education has spent years asking how it can better respond when students are struggling. The experiences of HBCU students invite a different question. What kind of campus do we create when every employee believes that caring for students is part of the job?

A Crisis Without a Coordinated Response:

Immigration Enforcement and Student Well-being

By Erik Cliburn



Immigration enforcement in the United States has changed more in the past 18 months than in perhaps any comparable period in recent memory, and the students living in its shadow are showing the strain.

Researchers studying children and adolescents in immigrant and mixed-status families are documenting sleep disturbances, appetite changes, heightened anxiety, depression, and symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—not as isolated case reports, but as a recurring pattern across multiple studies.

The evidence increasingly suggests that this is a mental health crisis that is also playing out on college campuses nationwide, and that most institutions are still responding to it piecemeal rather than treating it as the systemic emergency it appears to be.

A Policy Shift with Few Precedents

The scale of policy change since January 2025 cannot be overstated. The Department of Homeland Security rescinded the long-standing "sensitive locations" policy that had kept immigration agents away from schools, churches, and hospitals.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents have gained broader authority to enter homes. Hiring standards for agents were loosened and training requirements cut back. And in July 2025, Congress passed H.R. 1—the One Big Beautiful Bill—which committed $75 billion in new funding for ICE over four years, on top of $150 billion for immigration enforcement and border security more broadly.

Researchers have been tracking the practical effects of the sensitive-locations rollback since it took effect.

"Rescinding protections for schools, churches, and hospitals, combined with increasingly aggressive enforcement has destabilized the education of children from immigrant families," writes Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj, an education researcher who studies immigrant-origin students' access to equitable opportunities, in a commentary for the Brookings Institution.

In October of this year, Medicaid eligibility for lawfully present immigrants, including refugees, will significantly narrow. A January 2026 analysis from Georgetown University's Center for Children and Families described the convergence of these two policy tracks—increased enforcement and reduced health coverage—as a "perfect storm" for student mental health, one compounding the other at a moment when nearly half of American children already rely on Medicaid or Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and roughly a quarter have at least one immigrant parent.

What the Research Shows

The psychological toll is not speculative. A national study of U.S.-born adolescents of immigrants found that having a detained or deported family member was linked to an elevated risk of suicidal ideation, externalizing behavior, and alcohol use.

Crucially, the danger isn't limited to families with undocumented members. Even the anticipated threat of separation—a parent who might not come home from work, a knock at the door that might come—appears to generate its own chronic stress response.

Clinicians describe this as a form of trauma rooted not in a single event but in an ongoing, unpredictable condition of life, one that can compound earlier unrelated histories of violence and displacement within the same family. Even when no arrest actually occurs, psychologists say the anticipatory fear alone is enough to cause harm.

"It is not possible to overstate how damaging this is from a mental health standpoint," says Amanda Venta, director of the Youth and Family Studies Lab at the University of Houston and Co-chair of the American Psychological Association (APA) Presidential Task Force on Immigration and Health.

School psychologists on the front lines describe families pulling back from services altogether. Some parents have stopped bringing children to routine assessments or Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings for fear that engagement with any institution could expose their immigration status. That withdrawal creates a paradox: schools are often the only place children can access mental health care, but the very fear driving the crisis is what keeps families from walking through the office door.

A Broader Climate of Political Instability

Immigration enforcement doesn't operate in isolation. A qualitative freelisting study of University of Pennsylvania students conducted in the summer of 2025 found that even at a highly resourced urban institution, the dominant emotional responses to the current political moment were uncertainty and anxiety—and that these feelings were most pronounced among non-White and international students.

Researchers noted that workload, financial strain, and what participants called "news overload" compounded the psychological burden, suggesting

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that political instability of all kinds, immigration enforcement included, can strip students' individual capacity to cope.

"The consistent salience of uncertainty and anxiety, even among students at this highly resourced institution, highlights the enduring psychological costs of political instability," the research report reads.

That finding echoes across other research on college mental health more broadly. A recent survey found that 44% of college students nationally reported depressive symptoms and 37% reported anxiety—the highest rates recorded in 15 years of tracking—even before accounting for the additional weight carried by those from mixed-status families.

The Response on Campus

Some campuses have adapted meaningfully. School psychologists interviewed by the American Psychological Association described shifting IEP meetings to phone or video so undocumented parents wouldn't need to appear in person. Others have built "know your rights" resources, trained staff to serve as calm, consistent presences for students who no longer feel safe in public spaces, and turned to targeted interventions such as Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools, which uses group counseling to address PTSD and depression symptoms in those affected students.

But researchers who study this area are candid about the limits of what any single institution can do. Colleges have functioned for decades as a backstop for whatever government support is missing elsewhere, and that role is now colliding with an enforcement apparatus explicitly designed to reach into the spaces they once protected. Practitioners describe the emotional toll on staff themselves—a compounding secondary trauma that comes from trying to reassure students of a safety net the institution cannot fully guarantee.

A Crisis Without a Coordinated Response

What emerges from the available research is not a story of institutions ignoring the problem, but one of them responding in piecemeal—a trained counselor here, a revised meeting format there—without the systemic infrastructure that a crisis of this scale would seem to demand.

The convergence of enforcement policy and upcoming health coverage cuts suggests the strain on student mental health is not going to recede any time soon. It is by most available evidence still building—and largely unmet by the institutions they are counting on for support. Still, practitioners argue that colleges retain real power to soften the impact, even when they can't remove the underlying threat.

"The best thing that we can do right now to counter the mental health effects of this is to dig our heels in on community," says Venta. "It doesn't matter who's knocking on the door and whether or not they have a warrant; schools can continue to create a climate of warmth and belonging."



NEW JERSEY'S 24/7 MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

For the past three years, New Jersey college students have had access to free, around-the-clock mental health support through the nation's first statewide teletherapy program and data from the initiative suggests it reached students who previously had nowhere to turn.

Beginning in 2023, the New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education partnered with mental health platform Uwill to provide students at 45 colleges and universities with no-cost access to virtual therapy, crisis support, and wellness programming.

Since its launch in April 2023, the program has delivered more than 114,000 therapy sessions to 23,295 students at 45 colleges and universities across the state. As of June 2025, it had also connected students with crisis support more than, 1,200 times.

The numbers point to a population that campus counseling centers alone were not reaching. When it launched, 61% of students who registered said they had never made an appointment with a therapist or mental health counselor at their institution. Roughly 30% of all sessions took place outside traditional business hours— evenings, overnight, or on weekends—and more than 12,000 sessions took place during summer or winter break in 2024 alone.

The program also reflected the demographic realities of New Jersey's college student population. Uwill's counselor network for the state was 55% Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and spoke 11 languages. Eighty-five percent of students chose to work with a BIPOC therapist, and 9% sought care in a language other than English. The most common focus areas students searched for included self-esteem, loneliness, trauma, academic concerns, and body image.

The financial case for the program was straightforward. Therapy session copays typically ran $15 to $30 for students with insurance, and $100 to $200 without it. Based on the volume of sessions delivered, the state estimated students saved between $1.2 million to $2.3 million in out-of-pocket costs over the life of the program.

New Jersey has renewed this initiate for the 2026-27 academic year, but the utilization data offer a clear picture of what college students sought out when cost and scheduling were no longer barriers.

University of Iowa Well-Being Texting Program Boosts Employee Resilience

A simple text message might not seem like a mental health intervention—but for thousands of University of Iowa employees, a month of behavioral nudges delivered to their phones made a measurable difference.

The university piloted a texting-based well-being program called Recharge+ for employees in 2022, sending behavioral prompts over 30 days that encouraged participants to take an outdoor break, reconsider how their day was scheduled, or try a short mindfulness practice.

Of the more than 3,500 university employees who used the service, 53% reported higher levels of resilience after completing the program.

The Recharge+ program, offered through the university's liveWELL employee wellness initiative, organizes its texts around three areas: resetting one's sense of meaning and purpose, rethinking mindset, and reconnecting with others.

Participants complete an initial survey to identify where they could see the greatest improvement, then receive tailored text messages on a schedule of their choosing. The program can be repeated every 30 days.

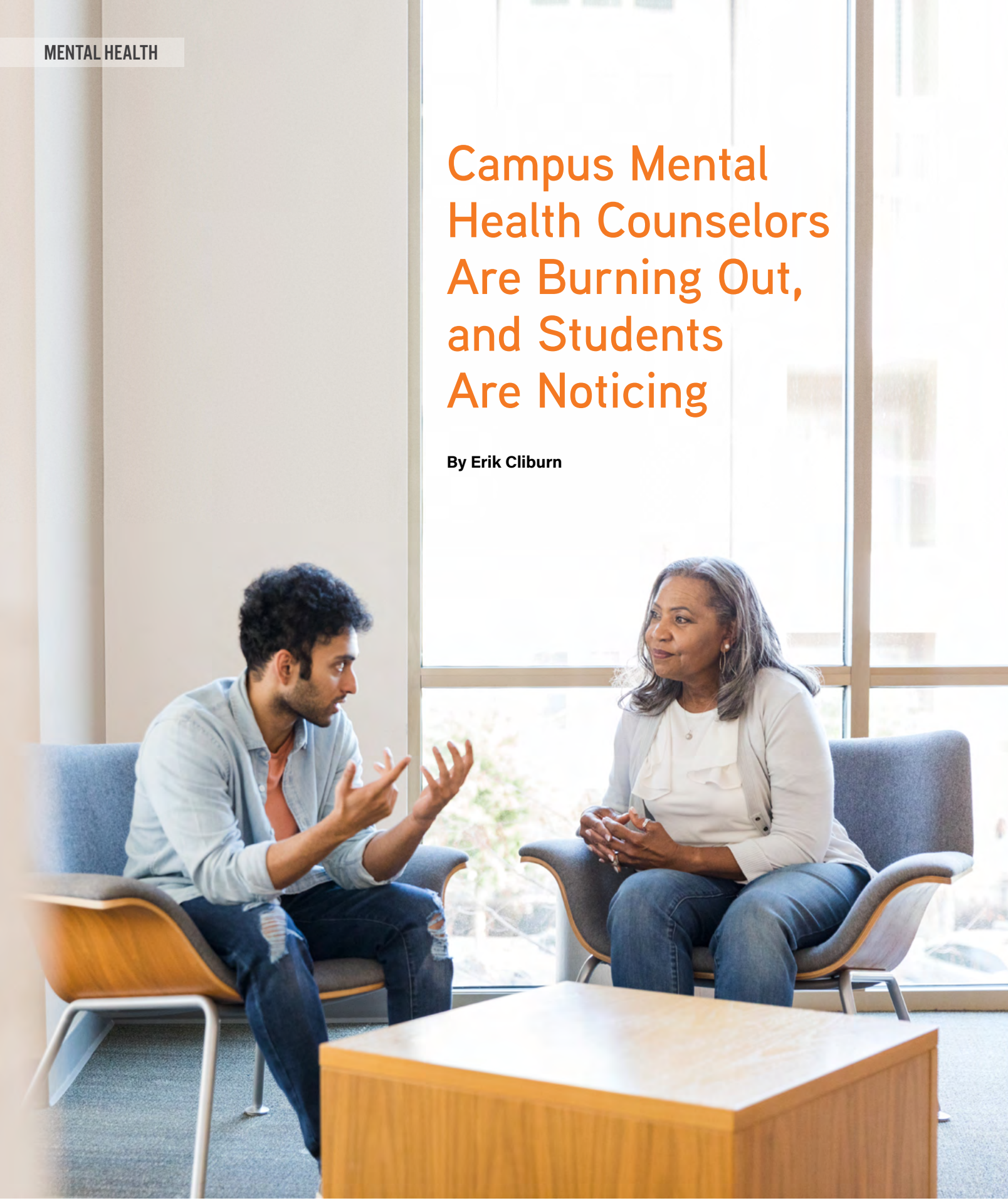
Iowa's approach was presented at a national workplace well-being summit hosted by Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health. It reflects a broader shift in how institutions are thinking about mental health support—moving away from a model that relies primarily on clinical services to absorb demand after someone reaches a crisis point—and toward low-friction, proactive interventions that reach people earlier.

The university has since expanded its well-being focus for students as well, introducing required mental health awareness training for incoming students.

The Recharge+ results offer a practical case study for institutions looking to scale mental health support without growing clinical infrastructure. Reaching more than 3,500 employees through text messages costs considerably less than expanding counseling staff—and when more than half report measurable gains, the return on that investment is difficult to ignore.

Campus Mental Health Counselors Are Burning Out, and Students Are Noticing

By Erik Cliburn



College mental health centers have spent more than a decade racing to keep up with rising demand. Now a second, quieter crisis is catching up with them: the clinicians themselves are wearing down and walking away.

Marcus Hotaling, who directs the counseling center at Union College and leads the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD), put the toll in stark terms in a recent brief for the American Council on Education (ACE).

A staff member told him last spring that her doctor had just put her on blood pressure medication because of the stress of the job. "This job is killing me," she said. Hotaling wrote that he wasn't surprised—he'd started the same medication himself a year earlier, without telling anyone at work.

That kind of strain is not confined to one office. Nationally, mental health counseling center utilization grew five times faster than college enrollment between 2009 and 2015, according to research from EAB, a higher education consulting firm.

Anxiety, depression, and stress remain the most common concerns students relay, and researchers point to several converging causes: reduced stigma around seeking help, more aggressive mental health screening in primary care, and a generation of students shaped by school shootings, a pandemic, and near-constant exposure to national crises.

Counseling centers absorbed that surge for years by expanding what they offered—not just individual and group therapy, but campus-wide prevention education, crisis response, faculty consultations, and referrals for problems that have little to do with clinical mental health.

Many also became the default landing spot for students whose real issue was a missed assignment or roommate conflict, not a diagnosable condition.

Many institutions responded by hiring more staff. EAB's research suggests that this strategy has reached its limit: even centers that added clinicians report they still can't keep pace with demand, and growing headcount indefinitely isn't realistic given tight budgets.

The newest data suggests the demand surge itself may finally be leveling off, even as the staffing crisis behind it persists. In its 2024-2025 annual survey of 488 counseling center directors, AUCCCD found institutions nearly evenly split. Close to 49% of four-year and graduate institutions reported rising demand over the prior year, while 46% reported a decrease—a marked change from the steady, years-long climb centers described earlier in the decade. A plateau in growth hasn't translated into relief, though: 80% of directors still said their centers have difficulty meeting demand.

The people doing the work are leaving, and last year the problem got worse. AUCCCD's newest survey found that 25% of clinic positions turned over in the 2024-2025 fiscal year, a significant jump from the year before.

Low salary remained the single biggest driver, cited by nearly 47% of directors, followed by staff relocation and dissatisfaction with working conditions. Nearly 40% of those departing moved into private practice where they can set their hours and earn more money.

Recruitment to fill open positions eased slightly even as turnover worsened: About 35% of directors reported difficulty filling open positions, down from nearly 49% the prior year, though it's still a coin flip for many centers.

Hotaling's brief includes anonymous excerpts from a listserv for counseling center directors, shared with the writers' permission, that capture the fatigue. One director described plans to leave the field entirely, citing "the leadership above me and university politics" as reasons why. Another wrote about feeling squeezed from multiple directions at once, saying campus administrators increasingly weigh in on clinical decisions they aren't trained to make.

The consequences ripple beyond the counseling center. As ACE's Hollie Chessman and co-authors note in a companion brief, faculty and staff across campus are increasingly filling informal support roles they never signed up for and aren't equipped to handle, even as counselors themselves say current staffing models are unsustainable.

Researchers and practitioners point to a handful of strategies that seem to help.

EAB recommends that institutions define a clear "scope of care" spelling out what their centers will and won't provide—so students and families have realistic expectations from the start.

Other recommendations include benchmarking clinical workloads with tools like the Clinical Load Index, reviving group therapy to expand capacity, and reviewing counselor salaries against private practice and community mental health pay, not just against other colleges.

A small but growing number of institutions have created chief mental health officer positions to coordinate strategy campus-wide rather than leaving it all to the counseling center alone.

None of these measures offers a complete solution. But as Hotaling put it in his brief, if a surefire solution existed, "I likely wouldn't need blood pressure medication." What both ACE briefs converge on is a more basic point: student mental health support depends on a workforce that is itself supported, and right now, many of the people doing that work say they are running on empty.



Smarter Meetings Can Improve Employee Well-Being

By Misty Evans

For many faculty and staff members, the modern campus workday has become fragmented into a series of meetings, leaving little uninterrupted time for teaching, research, advising, or strategic thinking. While collaboration is essential on college campuses, an increasing body of research suggests that too much time spent, particularly in the form of unnecessary or poorly designed meetings, is actually counterproductive.

According to Microsoft's 2025 Work Trend Index, workers are interrupted approximately every two minutes by a meeting, email, or notification. Nearly half report that work feels "chaotic and fragmented." Although the study spans industries, its findings resonate across higher education.

Meeting overload has become more than a scheduling problem. It's increasingly recognized as a contributor to stress, decision fatigue, reduced productivity, and burnout.

The Hidden Cost of Constant Collaboration

Budget constraints and staffing shortages have resulted in expanded responsibilities for nearly every campus employee.

Faculty members routinely need to balance instruction, scholarship, mentoring, committee service, and accreditation work. Professional staff might oversee advising, complex regulation changes, mental health referrals, student conduct issues, and more. Every additional meeting further eats up already limited time.

Researchers have also found that the cognitive effects extend beyond the meeting itself.

In a recent Harvard Business Review article, organizational psychologist Steven Rogelberg described what he calls "meeting hangovers," the lingering decline in focus, motivation, and productivity that follows ineffective meetings. Survey data found that more than 90% of employees have experienced these aftereffects.

Repeated interruptions in the day also contribute to decision fatigue.

Meetings often require participants to evaluate proposals, prioritize initiatives, interpret new information, answer questions, and shift attention among unrelated topics. Organizational psychology research has consistently shown that repeated decision-making depletes mental energy, making later decisions slower, less creative, and more reactive. Those cognitive deficits can accumulate quickly.

The challenge is compounded by context switching.

A college vice president might move directly from a cabinet discussion on enrollment strategy into a student disciplinary meeting, then pivot to a fundraising conversation before reviewing a faculty hiring proposal.

Eight Ways to Improve Productivity

If you're leading a department, committee, or initiative, these evidence-based practices can help your meetings be more productive and efficient.

1. Start With a Purpose

Before sending an invitation, ask one question: What decisions need to be made?

2. Send the Agenda in Advance

Include discussion topics, desired outcomes, and any materials participants should review beforehand.

3. Invite Only the People Who Need to Be There

Not everyone needs to attend every meeting. Include only those who will make decisions, provide expertise, or complete follow-up work. Others can receive a summary afterward.

4. Shorten Meeting Time

When possible, make meetings shorter. This encourages focus and efficiency.

5. Encourage Time Between Meetings

Employees should not schedule back-to-back meetings. Otherwise, they are likely to forget much of what the meeting focused on. They need some downtime to finalize meeting notes, think about their to-dos and plan their how-tos.

6. Make Asynchronous the First Option

Share updates, document reviews, announcements, and status reports through email, shared documents, recorded videos, or collaboration platforms, not in another meeting.

7. End With Clear Action Items

Conclude each meeting knowing what decisions were made, who owns each next step, and when deliverables are due.

8. Audit Recurring Meetings

Have a policy in place to periodically review standing meetings—eliminating nonessential ones can return dozens of hours to employees over the course of an academic year.

Each transition requires the brain to refocus, reducing efficiency and increasing mental fatigue.

Conducting Smarter Meetings

The solution is not eliminating collaboration. Rather, it is collaborating in a more effective way.

One of the simplest improvements is adopting an agenda-first policy.

The Harvard research emphasizes that every meeting should begin with a clearly defined purpose, specific discussion topics, expected outcomes, and designated decision-makers. If organizers can't explain why a discussion requires synchronous participation, the conversation may be better suited for another format.

Sharing agendas beforehand also improves outcomes. Rather than brainstorming every issue in real time, participants arrive ready to discuss options and make decisions, resulting in shorter, more efficient sessions.

Additionally, institutions can also reduce what some workplace experts describe as "meeting debt," maintaining recurring meetings long after their original purpose has been met. Periodically reviewing standing meetings and eliminating those that no longer add value can quickly restore valuable time to employees' calendars.

Protect Time for Deep Work

Many organizations are experimenting with protected focus time.

Research published in the MIT Sloan Management Review found that having meeting-free days significantly improved employees' productivity, autonomy, communication, job satisfaction, and stress levels. Protected work blocks gave people uninterrupted time to complete complex tasks that require sustained concentration.

Departments might establish meeting-free Friday afternoons during peak advising periods. Faculty governance groups could avoid scheduling routine committee events during major grading periods. Administrative divisions could reserve mornings for uninterrupted project work or student-facing responsibilities.

Even small changes can create meaningful improvements.

Reducing meeting lengths from 60 minutes to 45 or even 30 minutes creates transition time between commitments while encouraging more focused discussions. Starting and ending on time, inviting only essential participants, assigning clear action items, and documenting next steps all help as well. Taking breaks between meetings also allows for people to recap thoughts and plan for action.

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Make Asynchronous the Default

Not every conversation requires stakeholders to gather simultaneously.

Routine project updates, informational briefings, document reviews, policy revisions, and status reports can often be shared through collaborative documents, recorded videos, shared workspaces, or email summaries. Meetings can then focus more on discussion of ideas, problem-solving, and decision-making rather than just information sharing.

Technology is making asynchronous collaboration even easier.

AI tools now can generate meeting agendas, transcribe conversations, summarize discussions, identify action items, and make meeting notes searchable. Microsoft WorkLab argues that these capabilities reduce administrative work while allowing participants to focus more fully on meaningful discussion instead of just note-taking.

Leadership Sets the Tone

Perhaps the most important change is cultural rather than technological. On many campuses, full calendars have become an informal symbol of productivity and engagement. However, employees can provide greater value when they have time to mentor students, develop curriculum, conduct research, solve complex problems, and think strategically.

Leaders play a central role in establishing those expectations.

When presidents, provosts, vice presidents, deans, and department chairs model concise agendas, question whether meetings are necessary, end discussions early if objectives have been met, and maximize employees' time for daily duties, they signal that thoughtful work is just as important as visible activity.

At a time when colleges and universities are investing heavily in employee well-being initiatives, meeting reform represents one of the simplest and no-cost opportunities for stress relief.

Improving campus culture isn't about adding another get-together. It starts by removing one.



Expediting Access to Mental Health Care

By Erik Cliburn

Some American college students are accessing mental health care faster and more easily than ever before. Across a small cluster of campuses, "same-day" has become the new baseline for mental health care—a shift away from intake forms and multi-week waits toward simply walking in, or logging on, and being seen.

The push reflects a real surge in need. Research from Johns Hopkins Medicine found that more than 560,000 college students nationwide have reported increasing depression symptoms over roughly the past 15 years, a trend concentrated among women, minority students, and those under financial strain.

A 2021 survey of over 15,500 students by the New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education found seven in 10 reported more stress and anxiety than the year before, and two in five said they were specifically worried about their mental health.

The Princeton Review's 2026 Mental Health Services Honor Roll spotlighted 30 schools it says have responded not just by adding staff, but by rethinking when and how students reach care in the first place. The list evaluates institutions on administrative commitment to mental health, overall campus quality of life, and how well they equip students to manage their own well-being.

Arizona State University built its entire model around a single promise: a clinician will be reachable the day a student asks, regardless of how many others are also requesting help. As the university puts it, students will "always have a clinician available to speak to" when they need one. That pledge is backed by two round-the-clock channels, Open Call/Open Chat and the EMPACT Crisis Line, plus credit-bearing stress management courses and app partnerships with Headspace and Calm.

New York University runs a parallel system through its Wellness Exchange, layering a phone hotline, chat, email and scheduled urgent counseling sessions on top of standard appointments. The school says students can generally see a counselor within 24 hours.

Mercer University reserves a limited number of daily Same Day Solution Sessions for those who can't wait for a scheduled slot, alongside a required first-year curriculum built with the national RADical Health program.

New Jersey City University (NJCU) has approached the same challenge on a statewide scale, partnering with the teletherapy platform Uwill so that any of its roughly 5,500 students can reach a licensed counselor the same day, at any hour. The counseling center's director, Danielle Bachant, has pointed to steadily climbing after-hours demand as evidence the model is filling a real gap, one she attributes largely to anxiety, depression, and unprocessed trauma among students who may not have had a safe outlet before.

Scheduling flexibility alone hasn't solved everything. Cultural stigma still keeps some students away, a pattern one NJCU counseling intern has linked to how mental health is discussed or avoided within certain communities.

In response, the university has built out support well beyond traditional therapy: a Pride Center for LGBTQIA+ students, a peer support app connecting students internationally, and partnerships with outside providers for cases that need more than campus resources can offer.

New Jersey's broader push, coordinated through Uwill across dozens of participating schools is explicitly framed around equity—the idea that access to same-day care shouldn't depend on which college a student attends.

Together, these approaches point to the same conclusion: that same-day counseling matters most when it's paired with the structural work of removing whatever else keeps students from asking for help.



The Well-Being Curriculum

By Erik Cliburn

Two truths are long-held on college campuses. Campus counseling centers are straining under demand they can't meet, and students often don't seek help until they're already struggling.

A program the University of Chicago (UChicago) piloted in fall 2020 offers a unique model—one researchers are circling back to as evidence mounts that prevention, delivered before symptoms appear, can do more than treatment after the fact.

The program, called Living Intentionally to Flourish Everyday (LIFE), was a four-week sequence required of all first-year students at the college. Designed by Julie Edwards, UChicago's director of health education, it grew out of a campus health needs assessment that had flagged mental well-being as a top student priority.

Rather than waiting for students to walk into a counseling office, LIFE built psychological skill-building into the shared experience of arriving on campus. The curriculum was grounded in psychologist Martin Seligman's PERMA model, which frames flourishing as a product of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment.

Students took the VIA Institute on Character strengths assessment before the program began, then met weekly in groups of about 15 for 90-minute online sessions—lectures and full-group discussion followed by smaller breakout conversations on strengths, mindfulness, values and purpose, with daily reflection logs in between.

Student reception was mixed.

Of 763 first-year evaluations collected at the time, just over half were positive, roughly 30% neutral, and 8% were dissatisfied. Students and facilitators generally credited the small-group discussions with fostering connections they wouldn't otherwise have made, while also noting that engagement varied widely by group and that the remote format blunted some of the program's intended impact. It was a modest, uneven debut for an idea that researchers were, around the same time, starting to validate at scale.

That same year, a randomized controlled trial out of Yale and Stanford, published in Frontiers in Psychiatry, tested three well-being interventions against a no-treatment control group and found that a 30-hour, eight-week program combining breathing techniques, positive psychology, and community service produced significant drops in depression and stress along with gains in mindfulness and social connectedness.

A shorter, 10-hour pilot version of the same curriculum showed almost no effect. The lesson for a four-week program like LIFE is blunt: time and supervised practice appear to matter as much as content. A brief, one-time psycho-educational push is unlikely to move the needle the way a semester-long, skill-building sequence can.

A broader understanding arrived this year. A 2025 scoping review in Frontiers in Psychology, surveying 40 studies of U.S. college well-being programs published between 2009 and 2024, found that most interventions—LIFE included—remain co-curricular add-ons rather than credit-bearing coursework, and that only about one in six studies even defines "well-being" using a published theoretical framework.

The review's authors call for embedding well-being directly into the academic curriculum, not just orientation-adjacent programming, and for a shared implementation toolkit so that individual campus experiments stop reinventing the wheel in isolation from one another.

Edwards herself seems to have taken that lesson to heart. Since leaving UChicago for Cornell, she has continued adapting PERMA-based programming into new formats there—a one-credit course, standalone workshops, and material embedded directly into existing curricula—testing which structures actually stick once the novelty of a pandemic-era pilot wears off.

For colleges weighing well-being investments in 2026, LIFE's real legacy may be less the specific four-week online sequence than the model behind it: proactive rather than reactive, built around sustained skill-building rather than a single seminar, and is only as effective as the institutional commitment—credit, funding, in-person delivery, faculty buy-in—behind it. The research since 2020 suggests the framework travels well; what's harder to replicate is the follow-through.

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The 2026 Insight Into Academia Excellence in Mental Health and Well-Being Award winners are transforming how colleges care for their communities.



University of Central Florida's Field of Memories – Be Aware Show You Care flag exhibit is a powerful and poignant visual display created by UCF community members that represents the 1,100 suicides that occur annually on college campuses throughout the U.S. The activity is an example of how UCF helps raise awareness for university mental health counseling resources while reducing the stigma associated with seeking support.

The numbers have been clear for years. Anxiety, depression, and burnout are not peripheral concerns on today's college campuses—they are central ones, shaping whether students persist, faculty thrive, and institutions can deliver on their fundamental promises. The question facing higher education is no longer whether mental health matters but what an institution is actually doing about it.

We are proud to present the recipients of the 2026 Insight Into Academia Excellence in Mental Health and Well-Being Award, honoring colleges and universities where mental health is not a checkbox or a crisis response, but a genuine institutional commitment—embedded in culture, reflected in policy, and visible in the daily life of students, faculty, and staff.

This year's honorees represent an extraordinary range of institution types, from Ivy League research universities and large public flagships to community colleges serving students in the nation's most underserved communities.

Some have redesigned their entire model of student support around prevention rather than just using crisis intervention. Others have trained peer communities to carry the work of mental health promotion into classrooms, residence halls, and athletic programs. Several have built or updated their infrastructure—strategic plans, cross-divisional frameworks, data systems—to ensure well-being work is sustained, measured, and accountable over time. And a number are meeting students in the specific contexts that shape their own lives and experiences.

"What distinguishes this year's honorees is not the scale of their resources, but the depth of their commitment," says Lenore Pearlstein, co-publisher of Insight Into Academia. "These institutions know that mental health and well-being are not problems to manage—they are priorities to cultivate. That distinction changes how they lead, they design their programs, and how their communities experience life on campus."

Selected for their innovative programming, institutional commitment, and measurable impact, this year's honorees offer models that can be adapted and replicated by institutions of every size and type. Through their stories, readers will find practical approaches, innovative frameworks, and a clear picture of what it looks like when a campus decides that caring for its people is not an add-on to the academic mission—it is the foundation of it.



The Via Wellness Program is part of campus life across all four VCOM campuses and includes a diverse range of sports, fitness, exercise, social, cultural, and spiritual events, like this pickleball tournament held on the campus of Virginia Tech.



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Mental Health as a Campus Strategy: The U.S. Health Promoting Campuses Network

Mental health on campus has never been just a counseling center problem. For a growing number of colleges and universities, it is a strategic priority—something that must be embedded in culture, operations, leadership, and the design of everyday campus life itself.

The U.S. Health Promoting Campuses Network (USHPCN), initiated in 2020, exists to support exactly that vision. Anchored in the Okanagan Charter—an international framework calling on colleges and universities to embed health into all aspects of campus culture and to lead by example in the broader community—the USHPCN brings together member institutions across the United States that have committed to a comprehensive, settings-based approach to well-being. Member campuses appoint liaisons who meet regularly to share resources, best practices, lessons learned, and collaborate with 13 international networks to advance the health-promoting university movement globally. Several of this year's Excellence in Mental Health and Well-Being Award honorees are active USHPCN members, and their work offers a vivid picture of what a health-promoting campus looks like in practice.

Northern Michigan University (NMU) has organized its entire well-being strategy around USHPCN's Grand Challenge 1.1, a commitment to embedding mental health care across administration, operations, and academics, and to advancing collaboration both locally and globally, guided directly by the Okanagan Charter. The effort is anchored by a Wellbeing Advisory Council and structured around eight dimensions of holistic well-being, creating a sustainable, scalable framework that extends well beyond any single program. Among NMU's most visible initiatives is Wildpups, a therapy dog program that offers regular, low-barrier opportunities for stress relief and connection. Health promotion and peer educators lead peer-driven programming that builds skills and normalizes help-seeking, creating student ownership of the well-being agenda rather than positioning wellness as something delivered just by administrators.

University of Michigan-Flint (UM-Flint) is another active USHPCN member, and its participation in the network reflects a broader institutional evolution from a traditional service model to an integrated, prevention-focused approach.

Over the past five years, UM-Flint has created a new vice chancellor for health and well-being position to provide university-wide leadership; administering the National College Health Assessment and Healthy Minds Survey on alternating years to track trends; secured more than $1 million in grants to support student basic needs, emergency funding, and health promotion; and developed a trauma-informed toolkit for faculty, staff, and students. The university also partners with Aiberry to provide free, confidential mental health check-ins using research-backed tools. What distinguishes UM-Flint's approach is its insistence that mental health and well-being are not ancillary—they are foundational to student success, employee engagement, and institutional effectiveness.



Community College of Allegheny County employees wear green ribbons in recognition of Mental Health Awareness Ribbon Day on May 19, 2026. The college-wide observance promoted mental health awareness and well-being and aligned with this year's Mental Health America theme, "More Good Days Together."



University of Central Florida Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) PAWS events provide positive human-animal interactions to help reduce stress and anxiety, particularly around midterm and final exam periods. In addition to in-person resources, CAPS provides digital tools such as teletherapy and chatbots to support mental health and well-being on campus.

Grand Valley State University has built one of the more comprehensive mental health ecosystems among this year's honorees, with programs spanning early identification, peer education, faculty support, and real-time campus monitoring.

The PACE Initiative for Connecting Mind and Health coordinates cross-campus good mental health promotion, while a dedicated GV mental health app gives faculty and staff practical guidance for supporting students who may be struggling. Faculty and student mental health ambassadors extend reach into departments and classrooms, and a Mental Health and Well-Being Index provides ongoing measurement to track progress and identify gaps. Additional peer education programs ensure that students hear mental health messaging from people who share their experiences. Grand Valley's Professor Well-Being Awards recognize faculty who model and champion mental health awareness for students—a signal that institutional culture, not just institutional programming, is the ultimate goal.

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Insight into Academia Excellence in Mental Health and Well-Being Award 2026

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Rethinking the Model: From Reactive to Proactive Campus Care

The traditional model of college mental health places a counseling center at the center of everything, as a place students go when they are already in crisis. The institutions recognized here have deliberately moved beyond that model, building systems that identify need early, engage students before a crisis develops, and embed support into the spaces where students already spend their time.

San Diego Miramar College describes its shift in direct terms by changing from a reactive, clinical model to a proactive, strengths-based approach to student wellness. In partnership with MindArch Health, the college uses MindArch's MAP assessment to gather insights into student strengths and needs, informing targeted interventions that promote resilience, belonging, and personal empowerment. Wellness programming—yoga on the quad, therapy dog visits, art-based activities—is designed with an eye toward high-risk populations and is explicitly grounded in data. When county health data identified suicide as a leading cause of death among Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander youth, Miramar developed targeted outreach through its AANHPI Resource Center. Mental health, basic needs support, and student engagement have been aligned into a single, cohesive strategy—the recognition that a student who is food-insecure, socially isolated, or academically struggling is facing a mental health challenge, even if they never visit a counseling office.

Penn State Abington, a satellite campus operating with limited financial resources, has built something that many larger institutions have not: a peer counseling program. Students in specific majors go through a rigorous training process, attend a weekly seminar taught by a licensed counselor, and receive ongoing supervision as they provide individual and group counseling to peers. The program destigmatizes help-seeking by normalizing the experience of receiving support from someone who looks like you, shares your academic pressures, and understands the specific culture of the campus. The school has also established a Collegiate Recovery Program offering support groups, a drop-in center, sober recreational and living activities, and referral services for students affected by substance abuse disorders, recognizing that recovery and academic success are not competing priorities but deeply intertwined ones.



To support mental health awareness and suicide prevention, Florida International University Law organized and championed a team in the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Out of Darkness Campus Walk, sending the message that no one is alone and that help is always available.

GateWay Community College in Phoenix has reimagined well-being as an institutional identity. As a designated College of Well-Being, GateWay organizes its student and employee experiences around the 5C's of Well-Being: Character, Care, Connection, Contribution, and Career. Well-Being Wednesdays offer regular, research-informed programming for students and staff alike. The 5C's Student Success Center serves as a centralized hub for mental health and basic needs support. Most importantly, in students' first semester, GateWay embeds character strengths work and positive psychology into a required First Year Experience course, recognizing that resilience and self-understanding, developed early, are more powerful preventive tools than any reactive intervention.

Farmingdale State College has distinguished itself through a combination of structural commitments and one unique innovation: it is the only State University of New York campus to offer virtual reality (VR) therapy for anxiety, phobias, and relaxation training. Beyond the VR program, Farmingdale's counseling model is notable for what it refuses to do—there are no preset session limits, no direct or insurance billing, and no out-of-pocket cost to students or their families. Because no bill is ever generated, there is no explanation of benefits reaching a parent, preserving confidentiality in a way that traditional insurance-based systems cannot. Services are available 24/7 through in-house staff rather than a contracted off-campus call center. This model makes a clear argument: institutional commitment to mental health means removing every barrier between a student and the support they need.



A University of Illinois Chicago School of Law student journals between classes.

RECOGNIZED FOR SUPPORTING STUDENT WELL-BEING

The Community College of Aurora is proud to be a recipient of the **2026 Excellence in Mental Health and Well-Being Award** from *Insight Into Academia*.

Because student success starts with a healthy, supportive community.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE of AURORA

Insight Into Academia — Excellence in Mental Health and Well-Being Award — 2026





Peer-Driven, Community-Centered: Building Cultures of Care

Some of the most powerful mental health innovations on college campuses today have nothing to do with technology or clinical infrastructure. They are about culture—about who is doing the work of mental health promotion, who feels welcome seeking support, and what signals an institution sends daily about whether it values the whole person. The following honorees have built programs in which community itself is the intervention.

Virginia Tech has spent years building one of the most comprehensive well-being ecosystems in American higher education, and its most recent milestones are a reflection of sustained institutional commitment. The Cook Counseling Center has expanded its embedded counselor program into additional academic and residential spaces, including the Corps of Cadets. The Residential Well-Being model has reshaped the residential environment to focus explicitly on well-being and belonging, integrating case management into the experience so that support follows students to where they live. The Connection Project, adapted from the University of Virginia, builds meaningful peer relationships over a semester, formalizing the importance of human connection as an academic priority. The Community Resiliency Model has been infused across campus to give the entire community a shared language and skills for supporting one another. Virginia Tech became the first institution in the country to be designated a Digitally Well University by the Digital Wellness Institute, a recognition of its work to promote healthy technology use alongside mental health.

Adelphi University has taken mindfulness more seriously than most. The university's Mindfulness Center, opened in 2022, is a deliberately designed space. It is soundproofed to block outside noise, lit with a canopy of twinkling lights, and capable of supporting different moods and purposes. It offers yoga classes and guided meditation to students, faculty, and staff, and serves as a training ground for the Keys to Well-Being employee certificate program. Each fall, Adelphi hosts a campus-wide mindfulness retreat. In perhaps the program's most distinctive expression, students have traveled with the Alternative Break program from New York to California specifically to engage in meditation and mindfulness practices, treating contemplative practice as a form of engaged learning rather than a luxury add-on.

Bronx Community College's CARES Unit operates in the nation's poorest congressional district, and its model of mental health support reflects both the depth of need and the ingenuity of the response. CARES provides Mental Health First Aid training to the entire campus community on a monthly basis,



Graduates from the Notre Dame de Namur University, School of Psychology.

creating a campus-wide baseline of mental health awareness that extends far beyond the counseling office. Programming is designed explicitly from a cultural perspective: workshops that address the need to belong, groups for student athletes, support for the LGBTQIA+ community, and mindfulness offerings designed to be accessible and appealing, such as the Mindfulness and Crocheting Group. Strength-based case management is available for students with social and emotional needs. The unit's philosophy is that person-centered, wraparound services are the best tool for retaining students and supporting their futures and is a model developed in response to realities that many campuses have not grappled with directly.

Central Michigan University's (CMU) Counseling Center has built a trio of programs that work together across different levels of campus culture. COMPASS trains student peer leaders to deliver prevention-focused mental health outreach, expanding the counseling center's reach and normalizing help-seeking through peer-to-peer communication. "Different Minds, One CMU" is a neurodiversity-affirming initiative offering peer coaching, connection, and campus-wide consultation to create more accessible and predictable environments. "Psychologically Safe CMU" develops faculty and staff through a professional learning community focused on trauma-informed teaching and care. The institutional commitment runs deep: University Engagement and Student Affairs staff and the entire President's Cabinet are Mental Health First Aid certified, and all residence life peer staff are Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) trained in suicide prevention—a structural signal that mental health care is everyone's responsibility.



Moraine Valley Community College students decorate denim jeans during a Sexual Assault Awareness Month program.



University of Michigan-Flint's Week of Wellness offers activities that support all eight dimensions of wellness. The event encourages students to focus on self-care, providing opportunities to enhance their overall well-being and reinforcing UM-Flint's commitment to student health and wellness.

Well-Being in Specialized Settings: Meeting Students Where They Are

Mental health needs look different depending on where you are, whether in a law school navigating bar prep anxiety, a veterinary program confronting grief and trauma or in a pharmacy school working alongside students facing the dual pressures of graduate training and clinical responsibility. The institutions recognized here have built mental health programs responsive to their specific communities, understanding that generic programming often misses what their students need most.

The **University of Nebraska College of Law** has created its well-being strategy around the conviction that law school wellness begins with self-knowledge. A certified strengths coach works with every law student to identify and understand their unique abilities—helping them recognize not only what they are good at, but where they are most energized, and where to focus their professional development. This strengths-based foundation is introduced in first-year practice groups led by upper-level Inclusive Leadership Fellows, peer mentors who are simultaneously developing their own leadership skills.

The program also includes yoga and guided meditation classes held in a dedicated Wellness Room, organized walks, therapy dog visits, and regular office hours through the Nebraska Lawyers Assistance Program. The rationale is clear-eyed: studies show that 24% of lawyers report problematic alcohol use, with rates particularly pronounced in early career years. Helping law students understand themselves—their strengths, their limits, and their patterns—is mental health prevention work with a long career horizon.

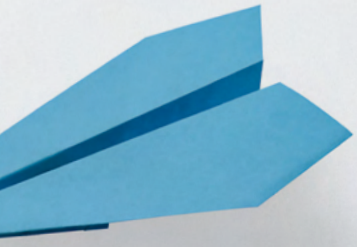
The **University of Illinois Chicago School of Law** has developed a program that addresses an underserved moment in every law student's trajectory, bar preparation. During the Bar Prep Bootcamp for recent graduates, the school now offers a weekly support space hosted in person by a staff counselor—a dedicated time for graduates to work through the anxiety, self-doubt, and mental health challenges that accompany the final, high-stakes stretch before licensure. The bootcamp recognizes what most law schools do not: that a student's mental health needs don't end at graduation, and the bar exam represents a unique moment of vulnerability that deserves its own intentional response.



University of Southern California Mann School students, faculty, and staff pot succulents in containers made from upcycled medication bottles during a campus event that fostered creativity, sustainability, and well-being. (Photo by David Zong)

Florida International University College of Law (FIU Law) has built a multi-layered well-being ecosystem that includes a faculty and administrato- led book club on wellness topics—including Kathryne Young's "How to Be Sort of Happy in Law School"—that meets weekly over lunch for four to five weeks. Students consistently report that the book club helped them navigate law school stress with greater ease and improved their overall sense of belonging. The program reflects FIU Law's broader philosophy that mental health programming should be embedded in community, not siloed in a counseling office, and that asking for help is a sign of strength, courage, and self-awareness.

UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine has grappled directly with a challenge specific to its field: veterinary medicine is an inherently high-stress profession shaped by emotionally complex patient care, demanding workloads, and frequent exposure to grief and trauma. The school has



developed an integrated well-being strategy grounded in an eudaimonia framework—emphasizing personal growth, reflective practice, and comprehensive well-being across all dimensions of life, not just stress management—in order to flourish. Embedded psychologists, counselors, and coaches offer accessible, on-site support. A school-wide Community Council coordinates initiatives that promote wellness and engagement across the entire school. Question, Persuade, Refer suicide prevention training and critical incident debriefing education are standard.

Notre Dame de Namur University's School of Psychology has taken a distinctive approach, integrating mental health and well-being not just into student services, but into the academic mission itself. Training clinics, supervised practicum experiences, and community partnerships that expand services to underserved populations make the school's well-being work inseparable from its educational purpose. Mindfulness, trauma-informed practices, and reflective supervision are embedded into coursework and faculty development. The result is an institution where students learn to provide culturally responsive mental health care in the same environment where they themselves receive it—a model of well-being as both practice and education.

M FLINT

WHERE SUCCESS LEADS

A CAMPUS THAT CARES FOR THE WHOLE PERSON

At UM-Flint, health and well-being isn't just a program; it's a commitment to embedding health and well-being into all aspects of our campus culture. We actively cultivate a health-promoting environment that supports the well-being of every student, faculty, and staff member, so our community can learn, work, and grow at its best.

We're honored to be named a recipient of the 2026 Insight Into Academia Excellence in Mental Health and Well-Being Award, and proud to be recognized for the work we do every day to make care, connection, and holistic wellness part of who we are.

Insight Into Academia Excellence in Mental Health and Well-Being Award 2026



umflint.edu

The Infrastructure of Care: Systems, Data, and the Whole Campus

Lasting change in campus mental health requires more than individual programs–it requires infrastructure.

The University at Albany, SUNY has organized its mental health work through the Thrive Initiative, a campus-wide framework that integrates mental health, physical well-being, financial stability, career readiness, and belonging into a single accessible ecosystem.

Rather than siloing services by type or department, Thrive connects students, faculty, and staff through shared principles, a centralized calendar, and cross-divisional collaboration. Programs are designed to be approachable and preventative—wellness workshops, financial literacy events, career support, community-building activities—reducing the stigma associated with receiving assistance by embedding support into everyday campus life. Thrive is continuously informed by participatory campus-wide needs assessments and feedback loops, ensuring the initiative stays responsive to the diverse lived experiences of its community.

American University centers its approach on a core principle: well-being must be inclusive or it isn't well-being at all. The Center for Well-Being provides up to six to eight sessions of weekly individual therapy per academic year for students. They have 24/7 access to crisis support through ProtoCall and Mantra Health, which provides free, round-the-clock support including therapy, self-care modules, emotional wellness coaching, and in-the-moment help through ConnectNow.

For faculty and staff, "Meditation on the Move" sends AhealthyU's wellness program manager directly to offices and conference rooms bringing calming music, breathing exercises, and guided stillness to employees in their own workspaces. The philosophy is straightforward: people cannot be well if well-being requires navigating a system to find it.

Pacific University takes a layered, coordinated approach to mental health that explicitly connects prevention, intervention, and crisis response. A centralized Office of Student Support handles non-clinical triage, including suicide risk screening using the Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale, coordinated across Student Support, Public Safety, and on-call staff. Question, Persuade, and Refer and Be Sensitive Be Brave trainings are campus-wide. The Counseling Center offers same-day access alongside 24/7 crisis support. Required mental health education for student-athletes reaches a population that is often reluctant to seek help. Cross-divisional working groups align mental health promotion, suicide prevention, postvention, and harm reduction into a single coordinated system, so that when a student needs support, the campus is already speaking the same language.

The University of Lynchburg addresses mental health and well-being explicitly through nine Dimensions of Wellness, with the conviction that students cannot succeed academically without attending to themselves outside the classroom. Among its more distinctive programs: "Crit Happens," a therapeutic tabletop role-playing game group led by a trained game master, uses the structure of collaborative storytelling to foster social skills and identity exploration. A bi-annual speaker series, "Beyond the Game," focuses on mental health and resilience specifically for student-athletes. An eight-week spirituality and mental health process group, co-facilitated by a university chaplain and a mental health counselor, reflects the institution's attention to spiritual well-being as a dimension of mental health, not separate from it. The Princeton Review has recognized Lynchburg's Counseling Center as one of the best in the country, a validation of an approach that insists on treating the whole person.



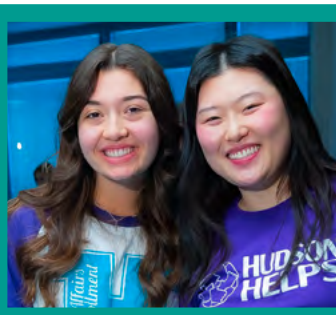
Cash, a therapy dog from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Police Department visits Nebraska Law each semester to interact with law students, offering a welcome break and a few extra smiles.

Hudson County Community College

Proud to Receive the *Insight Into Academia* 2026 Excellence in Mental Health and Well-Being Award!











We are honored to be recognized for the second consecutive year for fostering a caring, supportive campus community. At HCCC, the mental health and well-being of our students, faculty, and staff remain a priority, and our committment to creating an environment where everyone feels welcomed and valued is unwavering.

Mental Health Counseling and Wellness Center with free in-person and remote counseling assessments and sessions

Hudson Helps Resource Center provides services, programs, and resources that address basic needs and bolster student retention and success

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