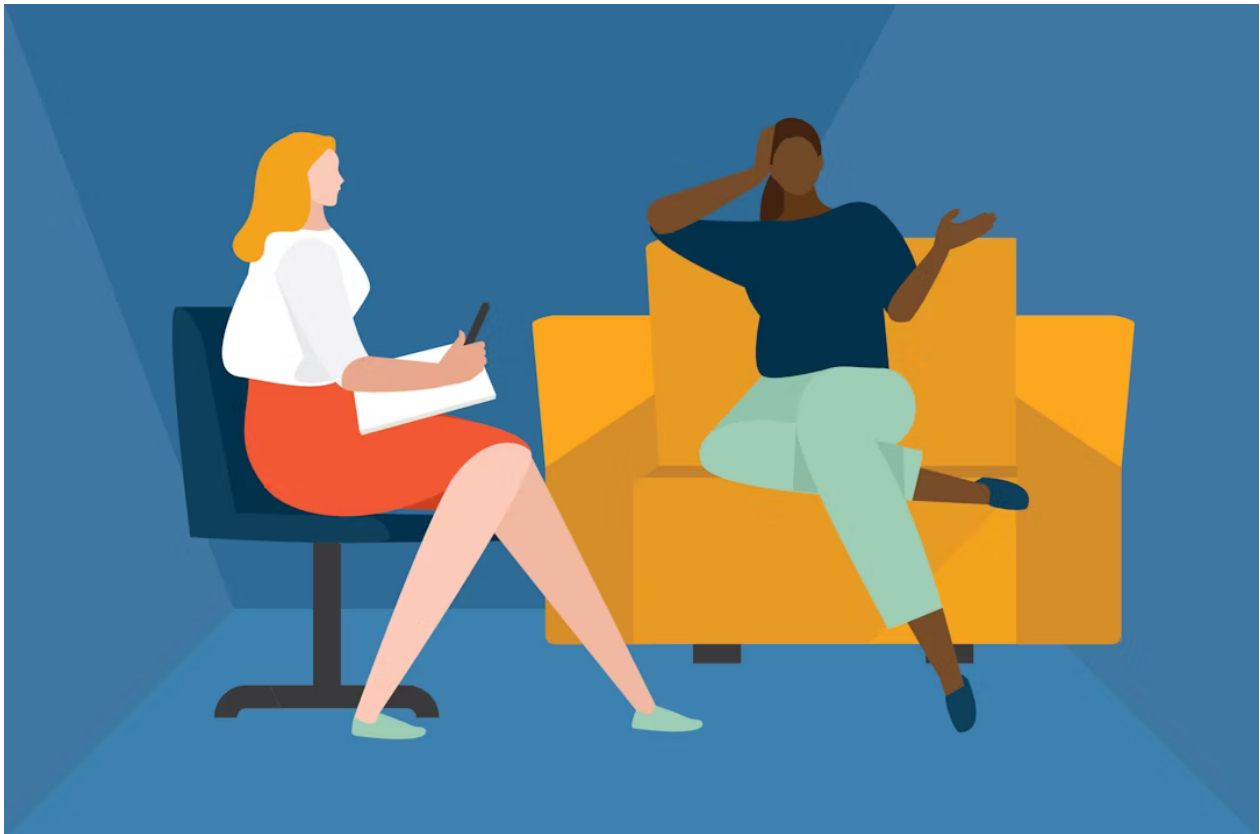


Why Mental Health Matters for College Completion



Emily Rounds
Education Policy Advisor
[@EmiliaRounds](https://twitter.com/EmiliaRounds)



Michelle Dimino
Deputy Director of Education
[@MichelleDimino](https://twitter.com/MichelleDimino)

Student mental health is a top concern on college campuses, with more than eight in ten college presidents reporting that it has become a greater priority in the past few years. That shift reflects college students' consistently declining mental health across the country—73% of college students struggle with moderate or serious psychological distress, and the pandemic has only exacerbated this mental health crisis.

As we approach a third pandemic academic year, it's critical that colleges are equipped to address student mental health. Mental health plays a significant role in students' overall wellbeing and their likelihood of staying enrolled in college and persisting to a degree. However, the cost of providing mental health support services is steep for many campuses. Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) dollars offer a source of financial relief. Congress created HEERF through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) in March 2020 to provide direct assistance to higher education institutions at the start of the pandemic. In May 2022, the Department of Education (Department) updated its guidance to encourage schools to use HEERF

funds for campus mental health supports—an effort that will help colleges meet students’ needs and promote stronger retention and completion rates.

Using HEERF Dollars for Mental Health Resources

Mental health has long-term impacts for students’ educations due to its significant correlation with retention and graduation rates. One-third of all college non-completers cite mental health issues as a contributing factor for stopping out of their program, and 14% reported mental health as their primary reason for leaving school. Those non-completers were also more likely to struggle socially and academically in their programs. When students stop out of school for mental health concerns, they may be less likely to reenroll or graduate at all, putting them at higher risk of being stranded with debt and no degree.

For colleges, financial commitment to mental health resources is not only an investment in their students’ futures, but also in their own bottom lines—treating 100 depressed students can potentially prevent six dropouts, saving \$240,000 in tuition fees per academic year. By investing in mental health and well-being, colleges can improve student academic outcomes, increase retention, and benefit from saved tuition revenue.

While mental health services are a necessity for student success, they are still a luxury on many campuses because of the high price tag attached. HEERF dollars can be a financial stepping stone to explore new strategies and bolster existing mental health resources. Thanks to HEERF funds, some college leaders have already grown their campus mental health supports. Here are three institutions that are successfully using HEERF funds to support mental health:

- **Denison University:** Denison, a private four-year university in Ohio, used HEERF funds to provide telehealth counseling for students. Denison’s Counseling Services Director contracted with providers from diverse identities to reach more students.
- **University at Albany:** Albany, a public four-year university in New York, expanded its peer mental health hotline, Middle Earth, with HEERF dollars. Middle Earth hired more staff and now students from other State University of New York campuses can access the hotline.
- **Sinclair Community College:** Sinclair, a public community college in Ohio, funded a social worker position with HEERF funds. The college focuses on meeting students’ basic needs and the addition of a social worker strengthens that mission.

Mental Health and the College Completion Fund

Policymakers have also shown growing interest in supporting student success through federal investments to scale and implement evidence-based college retention and completion programs. Given the link between mental health and student persistence, it’s no surprise that many of the

most effective initiatives have a holistic focus on well-being and integrate connections to community and campus-based mental health services.

Single Stop centers at community colleges are centralized offices where case managers help students apply to and access a variety of public benefits and free or low-cost services for which they qualify, including [referrals to mental health counseling](#). InsideTrack, a comprehensive one-on-one coaching program, has trained [Crisis Support Services](#) staff at the ready to provide personal supports to students experiencing acute mental health challenges. Both initiatives have been robustly evaluated and are included in the [What Works Clearinghouse](#) as leading interventions with demonstrated positive effects on student outcomes.

The Department of Education is currently developing an application process for awarding \$5 million in initial grant funding allocated for [Postsecondary Student Success Grants](#)—a new competitive grant program for which House appropriators recently proposed an additional \$200 million in funding for Fiscal Year 2023. In providing guidance on acceptable uses of grant funds, policymakers should recognize the clear through-line from responsiveness to students' mental health needs to stronger retention and completion outcomes.

Conclusion

Supporting college students' mental health is more important than ever post-pandemic. In the immediate term, colleges can take advantage of remaining HEERF funding to bolster the mental health services they provide and encourage their uptake by students. And as investment in student retention and completion takes hold at the federal level, policymakers and institutions will have continued opportunities to elevate mental health as a key component in improving persistence toward a college degree.

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