



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



## A skills-based approach to supporting first-gen students' mental health and academic performance

Patricia Lilian Pfende \*

*International Scholar, Higher Education and Student Affairs, Blacksburg, Virginia, USA.*

World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2026, 29(03), 1916-1921

Publication history: Received on 17 February 2026; revised on 23 March 2026; accepted on 25 March 2026

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2026.29.3.0563>

### Abstract

Mental health issues have emerged as a significant concern in higher education across U.S. institutions (Lipson et al., 2022). Clinical data collected over five academic years (2010–2015) showed small but significantly increasing trends for self-reported distress in generalized anxiety, depression, social anxiety, family distress, and academic distress, with the largest effect sizes observed for generalized anxiety, depression, and social anxiety (Xiao et al., 2017). The mental difficulties faced by college students have a powerful effect on their ability to cope, connect with others, and achieve their academic goals (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013). In this light, it has become increasingly important for student affairs professionals to be aware of the unique role they have, and with proper knowledge, they can act as an additional resource for mental health assistance in their functional areas (Massey et al., 2005). Student affairs professionals can work with students to recognize mental health difficulties and connect them to appropriate resources as part of their regular campus roles (Burke et al., 2016). Drawing on journal articles and books, this paper will examine the current mental health crisis in higher education and how student affairs professionals can use various helping skills to support students of color and first-generation students.

**Keywords:** Mental Health in Higher Education; First-Gen Students Mental Health; Helping skills in higher education; Helping skills for student affairs professionals; Academic success for first-gen students; Academic distress and mental health for first-gen students

### 1. Introduction

Mental health issues continue to impact most institutions in the United States of America (Much & Swanson, 2010). The National College Assessment reported that anxiety, depression, sleep difficulties, and stress are impacting students' performance in Higher Education, indicating mental health challenges among college students (American College Health). There has been a significant rise in the number of college students reporting suicidal thoughts during their initial meetings with campus counselors, as well as a sharp increase in students seeking counseling services on campus (Xiao et al., 2017).

A survey across 133 college campuses found that 44 percent of students report symptoms of depression, 37 percent anxiety, and 15 percent are considering suicide. National studies have also shown that more students are reporting severe and persistent mental illnesses, such as anxiety and depressive disorders, compared to situational stressors like the campus environment, financial concerns, and academic pressures (Smith et al., 2007). Scholars have also noted that counseling services have struggled to keep pace with the growing mental health needs of college students (Nguyen et al., 2018).

\* Corresponding author: Patricia Pfende

Student affairs professionals, therefore, play a vital role in supporting college students' mental health by providing mentorship, care, and referrals to appropriate resources (Kalkbrenner et al., 2021). The factors linked to college students' mental health can be categorized into five groups: students' characteristics, interpersonal factors (such as sense of belonging), health and safety factors (like nutrition and sleep), and stressors (including financial and academic concerns) (Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011). This paper will examine how interpersonal factors and stressors affect the mental health of first-generation students and students of color, and how this understanding can inform the work of student affairs professionals with these two distinct groups.

### **1.1. The impact of mental health on college students**

Student mental health is one of the most critical issues in present-day Higher education institutions. The national Healthy Minds Study (HSM) shows that nearly seven million college students have a clinically significant mental health problem (The Healthy Minds Study, n.d.). The ongoing mental health crisis has an effect on student retention and engagement among first-generation students and students of color, who are negatively impacted as a result of their identities (Lipson et al., 2023).

---

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Using the transactional theory of stress, this paper will demonstrate how student affairs professionals can help students understand stress and equip them with effective coping mechanisms in higher education (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to this theory, stress is defined as the emotional and physiological responses that occur when environmental demands surpass an individual's resources to cope, and coping refers to an individual's efforts to manage those demands. It is important to note that, according to the theory, primary appraisals directly influence secondary appraisals, which, in turn, affect coping strategies. These strategies elicit physiological and emotional responses to stress, which subsequently affect individuals (Goh et al., 2010).

The theory also states that secondary appraisals and coping strategies shape the effect of stressors. Secondary appraisals involve evaluating available resources that can help manage stress (Barbayannis et al., 2022). Mental health challenges among college students lead to reduced academic performance and increased retention problems (Andrews & Wilding, 2004). Students who do not utilize secondary appraisals tend to experience higher levels of depression, while those who engage in coping strategies show fewer depressive symptoms after adverse events.

Student affairs professionals need to understand the backgrounds of the students they serve so they can provide more effective secondary appraisals that help manage stress (Herman et al., 2020). Scholars have examined the experiences of students of color and first-generation students, identifying stressors that impact them due to their marginalized identities. (Leath & Jones, 2022). Student affairs professionals need to be aware of such stressors so that they can offer secondary support when helping and working with students from diverse identities.

### **2.1. Students of Color Stressors**

Black students in the U.S. also experience many challenges with the main ones being poverty, health challenges, and discrimination (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Such challenges put them at risk of depression and other mental health problems. A lot of black students turn to suicide, which is now the leading cause of death among black children ages 10 to 19. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that the rate at which black students attempt to commit suicide rose by 73% over 30 years (Sounding the Alarm on Black Youth Suicide, n.d.). Students of color, especially black students, have often felt alienated and stereotyped and they often reported significant degrees of dissatisfaction at PWI campuses that impact their mental well-being (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

### **2.2. First-generational students' stressors**

First-generation students are defined as college students who are enrolled in postsecondary education and whose parents have no postsecondary education (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Some scholars believe that 40% of college students are first-generation students (Saenz et al., 2017). With such a significant number of first-generation students entering college, student affairs professionals need to be aware of the challenges they face so they can help them. First-generation students face unique challenges that arise from balancing their home and school environments (Jenkins et al., 2013). Research has shown that first-generation students are more prone to post-traumatic stress than students who have parents who graduated from Higher Education (Mc Fadden, 2016). Such students also lack familial support, which can be associated with stress and depression among first-generation students (Covarrubias et al., 2015).

## **2.3. Applying Helping Skills**

### *2.3.1. The Role of Student Affairs Professionals as Mentors*

Student affairs professionals are at the frontline, as they can easily identify emotional and mental health challenges affecting college students (Ray Schroeder, 2020). In light of the unique challenges that first-generation students and students of color face within higher education, student affairs professionals must serve as mentors who shape students' personal and professional development, encouraging students with marginalized identities to pursue their goals by building resilience in higher education (Johnson, 2016).

Through mentoring, first-generation students and students of color can use this skill to guide and support their peers. For example, mentors can help these students develop practical time management and study skills to avoid academic stressors. Student affairs professionals can also help students increase their financial aid literacy and raise awareness about the resources and professional development opportunities available on campus. Students of color and first-generation students can also benefit from having student affairs professionals who help them navigate the academic and social transition into college (Engle, 2007).

Some first-generation students and students of color have limited financial knowledge. Student affairs professionals can guide these groups, for example, to work-study opportunities that help them reduce financial stressors affecting their mental health (Mimura et al., 2015). Given how first-generation students and students of color report experiencing depression and stress more frequently than their peers, student affairs professionals can also promote mental health resources and counseling services (Stebbleton et al., 2014).

## **2.4. Applying empathy and Care**

Student affairs professionals should genuinely care and demonstrate empathy toward students. This approach helps first-generation students of color build resilience in higher education (Dalton & Crosby, 2013). Authentic empathy and care allow students to have their voices and stories heard. Student affairs professionals can create safe spaces where first-generation students and students of color engage in counter-storytelling (Miller et al., 2020). Through this method, they can challenge racialized assumptions and share their lived experiences as acts of resistance. This fosters a sense of community among marginalized students, making them feel less alone (Miller et al., 2020). Such efforts promote a sense of belonging for college students (Keeling, 2014).

Additionally, student affairs professionals can establish safe environments where students feel comfortable discussing their concerns, processing their emotions, and addressing their shortcomings (Dalton & Crosby, 2013). Considering the identities and experiences of first-generation students and students of color, these professionals understand what support these groups need. For example, some first-generation students have limited parental involvement and family support, and professionals can step in to provide access to knowledge that facilitates college transition (Engle, 2007). The transition to college, especially during the first year when academic and social integration occurs, is crucial for student retention and academic success (Tinto, 1993). Effective integration often depends on how well student affairs professionals assist first-generation students and students of color in adjusting to college life (Ward et al., 2012).

---

## **3. Discussion**

It has been noted that student affairs professionals can help first-generation students and students of color by creating genuine connections through mentorship and demonstrating empathy and care. Too much support, however, can cause students to become too reluctant. For example, first-generation students and students of color have limited parental involvement and support. Student affairs professionals can step in and direct first-generation students and students of color to resources that help them deal with stressors (Engle, 2007). At the same time, student affairs professionals should also allow first-generation students and students of color to take charge of their learning.

Student affairs professionals can also ensure that adequate social and psychological support is available for first-generation students and students of color (Tello & Lonn, 2017). For example, student affairs professionals can design new support programs for first-generation students and students of color that help them ease the effects of stressors that challenge the mental health of these two identities (Ward et al., 2012).

Furthermore, intentional and collaborative efforts by campus departments and organizations to acknowledge, embrace, and empower the diverse cultural traditions, values, and assets of students could lead to enhanced learning environments for first-generation students and students of color. (Tello & Lonn, 2017). In addition to using collaborative learning groups, institutions are recommended to host on-campus events and programs that aim to expand

understanding of cultural capital by promoting the acceptance and celebration of students' diverse identities, knowledge, skills, and achievements. Such programs could foster a greater sense of belonging among first-generation students and students of color.

### 3.1. Policy and Practices

Higher education institutions can play a vital role in supporting students with mental health challenges when the proper measures are taken. As shown in the paper, stressors can be mitigated if colleges implement policies and practices that foster a sense of belonging for first-generation students and students of color through mentorship, empathy, and care. Addressing mental health issues and improving the overall well-being of these students is crucial. Colleges should increase access to social and psychological support for first-generation students and students of color. For example, campus psychotherapists should be available beyond just the counseling center.

### 3.2. Research Gap

Although much research has been conducted on how first-generation students and students of color possess salient identities that can hinder their transition into college, more studies are needed to understand how these identities impact their overall mental well-being. Many studies often overlook the perceptions of students of color and first-generation students who have experienced mental health challenges firsthand (Abelson et al., 2021). Currently, many interventions implemented at colleges and universities should be evaluated to determine their effectiveness. Abelson et al. (2021) also emphasize that researchers and higher education leaders need to examine how campus operations, including hiring practices and budget decisions, influence students' mental health. They highlight the importance of understanding how students are affected by limitations on the number of counseling sessions they can access during a given period. Similarly, it is crucial to find out whether students are more likely to seek counseling when they have to pay for sessions or when their institution charges a mandatory health fee that provides free counseling for all students.

---

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, given the diverse environment in which most higher education institutions operate, it has become increasingly important for student affairs professionals to step in and support diverse students in their transition to college. This paper examines how student affairs professionals can leverage practical helping skills, including mentorship and empathy, to support first-generation students and students of color. These skills can help students avoid stressors that, if left unaddressed, could negatively affect their mental health. The discussion includes recommendations and emphasizes the need for further research, particularly on the impact of limits on counseling sessions on students.

---

## References

- [1] Abelson, S., Lipson, S. K., & Eisenberg, D. (2021). Mental Health in College Populations: A Multidisciplinary Review of What Works, Evidence Gaps, and Paths Forward. In L. W. Perna (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research: Volume 37* (pp. 1–107). Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66959-1\\_6-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66959-1_6-1)
- [2] Andrews, B., & Wilding, J. M. (2004). The relation of depression and anxiety to life-stress and achievement in students. *British Journal of Psychology*, 95(4), 509–521. <https://doi.org/10.1348/0007126042369802>
- [3] Barbayannis, G., Bandari, M., Zheng, X., Baquerizo, H., Pecor, K. W., & Ming, X. (2022). Academic Stress and Mental Well-Being in College Students: Correlations, Affected Groups, and COVID-19. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.886344>
- [4] Coutinho, M. J., & Oswald, D. P. (2005). State Variation in Gender Disproportionality in Special Education: Findings and Recommendations. *Remedial and Special Education*, 26(1), 7–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325050260010201>
- [5] Dalton, J. C., & Crosby, P. C. (2013). Diversity, Multiculturalism, and Pluralism: Moving From Hospitality and Appreciation to Social Inclusion on Campus and Beyond. *Journal of College and Character*, 14(4), 281–288. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcc-2013-0037>
- [6] Flannery, M. E. (n.d.). *The Mental Health Crisis on College Campuses | NEA*. Retrieved October 30, 2023, from <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/mental-health-crisis-college-campuses>

- [7] Harper, S. R., & Hurtado, S. (2007). Nine themes in campus racial climates and implications for institutional transformation. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2007(120), 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.254>
- [8] Herman, K. C., Reinke, W. M., & Eddy, C. L. (2020). Advances in understanding and intervening in teacher stress and coping: The Coping-Competence-Context Theory. *Journal of School Psychology*, 78, 69–74. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2020.01.001>
- [9] Jones, M. K., Leath, S., Latimer, K., Lawson, E., & Briones, M. (2022). The Impact of COVID-19 on Black College Students' Mental Health. *Journal of College Student Development*, 63(3), 239–254.
- [10] Kalkbrenner, M. T., Jolley, A. L., & Hays, D. G. (2021). Faculty Views on College Student Mental Health: Implications for Retention and Student Success. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 23(3), 636–658. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025119867639>
- [11] Leath, S., & Jones, M. (2022). Racial Climate and Mental Health Service Utilization among Black College Students at Diverse Institutions. *Currents: Journal of Diversity Scholarship for Social Change*, 2(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.3998/ncidcurrents.1777>
- [12] Lipson, S. K., Diaz, Y., Davis, J., & Eisenberg, D. (2023). Mental health among first-generation college students: Findings from the national healthy minds study, 2018–2021. *Cogent Mental Health*, 2(1), 2220358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/28324765.2023.2220358>
- [13] Lipson, S. K., Zhou, S., Abelson, S., Heinze, J., Jirsa, M., Morigney, J., Patterson, A., Singh, M., & Eisenberg, D. (2022). Trends in college student mental health and help-seeking by race/ethnicity: Findings from the national healthy minds study, 2013–2021. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 306, 138–147. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2022.03.038>
- [14] Markoulakis, R., & Kirsh, B. (2013). Difficulties for University Students with Mental Health Problems: A Critical Interpretive Synthesis. *The Review of Higher Education*, 37(1), 77–100.
- [15] Massey, O. T., Armstrong, K., Boroughs, M., Henson, K., & McCash, L. (2005). Mental health services in schools: A qualitative analysis of challenges to implementation, operation, and sustainability. *Psychology in the Schools*, 42(4), 361–372. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20063>
- [16] Miller, R., Liu, K., & Ball, A. F. (2020). Critical Counter-Narrative as Transformative Methodology for Educational Equity. *Review of Research in Education*, 44(1), 269–300. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X20908501>
- [17] Much, K., & Swanson, A. L. (2010). The Debate about Increasing College Student Psychopathology: Are College Students Really Getting “Sicker?” *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 24(2), 86–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87568220903558570>
- [18] Nguyen, D. J., Brazelton, G. B., Renn, K. A., & Woodford, M. R. (2018). Exploring the Availability and Influence of LGBTQ+ Student Services Resources on Student Success at Community Colleges: A Mixed Methods Analysis. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 42(11), 783–796. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2018.1444522>
- [19] Oswalt, S. B., & Wyatt, T. J. (2011). Sexual Orientation and Differences in Mental Health, Stress, and Academic Performance in a National Sample of U.S. College Students. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58(9), 1255–1280. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2011.605738>
- [20] Smith, J. R., Terry, D. J., Manstead, A. S. R., Louis, W. R., Kotterman, D., & Wolfs, J. (2007). Interaction Effects in the Theory of Planned Behavior: The Interplay of Self-Identity and Past Behavior. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 37(11), 2726–2750. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2007.00278.x>
- [21] Snyder, T. D., & Dillow, S. A. (2015). Digest of Education Statistics 2013. NCES 2015-011. In the *National Center for Education Statistics*. National Center for Education Statistics. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED556349>
- [22] *Sounding the alarm on black youth suicide*. (n.d.). <https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2020/black-youth-suicide>. Retrieved November 1, 2023, from <https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2020/black-youth-suicide>
- [23] Stebleton, M. J., Soria, K. M., & Huesman Jr., R. L. (2014). First-Generation Students' Sense of Belonging, Mental Health, and Use of Counseling Services at Public Research Universities. *Journal of College Counseling*, 17(1), 6–20. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1882.2014.00044.x>
- [24] Tello, A. M., & Lonn, M. R. (2017). The Role of High School and College Counselors in Supporting the Psychosocial and Emotional Needs of Latinx First-Generation College Students. *The Professional Counselor*, 7(4), 349–359. <https://doi.org/10.15241/amt.7.4.349>

- [25] *The Healthy Minds Study*. (n.d.).
- [26] Xiao, H., Carney, D. M., Youn, S. J., Janis, R. A., Castonguay, L. G., Hayes, J. A., & Locke, B. D. (2017). Are we in crisis? National mental health and treatment trends in college counseling centers. *Psychological Services, 14*(4), 407–415. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000130>