



# POLICY ISSUE BRIEF

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## Mental Health and Higher Education

The rising incidence of student mental health conditions on college campuses has been described as a growing crisis. The policies and practices of how colleges and universities deal with student mental health challenges is not always fair or helpful, and can at times add to the burden that students have to manage.

For most college students the period of time engaged in higher education represents a critical period of development in their lives and marks a period of time that can have serious implications for success in later life. However, mental illnesses too often reach crisis levels in college among students with symptoms that may have been present for some time and either went unnoticed or unattended to. Mental illness among college students is on the rise as colleges struggle to adequately meet the need for mental health services and supports for students with psychiatric disabilities. The rate of moderate to severe depression among U.S. college students rose from 23.2% in 2007 to 41.1% in 2018, while rates of moderate to severe anxiety jumped from 17.9% in 2013 to 34.4% in 2018. Twenty percent of students in one survey reported having thought about suicide, while 9 percent reported having attempted suicide and nearly 20% reported self-injury.

The COVID pandemic has contributed to even higher rates of mental health challenges among college students. In the largest and most diverse sample of college students to date, nearly five thousand college students in New York and New Jersey were investigated to determine the mental health impact of the pandemic. The results indicated that students' mental health was severely affected, especially students of color, by academic, financial, and COVID-related stressors. In the study, the majority of students reported being more depressed or down, 75% reported feeling more anxious, with uncontrollable worry. Sixty-eight percent reported sleep problems, and 60% reported feeling hopeless.

MHANYS White Paper: *Mental Health & Higher Education in New York: A Call for a Public Policy Response*, reports on how society has responded to this crisis through the media, advocacy efforts, the courts and legislatures. The report concludes that more can and should be done in public policy to address the mental health needs of college students.

## Recommendation

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MHANYS is promoting public policies to increase mental health literacy on campuses and encourage whole health parity. In addition, MHANYS supports S.7659 (Kaplan), which includes provisions to increase mental health literacy, require the review college student leave of absence policies and create more telehealth/virtual counseling opportunities within the State University system. MHANYS seeks similar provisions in the law that would apply to independent and private colleges and Universities.