

# Supporting College Student Mental Health: Parents' Perspectives



MARY CHRISTIE  
FOUNDATION



STUDENT ADVANTAGE



### **ABOUT THE MARY CHRISTIE FOUNDATION**

The Mary Christie Foundation is a thought leadership organization dedicated to the health and wellness of teens and young adults. With world-renowned experts in health care policy, public health, behavioral health and higher education, the Mary Christie Foundation contributes to the examination and resolution of the most pressing, and often overlooked, health issues facing young people. Issues include the emotional, social and behavioral health of today's college students, to access to and completion of quality higher education.

### **ABOUT ANTHEM BLUE CROSS AND BLUE SHIELD**

Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield offers Medicare plans, Medicaid, individual and family plans, and group insurance plans in Colorado, Connecticut, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, Ohio, Virginia and Wisconsin. Our group plans include a variety of group medical, pharmacy, dental, vision, life and disability plans flexible enough to fit any size business. Our Anthem Student Advantage is a plan designed specifically for schools and their students, and integrating with student health and counseling centers. Independent licensees of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association.

### **ABOUT THE MASSINC POLLING GROUP**

The MassINC Polling Group is a nonpartisan public opinion research firm serving public, private, and social-sector clients. MPG elevates the public's voice with cutting edge methods and rigorous analysis. Based in Boston, MPG serves a nationwide client base.

# Supporting College Student Mental Health: Parents' Perspectives



MARY CHRISTIE  
FOUNDATION



STUDENT ADVANTAGE



Dear Reader:

Stewarding the emotional and behavioral health of America's college students involves a number of stakeholders, including their parents. Parents, particularly those of students at four-year, residential colleges and universities, more often than not participate in their children's admission choices, pay their tuition, and help them navigate what is often their first time away from home.

Parents today also have a set of expectations when it comes to their students' mental health that may or may not match with reality, legal or otherwise, or the resources that are available on campus. Yet despite their outsize role, parents have been an under-examined constituent group in college student mental health, leading to misinformation, misunderstanding, and, perhaps, lost opportunities.

To get a better understanding of the attitudes, awareness and expectations of college student parents, the Mary Christie Foundation commissioned this survey report. "Supporting Student Mental Health: Parents' Perspectives," provides a glimpse into how much parents know about their students' mental health while at college; how aware they are of their campus' mental health resources; what they expect to be told about these issues; and how concerned they are about them overall.

Like their students, college student parents are increasingly more diverse with differing perspectives that are reflected in the variances within this report. Parents of color, parents of students with a recognized diagnosis and parents of students from lower income levels have unique concerns that translate into valuable knowledge for those on campus who seek to support all of our students.

We hope you read with interest these perspectives and consider them in your work as we pursue the shared goal of improving the health, wellness and success of college students, our next generation of leaders. Our sincere thanks go to Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield for its sponsorship of this report and its recognition of the critical importance of this issue.

Sincerely yours,

John P. Howe, III, MD  
President  
The Mary Christie Foundation



# Parents See Mental Health as a Major Issue on College Campuses

But may have unrealistic expectations about student information and college capabilities

## Introduction

The statistics are alarming. A recent survey by the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors found 95% of college counseling center directors report the number of students with significant psychological problems as a growing concern in their center or on campus.<sup>1</sup> Among those students diagnosed with a mental health condition, 80% feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities as a student, and 30% report problems with school work due to mental health issues.<sup>2</sup>

The mental health issues are varied, with chief concerns ranging from anxiety to depression. Taken together, they have led to a dramatic increase in requests for mental health services in recent years. Between 2007 and 2017, the proportion reporting “past year treatment” rose from 19% to 34%.<sup>3</sup> Some of this may be attributable to increased willingness to seek treatment and better recognition of mental health conditions rather than a change in the actual well-being of the college student population.

Universities find themselves at the center of these societal changes. College campuses have experienced an uptick in demand for mental health resources. This increased demand is straining the resources of college mental health systems and the professionals that serve

them. One key group in the challenge to provide student mental health support is parents. They know their child’s background and history and often stay in very close touch throughout the college years. They share the goals held by administrators of keeping their students healthy. As a part of understanding the role of parents, the Mary Christie Foundation commissioned a nationally representative survey of parents of college students, funded by Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield. This report is based on a survey of 1,010 such parents. The parents represented in this survey have students who do not live at home and are between the ages of 18 and 25. The full range of people enrolled in college includes many other circumstances that are not directly addressed in this study. Instead, the survey reported here focuses on the most common situation and the one that includes the most parental involvement in students’ lives. The upper age limit was set because colleges (and parents) are each progressively less responsible for older graduate students in various stages of transition to their full-time careers. The survey also does not include those living at home because colleges hold less responsibility in these instances.

The picture that emerges from this survey is one of parents who are concerned about student mental health issues and see themselves as key players in maintaining their own children’s mental health. They see themselves as close to their children despite the distance, and knowledgeable about their children’s well-being. Most think they know the same amount or more now about their children’s mental health issues as they did before they left for college. Few feel completely out of the loop. Parents also say they want to stay informed about their

---

1 Mistler, Brian J., et al. “College students’ mental health is a growing concern, survey finds,” American Psychological Association, Monitor on Psychology, June 2013.

2 “Mental Health Guide for College Students,” CollegeStats.org, accessed July 2019.

3 Gregg Henriques, “The College Student Mental Health Crisis (Update),” Psychology Today, November 2018.

children's well-being and see themselves as key players in monitoring potential issues. In addition to their own communication with their children, many expect to hear from college officials when issues arise. They prioritize their desire for information over privacy concerns. Parents perceive a variety of stressors their children are facing, including many of the familiar culprits from past generations of college students as well as some new ones unique to our present time.

For administrators, this comes with important implications. Parents can be helpful partners. But parents also place a good deal of responsibility and faith in the college to know what to report, and when, about their children. Parents default to wanting information but recognize the delicate balance that oversharing could make students more reluctant to come forward. They also realize that parents themselves are often a source of stress. Navigating the issue of when and how to involve parents is the challenge for administrators.

These issues are particularly critical at this moment as more outlets to seek help for mental health issues are made available and more students use them, stretching campus resources thin. The stigma around mental health issues has lessened, which some studies suggest has also boosted utilization rates. Administrators are struggling to maintain these resources even as their utility is more and more apparent.

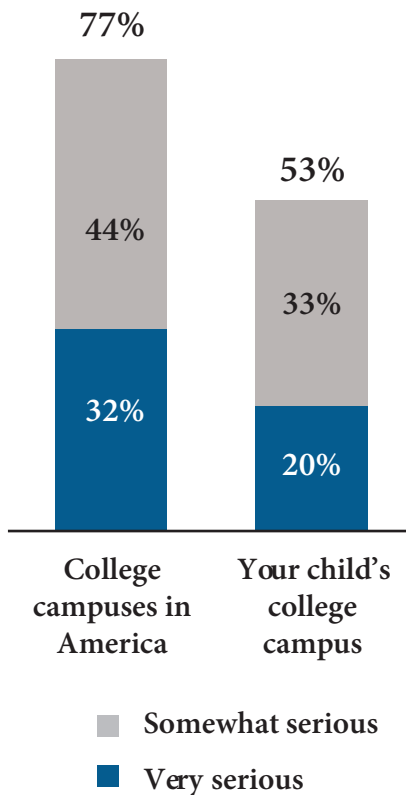
In its mission to advance the health and wellness of teens and young adults, the Mary Christie Foundation commissioned this survey, sponsored by Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield, to bring the views of a key constituency to the discussion. We are pleased to present this deep examination of parents' views of college student mental health.

## SUMMARY

- Parents see mental health as a serious issue on college campuses nationwide and at their children's own schools.
- Most parents say they remain in close touch with their children while they are at college, and want to take significant responsibility for their children's mental health.
  - 68% say parents and family have "a lot" of responsibility to monitor and report a mental health concern, a higher level of responsibility than parents assign to other college staff.
  - 87% say they know at least a fair amount about their children's mental health since starting school.
  - However, substantial minorities do see college staff as responsible, setting up potential misunderstandings.
- Parents want disclosure about mental health from their children's schools, which may conflict with the amount of information the university is able to provide to them.
  - 70% say parents deserve to be informed of their children's wellbeing by colleges and universities.
  - Parents of students at smaller campuses expect a higher level of disclosure.
- Parents believe colleges and universities have extensive mental health resources at their disposal, in many cases more than what is actually available on campus.

**Figure 1: Parents call mental health a serious problem on college campuses**

*% of college parents who say mental health is a very/somewhat serious problem on \_\_\_\_\_*



Source: The MassINC Polling Group survey of 1,010 parents of college students, April 2019.

## Key Findings

The survey includes exploration of a variety of issues related to student mental health. Some issues are specific to the respondent's own child, such as the nature of their current relationship, individual mental health issues, and demographic questions. Others cover opinions about the nature and extent of mental health issues on campus. Finally, the survey explores what parents desire and expect in terms of how colleges handle mental health issues. The survey was conducted in April 2019. The survey was sent in April in order to interview parents while the school year was still in session and issues of campus mental health would still be fresh in respondents' minds.

### Parents recognize the seriousness of mental health issues on campus

Parents of college students see mental health as a serious issue facing campuses today. In all, 77% call the issue "very" or "somewhat" serious on college campuses in America, while just 22% call it "not too" serious or "not at all" serious (Figure 1). Asked about the specific schools their own children attend, fewer call it serious on their own student's campus (53%). This is a common phenomenon in surveys, where respondents see familiar things as in a better state than things that are less familiar. In education surveys for example, problems with the state education system are seen as more severe than problems in a respondent's own city, no matter the quality of the local schools.

Parents go beyond just calling it a problem, placing mental health issues among the top threats to campus safety. Among all parents, 36% call mental health issues a "major threat" and another 41% rate

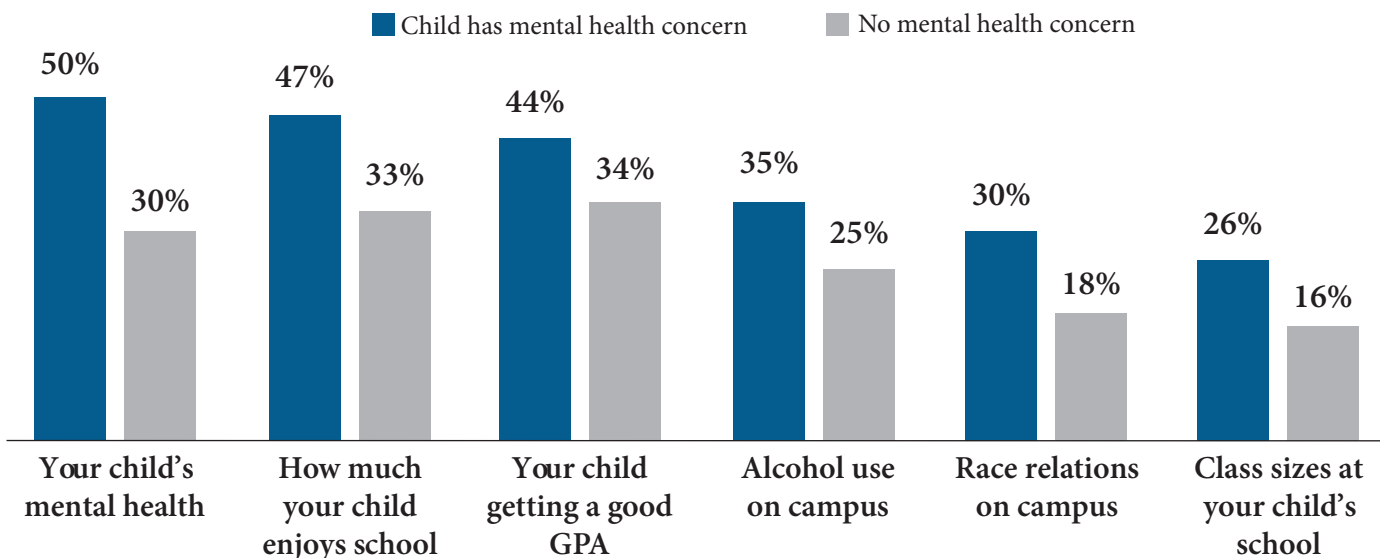
it as a “minor” threat. This places it ahead of a number of other issues, including gun violence (26% major threat), theft (25%), hate crimes (23%), self-harm (22%), and suicide (27%). Only alcohol and drug abuse (43%) and sexual assault and rape (40%) are seen by more parents as major threats to student safety. It is not the issue that tends to garner the most headlines in mainstream media outlets, but is clearly at the front of parents’ minds when thinking about their children.

It is a problem at the campus level but also affects students at an individual level. Here, parents place mental health among their top concerns, right alongside academic performance. More parents say they are concerned about mental health (61%, including 35% who are “very” concerned) than about class sizes or even race relations. This top tier of concerns also includes grades (68%) and their chil-

dren enjoying school (66%). Slightly more parents are concerned about mental health than alcohol use on campus (59%), a perennial and very well-publicized challenge within the college experience.

Not everybody sees the same issues for their own children, or rates the threats facing college campuses at the same level. Each parent’s specific experiences and their child’s situation inform how they view issues on campus. For parents of children who have a current mental health condition, their concerns across these measures are magnified (Figure 2). Fully 79% of these parents say mental health is a serious problem on their child’s college campus, including 47% who call it a “very” serious problem. Half of these parents say they are “very” concerned about their child’s mental health, compared to 30% of parents whose children do not have current mental health concerns.

**Figure 2: Parents of students with mental health issues hold broader array of concerns**  
*% who say they are “very concerned” about each element of their child’s experience*



Source: The MassINC Polling Group survey of 1,010 parents of college students, April 2019.



Parents of students with current mental health concerns also hold elevated concern about other aspects of their children's experiences. On every issue, they express higher levels of alarm than other parents. For example, 47% of parents of students with mental health issues say they are "very" concerned about how much their children enjoy school, compared to 33% of other parents. Looking at the percentage who say they are "very" concerned about their children's experience, there is at least a 10-point gap on each issue.

When it comes to student safety, parents of children with mental health issues are also on heightened alert. About half of these parents (51%) say they view mental health issues as a "major threat." Another 42% cite suicide, and 34% call student self-harm major threats to safety. Compared with parents whose children do not have mental health issues, these are some of the largest gaps on any perceived threats. Self-harm and suicide on college campuses have been behind some of the most high-profile court cases<sup>4</sup> in which parents have held colleges responsible for their children's death.

This data shows the extent to which parents are concerned mental health issues may escalate to self-harm. As will be explored in further detail later in the report, parents of children with mental health concerns are more likely to want disclosure and communication from colleges about their children's mental health.

---

<sup>4</sup> Seelye, Katharine Q., "M.I.T. Is Not Responsible for Student's Suicide, Court Rules," New York Times, May 7, 2018.

## **Parents, students of different backgrounds face different issues**

Students from all walks of life converge on college campuses, bringing elements of their own stories and backgrounds with them. Their experiences on campus partially reflect these stories. Parents' concerns about their students' campus experience are also shaped by these same elements of life experience and demographics. By extension, their interactions with administrators with regard to their children's mental well-being will also carry different hopes, fears, and experiences.

Parents of students of color are just as, if not more, concerned about their children's mental health. But their concerns about mental health issues are rivaled by their unease over race relations on campus. Race relations in America have been particularly disquieting across all sectors of society in recent years. For parents of Black students, 69% say they are "very" or "somewhat" concerned about race relations, nearly identical to the 67% who say they are concerned about mental health. Parents of white students, on the other hand, are somewhat less concerned with their children's mental health (58%), but much less concerned about race relations on campus (28%). Parents of Hispanic students (48%) and Asian students (47%) are also more concerned than parents of white students about campus race relations.

But race is not the only factor shaping parent concerns. Other demographic factors also play a role in sources of stress, and the seriousness with which parents rate them. Parents with income levels under \$50,000 are most likely to call money issues a major source of stress for their children (39%). This steady-

ly decreases to 21% among the highest-income parents. Lower-income parents are also more likely to cite family life as a source of stress.

Younger parents (under 40) are a smaller portion of the overall population of college parents, but describe a larger set of concerns about their children's well-being. Looking at sources of student stress, the percentage who rate each one as a major or minor source of stress decreases steadily as the age of parents increases. Younger parents also rate each threat to campus safety as more significant than do older parents. Whatever the cause, this elevated level of concern is pertinent for college administrators since it will shape their perceptions of student mental health and campus reactions to it.

These varying concerns speak to the need to recognize the vast differences in life experience that both students and parents bring to campus. These may play out both in day-to-day life for the student and will also influence the types of concerns parents have for their children's well-being.

### **The changing landscape of mental health on campus**

To some extent, the soaring utilization figures for mental health services demonstrate how mental health on campus has changed. Administrators and mental health professionals report a higher incidence of reported issues, stretching campus resources thin. Parents' comparisons with their own college experiences also help illustrate how views on college student mental health have shifted in recent years. When it comes to mental health issues, parents do not see today's college students' experiences as echoing their own.

Among those who attended college themselves, 72% of parents think mental health issues are more common than when they attended college, while just 19% say they are about the same as always. Parents cite a number of reasons why mental health issues are more prevalent. First and foremost, 89% of parents agree that there are more mental health resources available now than when they were growing up, including nearly half (49%) who "strongly" agree. Parents see an environment where resources for addressing mental health are more accessible, allowing students who need them to find them more easily.

Hand in hand with additional resources is increased acceptance - 82% of parents agree that there is less stigma around mental health today. A substantial portion (37%) agree "strongly" with this statement and credit the lessened stigma for the increase in reports of mental health issues. There is also a sense that mental health issues are simply more common, with 78% of parents agreeing that there are more mental health problems across the population than there used to be (39% "strongly" agree).

Still, a substantial proportion of parents think the mental health problems of today are associated with a lessened ability to cope with everyday issues that arise. Two-thirds (67%) agree that parents and educators have coddled students too much before they get to college, while 62% simply think students today are less resilient. But only 28% and 21%, respectively, "strongly" agree with those statements, much lower than the top items on the list. This is another indicator that a genuine shift in the landscape of mental health diagnoses and treatment — rather than kids "getting soft" — is responsible for students

seeking the care they need. These perceptions of seriousness are evidence that parents see the challenges campuses are facing. This should be encouraging for administrators as they work to deal with the challenges mental health issues pose on campus.

### **IN FOCUS: Parents of students with mental health issues**

Parents of students with a current mental health concern (18% overall) are an important analysis subgroup in this report. Their views on mental health on college campuses are distinct: their concern is heightened, they are more likely to see a role for themselves, and they place heavy emphasis on the resources of the college to support and monitor students.

It is notable that these parents and their children look demographically similar to those without a current mental health concern. Their children are just as likely to live at home or on campus, to attend small and large schools, public and private, and to have similar racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. In short, mental health does not discriminate and colleges must be prepared to help students from all walks of life.

### **Parents see themselves as key players in maintaining their children's mental health**

There is no question that the growing demands of addressing student mental health are a key challenge for school administrators. As they address these issues, they have an engaged partner in parents themselves. A significant majority of parents describe close relationships with their children, and a desire to help with mental health issues if and when needed.

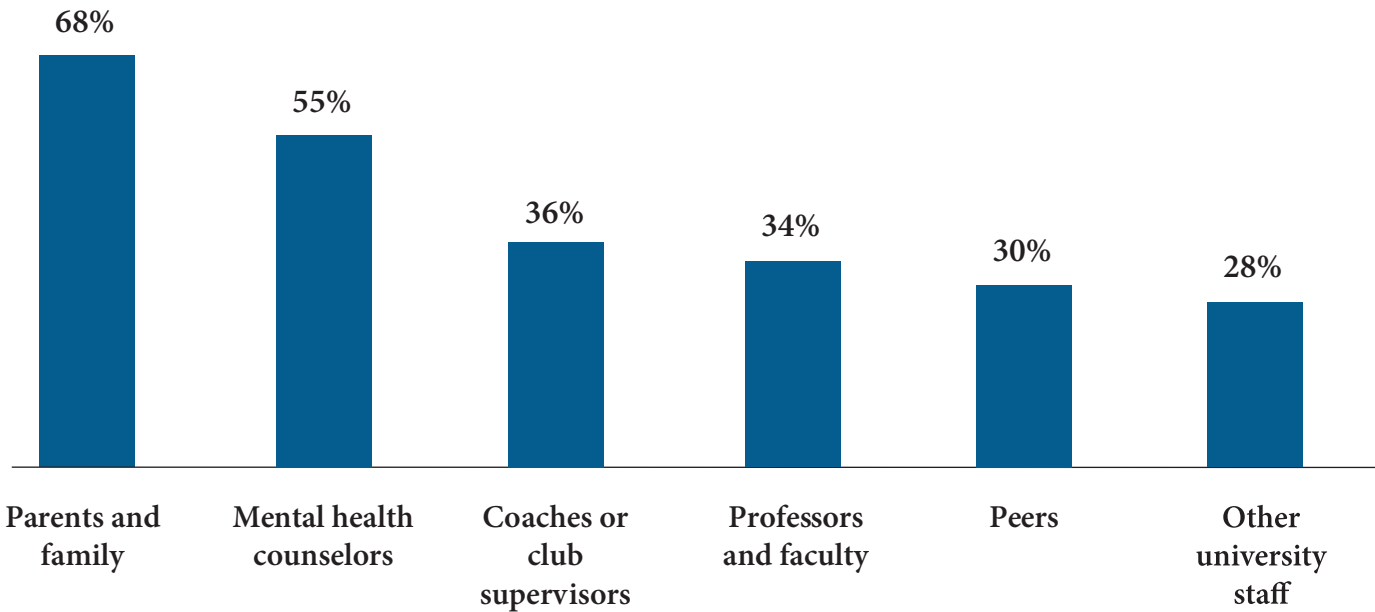
Parents want to be involved when it comes to their children's mental health. They think they are already, to a somewhat surprising degree. Just 18% say they know less about their children's mental health since their children lived at home, while the large majority say they know more (41%) or the same amount (40%). Further, fully 87% say they know at least a "fair amount" about their children's mental health since they started school, including 41% who say they know "a great deal."

Likewise, parents of children with mental health concerns do not feel they have lost touch, with just 15% saying they now know less about their children's mental well-being compared to when they were living at home. Another 53% of these parents say they know "a great deal" about their children's mental health since starting school.

Some of this may be optimism on the parents' part, hoping and wishing they still had as close a relationship as they had before. But some of it may also be true, given the many ways parents can keep in touch with their children with modern technology (see breakout box on page 16 for more information).

### Figure 3: Parents feel most responsible to monitor their students' mental health

% of parents who say each of the following has "a lot" of responsibility to monitor or report a concern about a student's mental health



Source: The MassINC Polling Group survey of 1,010 parents of college students, April 2019.

Related to these close relationships, parents assign themselves the most responsibility for monitoring their children's mental health, even while they are away at school (Figure 3). About two-thirds (68%) say parents and family have "a lot" of responsibility to monitor or report a concern about a student's mental health, the highest figure of any group. Mental health counselors are the only other group in which a majority assign "a lot" of responsibility (55%). Meanwhile, about a third each of parents say responsibility lies with other groups like peers, professors and faculty, coaches or club supervisors, or other university staff.

This may be good news for administrators, not because it lets them avoid responsibility, but because parents can often be the first line of defense. While college staff may be physically closer, parents may be the first to become aware if there is an issue. Close lines of communication between parents and the university may offer an earlier warning to both sides when problems arise.

However, this is also an issue where looking beyond the majority is important. Often in polls and surveys, we look for what rises above half, which group is the biggest, or which opinion appears much stronger than others. In this poll, looking at the smaller groups is also important. In this case, a sizable subgroup - between 28% and 36% - think figures on campus apart from mental health counselors have a lot of responsibility for monitoring students' mental health. Some of the highest-profile legal cases related to student mental health contain questions about the responsibility of various campus staff. What this poll tells us is that a substantial portion of parents do hold campus staff responsible in a way that campus administrators should take seriously.

This question of collective versus individual responsibility is illustrated in a recent case from MIT. The family of a student who committed suicide argued that the university was negligent in its care and thus responsible for the death.<sup>5</sup> Staff at the school knew

5 Jolicoeur, Lynn, "MIT Not Responsible For Student's Suicide, Mass. High Court Rules," WBUR.org, May 7, 2018.

of the student’s mental health history but were unaware of any specific suicidal ideation leading up to his death. The case represented a tipping point in higher education as a ruling in favor of the family could have changed the threshold at which universities would be held responsible. Ultimately, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that MIT was not at fault in this specific instance but did acknowledge colleges and universities do hold some responsibility in protecting students from suicide.

One central question is to what extent schools are legally obligated to monitor students’ well-being, especially when it comes to staff that are not clinically trained in mental health. Some fear that a higher precedent of obligation could cause staff to be overly cautious and end up deterring students from coming forward if they have a problem.<sup>6</sup> Other cases, such as one in California where a student with mental health problems injured a classmate, have been concerned with colleges’ “duty to protect” the safety of all students. The court in California acknowledged the “special relationship” between schools

and students, but also its limitations. Some critics say broad liability could backfire and bias admissions decisions away from those with mental health issues.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, there is a fine line universities must walk between legal liability, disclosure, and safety. Schools must not only navigate parents’ priorities and preferences but also remain within the bounds of what is legal. Parents, on the other hand, more plainly crave information and communication.

For instance, a common tradeoff in student mental health is between the privacy of the children and parents’ desire for knowledge. On this dynamic, parents prioritize their own desire for information over the privacy of their students by a wide margin (Figure 4). Asked to choose between the two, 70% agree that “when it comes to mental health, parents deserve to be informed of their child’s well-being by colleges and universities” versus 23% who say “students deserve to have their privacy protected.”

6 Seelye, Katharine Q., “M.I.T. Is Not Responsible for Student’s Suicide, Court Rules,” New York Times May 7, 2018.

7 Bauer-Wolf, Jeremy, “Duty to Protect,” Inside Higher Ed, March 26, 2018.

**Figure 4: Parents prioritize disclosure over student privacy**

*When it comes to mental health, % of parents who say \_\_\_\_\_*



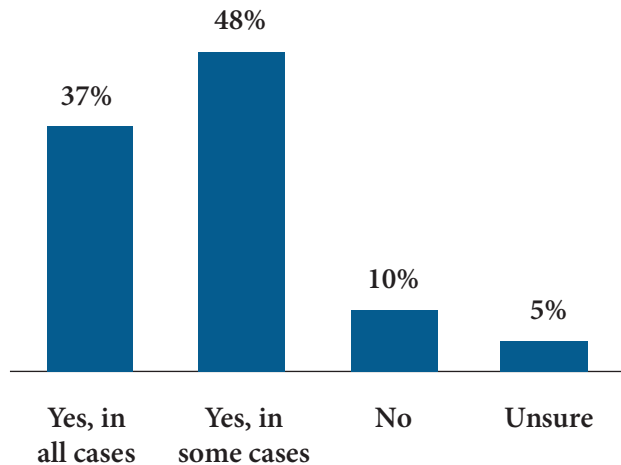
Source: The MassINC Polling Group survey of 1,010 parents of college students, April 2019.

Parents are divided when asked about the circumstances under which they would like to be notified. While colleges and universities are currently prohibited from sharing private information, 54% of parents say there should be an exception when there is an urgent concern. Another 38% say parents should be notified under all circumstances. This is another instance where we should look beyond what the majority say, and take note of the opinion of the minority. In this case, a substantial minority has very high expectations of notification.

Many are also aware that parents can be a source of stress themselves, which adds to the difficulty of knowing when to open the lines of communication between the campus and home, and no doubt keeps many administrators from making the situation worse. Nearly half of parents (47%) say a student's relationship with their parents should be a "major" consideration as colleges and universities decide what information to share with family, while another 40% call it a "minor" consideration. In addition, family life is cited as a major source of stress for children by 17% of parents, while another 38% call it a minor source of stress.

Some parents are sympathetic to the obligations to student privacy colleges must legally uphold, but still want information. Schools are currently prohibited from sharing private information about students, including mental health information. Some are concerned that if a school is legally obligated to share mental health information, it may discourage students from seeking treatment. Given their simultaneous desire for disclosure and appreciation that college is an important rite of passage into adulthood, parents are split on whether this potential de-

**Figure 5: Most parents think colleges should be informed of student mental health status**  
*% of parents who say parents/students should disclose a mental health condition to their college/university*



Source: The MassINC Polling Group survey of 1,010 parents of college students, April 2019.

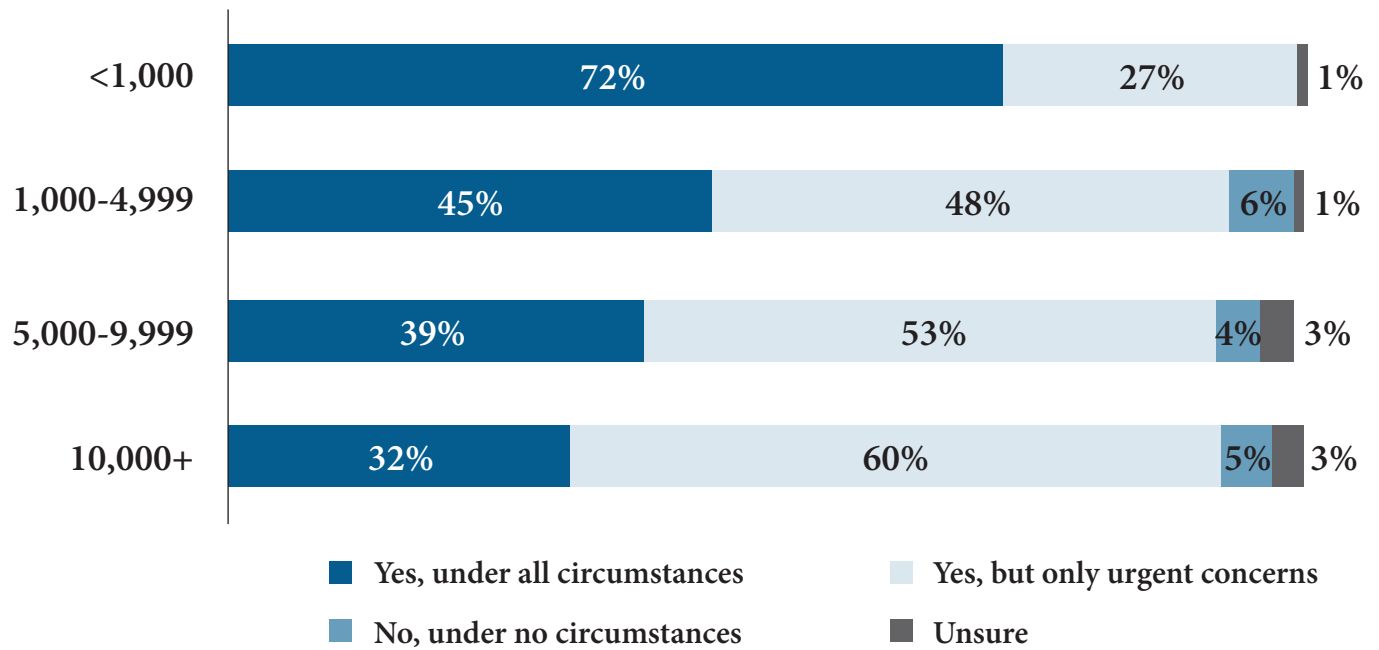
terrent is a "major" or "minor" concern (44% each). Few say it is not a concern (7%).

For the most part, parents see disclosure as a two-way street. While current policy does not require parents or students to disclose a mental health condition to their school, some 37% of parents say parents and/or students should do so in all cases, while another 48% agree at least some cases should require disclosure (Figure 5). Only 10% say parents and students should have no obligation to disclose a mental health condition.

Parents of students with a mental health condition are particularly likely to advocate for disclosure on behalf of all parties. Fully 95% think that colleges and universities should share information with parents regarding mental health either under all circumstances, or at the very least when there is an urgent concern. Likewise, 87% think parents and students should disclose to colleges when a student has a mental health condition in either some or all

**Figure 6: Higher expectation of disclosure from parents with children at smaller schools**

*Among parents with children enrolled at each of the following school sizes, % who say colleges/universities should share information regarding a student’s mental health*



Source: The MassINC Polling Group survey of 1,010 parents of college students, April 2019.

cases. These parents want the best outcomes for their children, and seem sympathetic to the competing interests of mental health disclosures.

Administrators at small schools should be aware of different expectations. Parents of students at smaller schools are more likely to expect monitoring from a broader group of staff. As the size of the school decreases, parents are more and more likely to see all types of college staff, from professors to coaches, as responsible. For instance, just 26% of parents with children enrolled at the largest schools think professors and faculty should be responsible for monitoring and reporting on student mental health, compared with 45% of parents with children enrolled at the smallest schools. Another 45% of these small-school parents say coaches or club supervisors hold “a lot” of responsibility (versus 32% of large-school parents), along with 39% who say other university staff hold “a lot” of responsibility (versus 22%). Mental health counselors, however, are equally likely to be given “a lot” of responsibility, regardless of

school size.

For administrators at larger schools, there appear to be lower expectations of communication, which can cut both ways. While parents may have lower expectations, they are also less likely to reach out and make the college aware if something is awry. When asked whether parents have the responsibility to tell the college about student mental health issues, 32% of large-school parents say “in all cases,” while more parents agree among those with children at smaller schools (e.g., 53% of parents at the smallest schools). This is exceeded, however, by the expectation of parents of children at small schools that colleges disclose information regarding a student’s mental health in all cases – fully 72% of small-school parents say this, compared with just 32% of parents whose children attend the largest schools (Figure 6).

Parents of children enrolled at smaller schools are also somewhat more inclined to see their own role as a complicating factor in managing students’ men-

tal health. Some 55% of parents with children enrolled at the smallest schools say the potential that reporting an issue to parents could deter students from seeking help should be a “major” concern, compared with 43% of large-school parents. Likewise, 60% of small-school parents say a student’s relationship with their parents should be a “major” consideration when colleges consider disclosure of mental health information, compared with 46% of large-school parents.

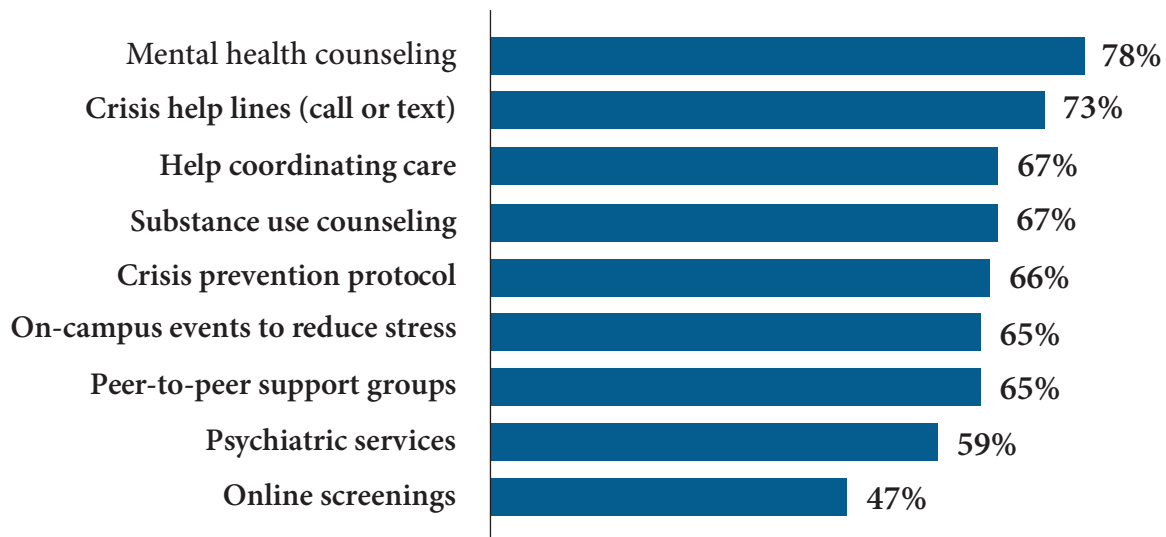
**Parents assume colleges and universities have extensive mental health resources**

Even with parents who remain interested and engaged once students are on campus, colleges are often first-to-the-scene if a student needs immediate support for mental health. Overall, parents assume colleges are well-equipped to provide necessary care

and resources, whether or not this matches with the reality.

Mental health considerations begin even before a student steps on campus. Over half of parents (52%) say that access to mental health resources were important when choosing a school for their child, including 24% who say it was “very” important. This is a particular priority for parents of children with mental health conditions – fully 70% say access to mental health resources was important to them when choosing a school, including 37% who say it was “very” important. This compares with 47% of parents whose children do not have a mental health issue, only 22% of whom called it “very” important. Many parents also say routine mental health screenings for all students should be a major priority (42%), and another 40% call it a minor priority. Only 14% say it should not be a priority.

**Figure 7: Parents believe a wide variety of mental health resources are available on campus**  
*% of parents who think each mental health resource is available on their child’s campus*



Source: The MassINC Polling Group survey of 1,010 parents of college students, April 2019.



But there may be some distance between what parents envision for their children and what colleges are actually able to offer. Across almost every mental health resource queried, a majority of parents believe the service is available on their child's campus (Figure 7). For instance, 78% of parents think that mental health counseling is available, and 67% think substance use counseling is available. These services are typically provided by colleges. But substantial proportions also think other types of resources that colleges may or may not offer are available.

Each college takes a different approach depending on budget, staffing, and philosophy. For instance, some colleges are utilizing technology, like crisis help lines students can call or text, and online screenings for mental health. Others try to cultivate community support through peer-to-peer groups and on-campus events to reduce stress and anxiety, like animal visits or free yoga. Some colleges focus on how to get students the help they need that goes beyond the scope of what can be provided on campus, like psychiatric services or help coordinating mental health care. And many colleges are increasingly developing crisis prevention protocols to keep all students safe during a mental health crisis. But while colleges differ in what they offer, majorities of parents assume a broad array of services are available, creating an information gap and potential for misunderstanding.

At the same time, a more general question about mental health resources on campus reveals that only a minority feel up to date with what their child's college offers. Just a quarter say they feel "very" well-informed about mental health resources available, while another 44% feel "somewhat" well-informed.

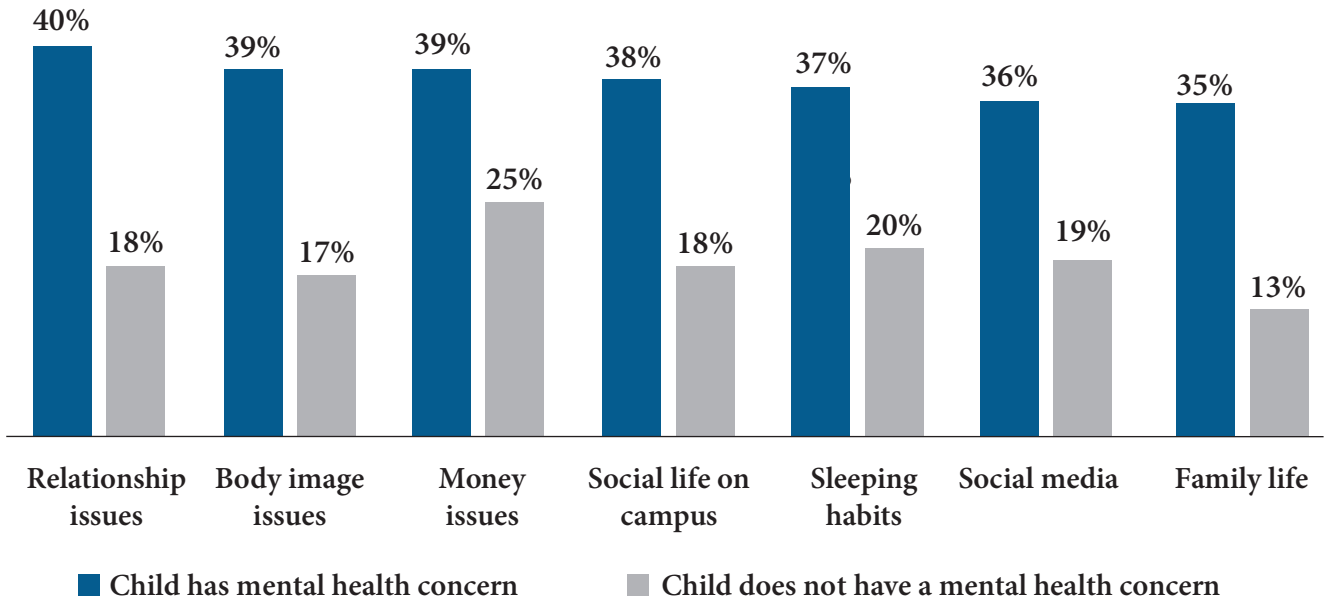
This leaves 28% of parents feeling "not too" or "not at all" well-informed – a minority, but a substantial one that suggests the potential for misunderstanding. This highlights the possibility for parents to overestimate the resources offered on campus.

Parents who feel well-informed are much more likely to think more resources are available on their child's campus. For instance, 69% of parents who feel well-informed about resources on campus say they think psychiatric services are available, compared with 36% of parents who do not feel well-informed. Even for the most common resource – mental health counseling – 86% of well-informed parents say it is available compared with 61% of parents who do not feel well-informed.

These gaps repeat themselves on every item, adding an additional complexity should a child have a mental health crisis. Actually well-informed parents may be better equipped to direct their children toward appropriate on-campus resources, while less-informed parents may either not know a resource is available or take longer to determine options when time is critically of the essence. But given the significant variations in mental health resources on college campuses, parents may be making assumptions about services that simply don't exist at their child's school. Lastly, the large number of students who do not receive the mental health care they seek suggests a disconnect between presumed resources and the situation on the ground.

As documented in this report, parents with children enrolled at smaller schools place extra emphasis on mental health, from their level of concern to their expectations of college resources and information.

**Figure 8: “Second tier” stressors heightened for parents of children with mental health concerns**  
*% of parents who think each of the following is a major source of stress for their child*



Source: Source: The MassINC Polling Group survey of 1,010 parents of college students. Field dates: April 2019.  
 Not shown: Academic performance, career prospects, alcohol or drug use, sexual assault, sexual activity, eating disorders.

These parents could be expected to be on the lookout for information from colleges and primed to digest it. But despite the heightened attention these parents pay to mental health, they feel only moderately more informed than large-school parents. Overall, 70% of parents of children who are enrolled at the smallest schools say they feel well-informed, compared with 66% of those at the largest schools, a difference that is not statistically significant. Even at the extreme end, the gap between small- and large-school parents is only 9 points (28% of the smallest school parents feel “very” well-informed vs. 19% of the largest-school parents). Given the greater desire for information and disclosure described elsewhere by small-school parents, these findings suggest small school parents likely want more than they are receiving.

**Parents perceive a number of stressors on their children, many familiar across generations**

Colleges have long known about the stress academics and careers can bring. The headlines often focus on what is new or scintillating, which could lead the casual observer to believe the problems are

much different than they have been in the past. But respondents to the survey told a more familiar story of age-old concerns. The issues that top the list of stressors for students would likely echo a survey taken from past decades. Academic performance is still the top source of perceived stress for students (called a “major” source of stress by 46% of parents), followed by career prospects (31%) and money issues (28%).

A second tier of stressors includes social media (23%), sleeping habits (23%), social life on campus (22%), relationship issues (22%), and body image issues (22%). Social media garners more than its fair share of media attention when discussing college students today. It is perhaps surprising, then, that social media is relatively low on the list of parents’ perceived stressors, about as worrisome as sleeping habits or social life. Rather than stand out, social media is grouped with the other items queried. It may be that it is seen as amplifying stresses caused by other issues, rather than serving as a source of stress on its own.

Indeed, research among teens themselves shows social media as a routine part of young adult life, with ups and downs familiar to any generation at that age. According to a recent Pew Research Center report, a notable proportion of teens say social media can make them feel overwhelmed and pressured to only present their best selves that will win them attention. But majorities of teens also report specific positive effects like feeling connected, diverse interactions, and a ready support system.<sup>8</sup> In another Pew report, the plurality of teens (45%) say the net effect of social media is neither positive nor negative.<sup>9</sup> For some adults who did not grow up with social media, this duality can be difficult to understand. But these teens have incorporated technology from an early age (95% own or have access to a smartphone, for instance) and treat it as a natural extension of their friendships and social lives. Rather than distinguish between their “online” and “offline” lives, this generation sees little difference. Concern about the impact of social media is sometimes a projection of adult anxiety rather than teen reality. When it comes to parents of college students, these concerns are muted by the fact that parents are on social media themselves (see box, next page).

The last tier of stressors includes alcohol or drug use (18%), sexual assault (18%), sexual activity (17%), family life (17%), and eating disorders (14%). While these issues are less concerning to parents overall, this still represents a substantial portion who call them a “major” source of stress.

For parents of students with mental health concerns, these stressors are carefully watched. Across each item measured, these parents are more likely to flag it as a “major” source of stress than parents whose children do not have a mental health issue (Figure 8). And while the top concerns remain – academic performance, and career prospects – many more stressors jump up into higher levels of concern than seen in the overall results. For example, 40% of parents of students with a mental health issue cite relationships as a “major” source of stress. Only 22% of parents overall say the same. This pattern repeats itself with body image issues (39%), money issues (39%), social life on campus (38%), sleeping habits (37%), social media (36%), and family life (35%). In essence, the “second tier” of stressors is larger for these parents, speaking to the exacerbating effect mental health can have on typical college life.

---

8 Anderson, Monica and JingJing Jiang, “Teens’ Social Media Habits and Experiences,” Pew Research Center, November 28, 2018.

9 Anderson, Monica and JingJing Jiang, “Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018,” Pew Research Center, May 31, 2018.

## Today's college parents are no strangers to technology

College has always been viewed as a rite of passage into adulthood – the first time many young people live away from family, have more control over their time and priorities, meet new people, and plan for their future. Historically, geographic distance often meant more infrequent communication with family and friends back home. But in the past few decades, with the advent of technology like personal computers, cell phones, social media, and smartphones, parents and students have more ways than ever to stay in touch.

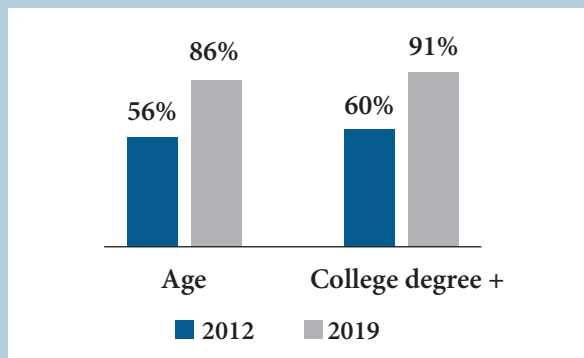
While young people have always been early adopters of technology, this generation of college students may be unique in that their parents are also no strangers to technology. Most parents of college students are between 40 and 60, meaning technology has been tightly woven into their daily routines for much, if not all, of their working lives. In addition, most parents of college students are well-educated themselves. Studies find those with higher levels of education are more likely to adopt and regularly use technology.

According to the Pew Research Center, cell phone ownership is nearly ubiquitous. Fully 96% of the

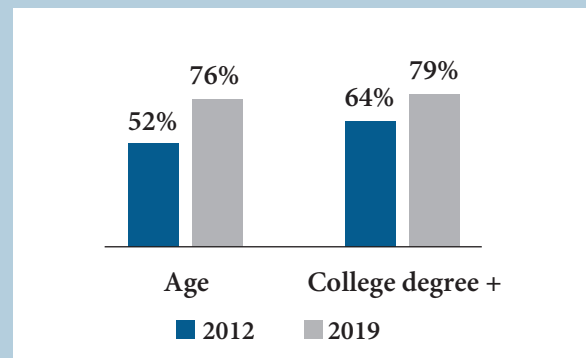
adult population in the U.S. owns a cell phone or smartphone, including over 90% of each age group. Among those with college degrees, 91% own a smartphone. Social media usage has also continued to grow, enabling parents of college students another way to stay in touch. While young people may use different platforms (e.g., Instagram skews young), there is still substantial overlap with the social media platforms parents use.

This is all to say, today's college parents are technology-savvy, providing myriad ways to stay in touch with their children away at school. These tight-knit communication habits could be crucial to monitoring students' mental health on campus. As noted earlier in this report, most parents say they know as much or more now about their children's mental health than when they lived at home, and two-thirds say parents and families have "a lot" of responsibility for monitoring or reporting a student mental health concern. Colleges and universities should be encouraged by these communication channels and the relationship they can foster with parents to keep students healthy and safe.

Smartphone ownership, 2012-2019



Social media usage, 2012-2019



\*Note: Age represents averages of the relative age of college parents in 2012 vs. 2019. For smartphones, this includes those ages 25-54 in 2012 vs. 30-64 in 2019. For social media adoption, this represents those ages 30-64 in both years.

Source: "Mobile Fact Sheet" & "Social Media Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, accessed July 2019.

## Conclusion

The increased prevalence of mental health as a concern among college students poses challenges along with opportunities. The perceived decreased stigma around mental health means more students in need can and do seek treatment, allowing them to better address issues they are experiencing. Managing mental health conditions is vital to individual and campus-wide health. But many colleges and universities are struggling to keep up with demand as more and more resources and staff are required to address student needs.

In this task, colleges and universities have allies in parents. Parents feel well-informed about their children's mental health, with many saying they know a "great deal" about their children's mental health. A substantial portion feel even more confident in this knowledge than when their child lived at home. They also see themselves as the first line of defense, with roughly two-thirds saying they have "a lot" of responsibility to report any concerns about their child.

But parents also look to schools as stewards of information and expect them to share any pertinent mental health concerns. Fully 70% say parents deserve to be informed of their children's well-being and nearly all think there should be at least some level of disclosure from schools. Especially at small schools, there are higher expectations that more staff will monitor students and report concerns. These expectations, however, may conflict with the current law. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prohibits schools from revealing confidential information about students, except in certain cases.

Parents also presume a robust set of resources and protocols are already in place on college campuses. Majorities of parents think a range of resources – from the common to the experimental – are available on their child's campus. This is especially relevant as roughly half of parents say mental health resources were "very" or "somewhat" important when selecting a college. The reality is that many schools lack the funding and staffing to adequately address the full range of student mental health concerns. This creates a notable gap between what parents think colleges are capable of providing and the practicalities of mental health care on campus.

These interplaying dynamics – involved parents, high expectation of communication, and a presumption of robust on-campus resources – leave much for colleges and universities to consider. Whose wishes are colleges ultimately responsive to – students' or parents'? What level of disclosure is appropriate, legal, and productive? How can colleges accurately portray the availability of mental health resources without causing unnecessary concern?

This report raises many questions about the appropriate role of colleges and universities beyond education. As campuses have evolved to encompass far more than the classroom, their responsibility for the health and wellness of students has likewise expanded in the minds of parents. But as mental health is an increasingly prominent and pressing concern for parents, colleges and universities should act with urgency.



**The Mary Christie Foundation Survey**  
**Topline Results**  
**National Survey of 1,010 Parents of College Students**  
**Field Dates: April 18 – April 30, 2019**

Do you have a child ages 18-25 who is enrolled as an undergraduate or graduate student at a college or university? If you have more than one child enrolled, please think about your YOUNGEST child.

Yes, enrolled as an undergraduate student	82%
Yes, enrolled as a graduate student	18%

Where does your child live while attending school?

On-campus housing	59%
Off-campus housing	41%

Is your child's college or university public or private?

Public	68%
Private	30%
Unsure	1%

**IF CHILD ENROLLED AS UNDERGRADUATE**

Which of the following best describes the undergraduate program your child is enrolled in?

2-year junior or community college	13%
4-year college or university	86%
Unsure	0%

**ASK ALL**

In what year of college is your child currently enrolled?

First Year or Freshman	31%
Sophomore	25%
Junior	20%
Senior or higher	15%
Graduate student	0%
Unsure	8%

Approximately how many students attend your child's school?

Less than 1,000	5%
1,000 to 4,999	27%
5,000 to 9,999	25%
10,000 or more	34%
Unsure	9%

When thinking about your child's experience, how concerned are you about each of the following?

<b>ROTATE ORDER</b>	Very concerned	Somewhat concerned	Not too concerned	Not at all concerned	Unsure
Alcohol use on campus	28%	31%	27%	14%	1%
Class sizes at your child's school	18%	27%	35%	20%	0%
Race relations on campus	21%	19%	33%	28%	0%
Your child getting a good GPA	36%	31%	18%	14%	0%
How much your child enjoys school	36%	30%	18%	15%	0%
Your child's mental health	35%	26%	23%	16%	0%

How much of a threat to student safety do you think each of the following poses on college campuses?

<b>ROTATE ORDER</b>	Major threat	Minor threat	Not a threat	Unsure
Gun violence	26%	45%	26%	3%
Alcohol and drug abuse	43%	41%	13%	2%
Sexual assault and rape	40%	42%	15%	3%
Mental health issues	36%	41%	20%	3%
Hate crimes	23%	48%	26%	3%
Theft / robbery	25%	56%	17%	2%
Students harming themselves	22%	48%	25%	4%
Suicide	27%	44%	25%	3%

How serious a problem do you think student mental health is on college campuses in America?

Very serious	32%
Somewhat serious	44%
Not too serious	18%
Not at all serious	4%
Unsure	2%

How serious of a problem do you think student mental health is on your child's college campus?

Very serious	20%
Somewhat serious	33%
Not too serious	32%
Not at all serious	10%
Unsure	5%

Did you attend college?

Yes	86%
No	14%



**ASK PARENTS WHO ATTENDED COLLEGE**

Compared to when you were in college, do you think mental health problems are more common today, less common today, or about the same as always.

More common today	72%
Less common today	7%
About the same as always	19%
Unsure	2%

**ASK ALL**

As you may know, there has been a substantial increase in the number of students reporting mental health issues in recent years.

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? College students today are more likely to report mental health issues because...

<b>ROTATE ORDER</b>	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Unsure
They are less resilient	21%	41%	23%	10%	5%
They have more mental health resources available to them than when I was growing up	49%	40%	7%	2%	2%
There is less stigma around mental health today than when I was growing up	37%	44%	12%	4%	2%
Parents and educators have coddled students too much before they get to college	28%	39%	22%	9%	3%
There are more mental health problems across the population than there used to be	39%	39%	15%	4%	3%

How important, if at all, was access to mental health resources when choosing a school for your child?

Very important	24%
Somewhat important	28%
Not very important	28%
Not at all important	18%
Unsure	2%

How much would you say know about your own child’s mental well-being since they started school?

A great deal	41%
A fair amount	46%
Not too much	11%
Nothing at all	1%
Unsure	1%

How much would you say you know about your child's mental well-being now compared to when they were living at home?

Know much more now	17%
Know a little more now	24%
Know about the same amount	40%
Know a little less now	17%
Know much less now	1%
Unsure	1%

How well-informed do you feel about mental health resources available where your child goes to school?

Very well-informed	25%
Somewhat well-informed	44%
Not too well-informed	23%
Not well-informed at all	5%
Unsure	2%

Please indicate whether you think each of the following is a major source of stress for your child, a minor source of stress, not a source of stress, or if you are unsure.

<b>ROTATE ORDER</b>	Major source of stress	Minor source of stress	Not a source of stress	Unsure
Academic performance	46%	38%	15%	0%
Social life on campus	22%	45%	31%	2%
Social media	23%	37%	38%	2%
Money issues	28%	41%	30%	1%
Family life	17%	38%	44%	1%
Career prospects	31%	48%	19%	2%
Alcohol or drug use	18%	33%	47%	2%
Eating disorders	14%	27%	58%	2%
Sexual activity	17%	36%	41%	6%
Sleeping habits	23%	43%	32%	2%
Sexual assault	18%	27%	52%	3%
Relationship issues	22%	45%	31%	2%
Body image issues	22%	36%	40%	2%

To the best of your knowledge, are the services below available on campus where your child goes to school? If you are unsure, please say so.

<b>ROTATE ORDER</b>	Available	Unavailable	Unsure
Mental health counseling	78%	7%	15%
Peer-to-peer support groups	65%	8%	27%
Crisis prevention protocol	66%	8%	26%
Crisis help lines (call or text)	73%	7%	20%
On-campus events to relieve stress and anxiety (e.g., animal visits, free yoga, etc.)	65%	10%	25%
Online screenings or mental health treatment	47%	12%	41%
Substance use counseling	67%	9%	25%
Psychiatric services (i.e., can prescribe medication)	59%	13%	28%
Help with coordinating mental health care for students	67%	8%	25%

Which of the following best describes your view, even if neither is exactly right?

When it comes to mental health, parents deserve to be informed of their child's well-being by colleges and universities	70%
When it comes to mental health, students deserve to have their privacy protected by colleges and universities	23%
Unsure	6%

How much responsibility do you think each of the following people should have in monitoring or reporting a concern about a student's mental health?

<b>ROTATE ORDER</b>	A lot	Some	A little	None	Unsure
Professors and faculty	34%	44%	17%	4%	1%
Mental health counselors	55%	32%	10%	2%	1%
Coaches or club supervisors	36%	43%	16%	4%	1%
Other university staff	28%	43%	20%	6%	3%
Peers	30%	44%	19%	5%	2%
Parents and family	68%	22%	7%	1%	1%

Do you think routine mental health screening for all students should be a major priority, a minor priority, or not a priority for colleges and universities?

Major priority	42%
Minor priority	40%
Not a priority	14%
Unsure	4%

Do you think parents and/or students should disclose a mental health condition to their college or university?

Yes, in all cases	37%
Yes, in some cases	48%
No	10%
Unsure	5%

Colleges and universities are currently prohibited from sharing private information about students. Do you think there should be an exception that would allow for sharing information with parents regarding a student's mental health?

Yes, under all circumstances	38%
Yes, but only when there is an urgent concern	54%
No, under no circumstances	5%
Unsure	3%

Sometimes parents can be a source of stress or pressure for students. How much of a consideration should a student's relationship with their parents be when colleges or universities are deciding whether to share mental health information?

Major consideration	47%
Minor consideration	40%
Not a consideration	8%
Unsure	6%

Some say if a school is legally obligated to share a student's mental health information it may discourage students from seeking needed treatment. How much of a concern do you think this should be for colleges and universities?

Major concern	44%
Minor concern	44%
Not a concern	7%
Unsure	5%

Was your child ever treated for mental health issues before attending college?

Yes	21%
No	78%
Prefer not to say	2%

To your knowledge, does your child currently have any mental health concerns?

Yes	18%
No	74%
I'm not sure	7%
Prefer not to say	1%

## DEMOGRAPHICS

### Gender

Male	47%
Female	53%
Neither / some other gender	<1%
Prefer not to say	0%

### Race

White	58%
Black	14%
Hispanic or Latino	16%
Asian	9%
Some other race	1%
More than one race	1%
Prefer not to say	<1%

### Education level

High school or less	9%
Some college, no degree	24%
Bachelor's degree	47%
Advanced degree	21%

### Region

Northeast	24%
Midwest	17%
South	33%
West	25%
Not available	2%

## **Appendix B – Methodology**

These results are based on a national survey of 1,010 parents of college students living at school. The survey was conducted online April 18-30, 2019. Results were weighted to estimated demographics of the US population of parents of college students on race, gender, and region of the country. Demographic estimates were generated using data from the Census Bureau and other publicly available sources. The poll was commissioned by the Mary Christie Foundation and sponsored by Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield.





11 BEACON STREET  
SUITE 500  
BOSTON, MA 02108

