

Majority of US faculty help students with mental health issues—but few are trained for it

April 27 2021, by Jillian McKoy



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Nearly 80 percent of higher education faculty report dealing with student mental health issues—issues that more than 90 percent of faculty believe have worsened or significantly worsened during the pandemic, according to a new nationwide survey led by a Boston University mental health

researcher.

"The vast majority of [faculty members](#), myself included, are not trained [mental health professionals](#), but we have a role to play in supporting student well-being," says survey principal investigator Sarah Ketchen Lipson, a BU School of Public Health assistant professor of health law, policy, and management. "These data underscore a real opportunity to better equip faculty with knowledge and basic skills to support and refer students."

[These findings](#), detailed in a first-of-its-kind report, underscore faculty's growing involvement in the health and well-being of students and their willingness to serve as mental health "gatekeepers"—a role that has become increasingly important as students continue to navigate [online learning](#), social isolation, and other COVID-19-related stressors.

But the survey revealed that less than 30 percent of faculty have received training from their [academic institutions](#) to handle these issues, even though almost 70 percent say they would welcome this guidance and are eager to strengthen their support for students experiencing mental or emotional health challenges.

Another key survey finding: more than one in five faculty members said that students' mental health has taken a toll on their own mental health. Almost half of respondents said that their institution should invest more in supporting faculty mental health and well-being.

"I am hopeful that our new research in this area will raise awareness of the reality that many faculty members are struggling with their own mental and emotional health," Lipson says.

She says she leveraged BU's [mental health resources](#) to help her find a therapist. "I know that I am a better teacher, advisor, and colleague

because I am able to prioritize my own mental health in a way that meets my needs," she says.

The pilot survey, which was funded by the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation and conducted in partnership with the Mary Christie Foundation and the Healthy Minds Network, was administered during the spring 2021 semester to almost 1,700 faculty members at 12 colleges and universities across the United States. The results indicate that more work needs to be done on campuses to enable faculty to identify and refer students in mental distress.

"These data make it clear that college and university faculty members are attuned to the mental health needs of their students," Lipson says.

Importantly, she says, while 75 percent of faculty reported that they would reach out to a student in mental or emotional distress, only 51 percent were confident that they could recognize signs of student mental distress. More than 60 percent of faculty believe that it should be mandatory for institutions to provide basic training on handling [student](#) mental health, and faculty want additional resources, such as a checklist of warning signs, guides for how to initiate conversations, and a list of available mental health resources.

The survey also found that while 55 percent of faculty believe their institutions are welcoming or somewhat welcoming towards students of color, 58 percent of Hispanic or Latinx faculty and 39 percent of Black or African American faculty believe their institution is hostile or somewhat hostile towards students of color. These results indicate that institutions should not only make campuses more inclusive for students, but also build the level of trust needed among faculty of color to refer students to campus resources, the report said.

"Data are powerful in creating change in higher education, and for so

long, there has been a lack of national data on the [mental health](#) of college and university faculty," says Lipson. "I hope that investments in new resources to support faculty well-being will yield benefits not only to individual faculty members, but also to students and institutions writ large."

Provided by Boston University

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