

Therapy dogs help students cope with the stress of college life

September 22 2021, by Christine Kivlen



College students interact with therapy dogs as a way to relieve stress. Credit: Christine Kivlen, [CC BY-ND](#)

At a private college in the Northeast, a first-year student said it was the highlight of her day whenever she would lie on the floor of her adviser's office and cuddle with a therapy dog, a Leonberger named Stella.

At a large public university in the Midwest, a graduate [student](#) spoke of how a [therapy dog](#) there provided some much-needed relief.

"What stands out for me is how comforting it felt to pet the [therapy dog](#), especially when I started to miss my family and my own dog at home," the student, who is in a demanding health professional program, told me for my [study of therapy dog programs for graduate students](#). The student spent about 35 minutes a week with three other students who all got to spend time with the therapy dog, petting her and giving her treats.

Another student in the same [program](#) said spending time with a therapy dog helped her prepare for high-stakes tests. "It was always really nice to spend time with the therapy dog before big exams," the student said. "I felt like it gave me time to relax before the stressful test."

Such scenes are becoming more and more common at college campuses throughout the U.S. as college students [increasingly turn](#) to therapy dogs for comfort and to cope with the [challenges of student life](#)—such as [increasing workloads](#).

And as the [demand for mental health counseling](#) on campuses [continues to soar](#), colleges are using therapy animals as a way to improve student mental health. Therapy dog programs are provided to colleges and their students [largely free of charge](#).

As an [expert on therapy dog programs](#)—more formally known as canine-assisted interventions—I've [studied](#) how the programs can [improve student well-being](#). Among other benefits, therapy dogs can help students [achieve a stronger sense of belonging](#) and [better deal with being homesick and lonely](#), while also [lessening their anxiety and stress](#).

Some of this can be explained by how human bodies respond to pleasant interactions with therapy animals. A 2019 study found that [college students](#) who spent even just 10 minutes petting a dog or cat saw [significantly decreased cortisol levels](#), which are known to indicate stress.

Animals on campus

In 2017, a survey of over 150 institutions found that [62% of schools had an animal-assisted intervention program](#).

Dog therapy programs tend to look different at each institution. Some programs may involve a few therapy dogs and their handlers casually [visiting the library a few times throughout the semester](#).

In this setting, students may approach the therapy dogs one on one or in small groups. The time students spend with the therapy dog can vary from a few minutes to 45 minutes.

Other programs are more structured and involve scheduled times with a certain number of students being paired with an assigned therapy dog and handler.

Inexpensive for dog owners

The cost of having a dog registered as a therapy dog is relatively low for

the owner.

The programs are typically coordinated by college personnel or [faculty members](#) in various departments, such as occupational therapy, psychology or counseling, or by an activities coordinator in student services. The dogs are typically pets with a good temperament and training. The handler pays any fees required for the dog-and-handler team to be registered through a company that provides therapy dog registration. The handlers pay the fees because they enjoy providing animal-assisted intervention.

Through the company Pet Partners, a widely used animal-assisted intervention company, it [costs the handler \\$15 to \\$30](#) for a dog/handler team to be evaluated, \$95 to register the therapy dog team and \$70 to renew each subsequent year.

Calming effects

In [my dissertation](#) on animal-assisted interventions, I asked a series of open-ended questions of graduate students who were participating in therapy dog programs.

Several students related how pleasant it was to have a scheduled break from schoolwork. "The experience forced me to take time out of my day and dedicate it to not studying," one student wrote.

"The therapy dog is so calm," another student wrote. "Her energy/mellowness helped me to calm down each session."

Not only did the students enjoy their time with the therapy dogs, the therapy dogs seemed to enjoy spending [time](#) with the students as well. Many handlers told me about their dogs being much more excited on the morning of their designated day to go to the [college](#). They also reported

that their [dogs](#) were even more excited when they arrived on campus.

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