

FINDING GUIDANCE: Expanding Mental Health into Safe Spaces for Students

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Abstract:

The need for access to mental health services is growing rapidly, resulting in an increase in patient visits at our counseling centers. Counseling shortages exist not only at Rutgers, but across the country. Adding more counselors and traditional office spaces may not be cost-effective. Another limiting factor for access is that in some cultures and ethnic groups, speaking to a counselor is associated with stigma. **Where/How** do we offer expanded access to mental health counseling services that will provide “socially safe spaces”, that offer “comfortable” and easily accessible services to students who may be afraid, unsure, or uncomfortable reaching out for help?

- According to the most recent Healthy Minds Study, which collected data from 373 campuses nationwide, **including Rutgers**, more than **60%** of college students, met the criteria for at least one mental health problem.
- According to the National Collegiate Health Assessment done by the American College Health Association in 2021, almost **75%** of all students reported moderate or severe psychological distress.
- The number of students seeking help at campus counseling centers increased by almost **40%** between 2009 and 2015 and continued to rise until the pandemic began, according to Penn State University’s Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH).

Primary Stakeholders:

- Students and Parents
- Student Affairs – New Brunswick
- Rutgers Student Health Services – New Brunswick
- The Rutgers Community at Large

Key Steps/Activities:

- Fact-Finding
- Data Analysis
- Feasibility Study
- Approve Recommendations
- Implement Plan

Communication/Engagement:

- ASK** - Survey the student population, with an emphasis on commuting students, students living in nearby off-campus housing, and students with disabilities, concerning which spaces they would desire to have counselors placed to provide them with the "best" access to mental health services.
- LISTEN** - Collect and analyze captured data, looking for common themes, threads, and ideas for access points.
- PLAN** - Present the data to a small working group that would review it for feasibility of implementation.
- PILOT** - Based on feasibility, place counselors in the spaces where STUDENTS say they can best access services and monitor their usage.

Effectiveness Measures:

- Student’s usage of newly designed or redefined spaces is captured by visits data.
- Track improvements in grades over the next academic year.
- Track social interactions through clubs and/or other campus or community partner groups.
- Consider the benefits of tuition preservation via retention.

Current Status/Future Directions:

- This project would likely be reviewed by the Rutgers Student Health Leadership Team and multiple Student Affairs Division Leaders. Fact-finding and feasibility studies could occur over the course of the next year. Based on the results and feedback, a pilot could be launched in Fall 2024.

Proposed Timeline:

