

Addressing Mental Health Stigma and Enhancing Counseling Access in Community Colleges

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ABSTRACT

Mental health stigma poses a substantial barrier to students seeking counseling services in community colleges, limiting their access to necessary support. Although existing literature addresses mental health stigma in higher education, there is a notable gap in research specific to community college settings. This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating how stigma manifests in community colleges and assessing the effectiveness of various strategies to reduce it. Utilizing a qualitative approach, this research relies on a comprehensive review of secondary data, including academic journals, case studies, and program evaluations related to mental health stigma and intervention strategies in educational settings. The data analysis involves synthesizing findings from these sources to identify patterns, evaluate the success of stigma-reduction initiatives, and determine best practices for increasing counseling access. Results confirm that stigma significantly hinders students from seeking help, but also highlight successful interventions that have mitigated this issue in other educational contexts. The study concludes by recommending tailored strategies for community colleges to reduce stigma, such as peer-led programs, awareness campaigns, and culturally sensitive counseling services, aiming to enhance student well-being and access to mental health resources.

Keywords: mental health stigma, community colleges, counseling services, stigma-reduction strategies, qualitative research, access to support, peer-led programs

INTRODUCTION

Community colleges serve a diverse student population, including many nontraditional and at-risk students who are more likely to experience mental health challenges (McBride, 2019). Despite the high need for mental health services, community college students often face barriers to accessing these resources. Stigma, particularly among students of color, is a significant obstacle, with many students expressing mistrust of campus services and negative cultural attitudes toward seeking therapy (McSpadden, 2021).

Research has identified distinct stigma profiles among college students, with those experiencing high self-stigma and public stigma being less likely to utilize mental health services (Wu et al., 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated mental health concerns among college students, highlighting the urgent need for community colleges to implement holistic, multilevel approaches to support student mental health (Sontag-Padilla et al., 2023). Addressing stigma, increasing awareness of available services, and developing culturally sensitive interventions are crucial steps in enhancing mental health support for community college students.

Studies further indicate a significant need for mental health services in community colleges, with over 40% of post-secondary students enrolled in these institutions (McBride, 2019). Despite this demand, there is a lack of research on mental health services in two-year colleges (McBride, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated mental health challenges for college students, particularly in community colleges (Coll et al., 2023). Community college-university partnerships have been proposed as a potential solution to address staffing shortages (Coll et al., 2023).

Stigma, access, and trust in providers contribute to disparities in counseling center utilization, especially among marginalized students (Banks, 2020). Traditional barriers like stigma only partially explain the high prevalence

of untreated mental health disorders in college populations (Eisenberg et al., 2012). Innovative approaches, such as anti-stigma campaigns, screening programs, and gatekeeper training, have been implemented to improve help-seeking behavior, but their effectiveness requires further research (Eisenberg et al., 2012).

This research addresses the significant barrier that mental health stigma creates, preventing community college students from accessing essential counseling services, thereby negatively impacting their mental health and academic success. Its purpose is to explore how stigma manifests in community colleges, identify the cultural, social, and institutional factors that contribute to it, and evaluate the effectiveness of various stigma-reduction strategies implemented in similar educational settings.

Problem Statement

Mental health stigma significantly impedes students in community colleges from accessing necessary counseling services, thereby exacerbating mental health issues and reducing overall well-being. Despite extensive research on mental health stigma in broader educational contexts, there is a lack of focused studies addressing this issue within community colleges. This gap limits understanding of how stigma uniquely affects these institutions and the effectiveness of interventions specifically tailored to them. Thus, this paper addresses this problem to improve mental health support and access to counseling services in community colleges.

Specifically, it tries to answer the following research questions:

1. How does mental health stigma specifically manifest among students in community colleges?
2. What are the cultural, social, and institutional factors contributing to mental health stigma in community colleges?
3. Which existing strategies and interventions have proven effective in reducing mental health stigma in educational settings similar to community colleges?
4. How can these successful stigma-reduction strategies be adapted and implemented to enhance counseling access for community college students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

As research on mental health stigma among college students reveals, significant barriers to seeking help exist. Studies show that perceived stigma is often higher than personal stigma, leading to misperceptions about campus attitudes (Pompeo-Fargnoli, 2020). Cultural factors play a crucial role, with students of color expressing mistrust towards campus services and therapy (McSpadden, 2021). Latent profile analyses identified distinct stigma groups, with those experiencing high self and public stigma less likely to seek mental health services (Wu et al., 2017).

Vietnamese American students face additional challenges due to intergenerational cultural differences, with many preferring to discuss mental health issues with peers rather than family (Vu & Nguyen, 2021). To address these barriers, researchers suggest implementing initiatives to better inform students about available services, developing culturally sensitive interventions, and creating educational workshops for parents and faculty to promote understanding and destigmatize mental health issues (McSpadden, 2021; Vu & Nguyen, 2021).

Literature indicates that over 50% of community college students meet the criteria for at least one mental health problem, comparable to rates at 4-year institutions (Lipson et al., 2021). However, community college students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, are less likely to utilize mental health services (Lipson et al., 2021). Barriers include financial stress, cost of treatment, cultural stigma, and lack of awareness about available services (McSpadden, 2021; Lipson et al., 2021).

Research indicates that stigma significantly impacts help-seeking behaviors for mental health issues even among community college students, with stigma consciousness negatively affecting academic performance and self-esteem, particularly for stigmatized groups such as African Americans and Latinos (Pinel et al., 2005). Stigma remains a key barrier to mental health treatment, contributing to the high prevalence of untreated mental health

disorders on college campuses, which must include community colleges (Eisenberg et al., 2012).

Depression, which is common among college students, is often stigmatized, reducing the likelihood of seeking treatment (Reichert, 2012). Social and self-stigma play a significant role in deterring help-seeking, with men being especially vulnerable (Covello, 2020). To confront these challenges, community colleges can implement anti-stigma campaigns, screening programs, and gatekeeper training (Eisenberg et al., 2012). Additionally, applying the Theory of Stigma Management Communication could help develop strategies to manage depression stigma and encourage help-seeking behaviors among students (Reichert, 2012).

Indeed, studies have identified distinct stigma profiles among college students, with those experiencing high self and public stigma being less likely to seek help (Wu et al., 2017). To address these issues, researchers suggest implementing mental health literacy programs, such as the REDFLAGS model, which has shown promise in supporting community college students' mental health needs (Kalkbrenner et al., 2019). Thus, the significance of this study on mental health challenges faced by community college students and the barriers to accessing support services cannot be overemphasized.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative design, focusing on a comprehensive review and analysis of secondary data to address mental health stigma and enhance counseling access in community colleges. The primary research instrument is a systematic literature review, where existing academic journals, case studies, program evaluations, and relevant publications are carefully selected and analyzed to gather insights into the manifestation of mental health stigma and the effectiveness of various stigma-reduction strategies. The data-gathering procedure involves identifying and collecting relevant studies and reports from reputable academic databases and sources that specifically address mental health stigma in educational settings similar to community colleges.

Ethical considerations are prioritized by ensuring that all secondary data sources are properly cited and that the research adheres to academic integrity standards. Additionally, the study avoids the use of primary data, thus minimizing ethical concerns related to participant consent and confidentiality. The data analysis procedure involves thematic analysis, where patterns, themes, and key findings from the reviewed literature are synthesized to conclude the effectiveness of existing interventions and their applicability to community college settings. The analysis aims to identify best practices and develop tailored recommendations for reducing mental health stigma and improving counseling access in community colleges.

Through a synthesis of existing literature and analysis of successful interventions, the research aims to develop tailored recommendations to enhance counseling access and improve mental health outcomes for community college students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on data sources that were examined, mental health stigma serves as a barrier to students in community colleges, preventing them from accessing necessary counseling services. This issue exacerbates mental health conditions, leading to diminished academic performance, reduced well-being, and increased dropout rates. While extensive research has explored mental health stigma in higher education, the unique challenges faced by community college students remain under-researched. This study sought to fill this gap by analyzing how stigma manifests in these institutions and exploring strategies to enhance counseling access. Here, then, are the results based on the research questions formulated:

1. How does mental health stigma specifically manifest among students in community colleges?

Mental Health Stigma in Community Colleges

The Prevalence of Public Stigma Over Personal Stigma

The literature consistently highlights that public stigma, or the negative perceptions held by others, is more

prevalent than personal stigma, the individual's internalized stigmatizing attitudes. Public stigma is a powerful deterrent to help-seeking behaviors, creating a social environment where students fear judgment or labeling from their peers, faculty, and even family members. According to Eisenberg et al. (2009), public stigma is a dominant force in educational settings, making it a critical focus for intervention efforts. The impact of public stigma is particularly pronounced among specific student demographics, such as younger, male, Asian, international, religious, and economically disadvantaged students. These groups are more likely to experience personal stigma, which compounds the effects of public stigma and further inhibits their willingness to seek help.

The Interaction Between Public and Self-Stigma

The development of self-stigma, or the internalization of public stigma, is a significant concern in community colleges. Vogel et al. (2013) suggest that public stigma often leads to self-stigma over time, creating a vicious cycle where students not only fear external judgment but also begin to see themselves as less capable or worthy of help. This progression from public to self-stigma has serious implications for student's mental health and their likelihood of seeking counseling services. It highlights the need for interventions that target both forms of stigma simultaneously, aiming to break the cycle before self-stigma becomes deeply ingrained.

Demographic Variations in Stigma Experience and Help-Seeking

Research reveals that different student demographics experience stigma in varied ways, influencing their mental health and service utilization. Wu et al. (2017) used latent profile analysis to identify distinct groups based on levels of public and self-stigma, with significant differences in demographics, mental health outcomes, and counseling service usage. For instance, students who face higher levels of public stigma are more likely to experience severe mental health issues but are less likely to use available services. This finding underscores the importance of developing tailored interventions that address the specific needs of diverse student populations, recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective.

Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Responses to Stigma

Dias & Wang (2021) found that students' responses to mental health stigma are multifaceted, encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Cognitively, students might rationalize not seeking help by downplaying their mental health issues or questioning the efficacy of counseling. Affectively, they may experience emotions such as shame, guilt, or fear, which further deter them from accessing support. Behaviorally, stigma can lead to avoidance of counseling services, social withdrawal, or other coping mechanisms that are not conducive to mental health. These varied responses indicate that interventions need to be comprehensive, addressing the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of stigma.

BEST PRACTICES AND TAILORED RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively reduce stigma in community colleges, multi-level programs should address both public and self-stigma through culturally tailored educational campaigns, peer support, and mental health training for staff. Demographically-sensitive interventions should cater to diverse student needs, particularly those of younger, male, Asian, international, religious, and economically disadvantaged students. Comprehensive support services, including flexible counseling and peer-led initiatives, should be accessible to normalize help-seeking behaviors. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of these programs will ensure they evolve with students' needs while integrating mental health education into the curriculum can further destigmatize mental health issues on campus.

2. What are the cultural, social, and institutional factors contributing to mental health stigma in community colleges?

Factors Influencing Mental Health Stigma in Community Colleges

Cultural Influences on Mental Health Perceptions

Cultural beliefs and norms play a critical role in shaping attitudes toward mental health among community

college students. McSpadden (2021) highlights that in some cultural groups, mental health issues are perceived as personal or familial failures, leading to significant stigma. This cultural stigma is particularly strong among students from Asian, international, and more religious backgrounds, where traditional views may discourage open discussions about mental health and the pursuit of counseling services. The diversity of the community college population means that a wide range of cultural perspectives must be considered when addressing mental health stigma, making culturally tailored interventions essential.

Social Dynamics and Stigma

Social factors, such as peer pressure and social isolation, are significant contributors to mental health stigma in community colleges. Katz & Davison (2014) discuss how the desire to conform to peer expectations and the transient nature of community college student populations, who often balance multiple responsibilities, can lead to feelings of isolation. This social isolation exacerbates stigma, as students may lack the supportive networks necessary to normalize mental health challenges. Furthermore, peer pressure can discourage help-seeking behaviors, as students may fear being judged or ostracized for accessing mental health services. These social dynamics create an environment where stigma is perpetuated, making it difficult for students to seek the support they need.

Institutional Barriers to Mental Health Support

Institutional factors, particularly limited funding and resources, significantly impact the availability and effectiveness of mental health services in community colleges. Katz & Davison (2014) note that community colleges often have fewer mental health resources and awareness programs compared to four-year universities. This disparity is due in part to constrained budgets, which limit the ability to hire qualified mental health professionals, offer comprehensive services, and promote mental health awareness on campus. The lack of institutional support for mental health not only perpetuates stigma but also leaves students without the necessary resources to address their mental health concerns, leading to worsened psychological outcomes.

Demographic Variations in Stigma and Help-Seeking

Eisenberg et al. (2009) identify significant demographic variations in personal stigma and help-seeking behaviors among community college students. Male, younger, Asian, international, more religious, and economically disadvantaged students are more likely to experience higher levels of personal stigma, which is negatively associated with their likelihood of seeking help. These demographic factors intersect with cultural and social influences, compounding the barriers to accessing mental health services. The recognition of these variations underscores the need for targeted interventions that address the specific challenges faced by these student groups, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach.

Psychological Distress and Institutional Challenges

Community college students often face more severe psychological concerns compared to their counterparts at traditional universities, exacerbated by limited institutional mental health resources. Byrd & McKinney (2012) highlight that factors such as limited coping abilities and perceived racially tense campus climates contribute to heightened psychological distress among these students. The combination of these individual and institutional challenges creates a situation where students are more vulnerable to mental health issues but have fewer resources available to address them. This makes it critical to focus on both improving institutional support and developing students' coping mechanisms to mitigate the effects of stigma and enhance their well-being.

Tailored recommendations

Community colleges should include implementing culturally responsive mental health programs with multilingual resources and relevant messaging, fostering social support networks through peer mentoring and support groups, and increasing institutional commitment to mental health by advocating for more funding and resources. Targeted interventions should address high-risk groups, such as younger, male, Asian, international, and economically disadvantaged students while integrating coping strategies and resilience training into the

student experience to help manage psychological distress and reduce stigma.

3. Which existing strategies and interventions have proven effective in reducing mental health stigma in educational settings similar to community colleges?

Interventions to Reduce Mental Health Stigma in Educational Settings

The Impact of Anti-Stigma Campaigns and Educational Programs

Anti-stigma campaigns and educational programs are central to efforts aimed at improving attitudes toward mental health and encouraging help-seeking behaviors. Eisenberg et al. (2012) and Turetsky & Sanderson (2018) highlight that these initiatives have been effective in reducing stigma by increasing awareness and knowledge about mental health issues. These programs often involve disseminating information that challenges existing stereotypes and misconceptions, thereby creating a more informed and supportive environment. The success of these campaigns is rooted in their ability to normalize discussions about mental health, making it easier for students to seek help without fear of judgment or discrimination.

The Role of Social Contact Interventions

Social contact interventions, particularly those that involve video-based approaches, have proven to be especially effective in reducing stigma by fostering empathy and understanding. Yamaguchi et al. (2013) emphasize that these interventions work by exposing students to personal stories and experiences of individuals with mental health issues, thereby humanizing the subject and reducing social distance. This approach is powerful because it directly challenges the "us vs. them" mentality often associated with stigma, promoting a more inclusive and compassionate view of mental health. The effectiveness of these interventions lies in their ability to create emotional connections, which can lead to lasting changes in attitudes and behaviors.

Correcting Misperceived Norms Through Theory-Driven Interventions

Brief, theory-driven interventions that focus on correcting misperceived norms about mental health are another promising strategy for reducing stigma. Turetsky & Sanderson (2018) discuss how these interventions target the gap between perceived and actual social norms regarding mental health, helping to align individual perceptions with the more accurate, less stigmatizing views held by the broader community. By addressing these misperceptions, such interventions can reduce public stigma, making it easier for students to recognize that seeking help is both acceptable and common. These interventions are particularly valuable because they are typically brief and can be easily integrated into existing educational programs.

The Importance of Mental Health Training for Campus Communities

Providing mental health training to faculty, staff, and students is identified as a crucial element in creating a supportive campus environment. Collins et al. (2013) highlight that such training can equip members of the campus community with the skills and knowledge needed to recognize signs of mental distress and respond appropriately. This not only reduces stigma but also ensures that students receive timely support, potentially preventing the escalation of mental health issues. The effectiveness of these training programs is enhanced when they are made a routine part of campus life, ensuring that the entire community is engaged in promoting mental health.

Methodological Limitations and the Need for Rigorous Research

Despite the promising results of these interventions, Yamaguchi et al. (2013) and Collins et al. (2013) point out that many studies suffer from methodological limitations, particularly a lack of evidence for long-term effects and actual behavioral changes. While these interventions may improve attitudes in the short term, it is unclear whether these changes are sustained over time and translate into increased help-seeking behaviors or improved mental health outcomes. This highlights the need for more rigorous research that includes long-term follow-up and measures actual behavior, not just attitudes. Future studies should aim to fill these gaps by employing more

robust methodologies and exploring the long-term impact of stigma-reduction efforts.

Tailored Recommendations

To effectively reduce mental health stigma on campus, community colleges should implement sustained anti-stigma campaigns with educational programs, social contact interventions, and ongoing awareness efforts that evolve with new findings. Social contact interventions should be widely adopted across campus, incorporating personal stories to reduce social distance. Integrating brief, theory-driven approaches into peer-led programs can help correct misperceived norms. Comprehensive mental health training for all faculty, staff, and students should be mandatory and regularly updated. A commitment to rigorous research and evaluation is essential to assess the long-term impact of these stigma-reduction strategies and ensure their effectiveness.

4. How can these successful stigma-reduction strategies be adapted and implemented to enhance counseling access for community college students?

Strategies to Enhance Counseling Access for Community College Students

The Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly exacerbated mental health challenges among community college students, amplifying existing issues and creating new ones. Sontag-Padilla et al. (2023) underscore the heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression experienced by students during the pandemic, which has made the need for accessible mental health services even more urgent. The disruption to traditional learning environments, combined with the personal and financial hardships caused by the pandemic, has intensified the psychological distress faced by students, further highlighting the critical need for effective mental health support systems in community colleges.

Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Services

Despite the increased need for mental health services, several barriers prevent community college students from accessing these services. Stigma remains a significant obstacle, with many students fearing judgment or negative labeling if they seek help (McSpadden, 2021). Cultural barriers also play a crucial role, as students from diverse backgrounds may face additional stigma due to cultural norms that view mental health issues as personal or familial failures. Furthermore, a lack of awareness about available services, compounded by the often transient nature of the community college student population, means that many students are not aware of the support they can access, leaving their mental health needs unmet.

Tailoring Interventions to Cultural and Social Realities

Culturally tailored anti-stigma campaigns and peer-led initiatives have been identified as effective strategies to address these barriers. McSpadden (2021) and Brower et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of designing interventions that resonate with the diverse cultural backgrounds of community college students. By integrating cultural sensitivity into anti-stigma campaigns, colleges can create more inclusive environments that encourage help-seeking behaviors. Peer-led initiatives, where students support each other in navigating mental health challenges, also prove effective by leveraging the influence of peer networks to reduce stigma and promote mental health awareness.

Flexibility and Accessibility of Counseling Services

Another critical theme is the need for counseling services that are flexible and accessible. Community college students often juggle multiple responsibilities, including work, family, and education, making traditional counseling hours and methods less effective. To address this, institutions are encouraged to offer flexible services that accommodate students' schedules, such as online counseling, telehealth options, and extended hours (McSpadden, 2021). These adaptations are crucial in ensuring that students can access the mental health support they need without additional barriers related to time or availability.

The Role of Institutional Support and Partnerships

Institutional support is identified as a key factor in the successful implementation of mental health initiatives. Sontag-Padilla et al. (2023) argue that community colleges must invest in mental health resources, train staff, and integrate mental health into their overall mission to create a supportive environment. This includes seeking additional funding and establishing partnerships with other institutions, such as universities with graduate training programs, to maximize resources and provide on-campus counseling services (Stewart et al., 2015). Institutional commitment to mental health is essential for sustaining these efforts and ensuring that they have a lasting impact.

Addressing Intersectional Stigma and Promoting an Ethic of Care

The analysis also highlights the importance of addressing intersectional stigma and promoting an ethic of care within community colleges. Brower et al. (2021) discuss how students experiencing multiple forms of stigma—such as those related to race, gender, or socioeconomic status—may face additional challenges in accessing mental health services. Extending an ethic of care that acknowledges and supports these students' unique experiences is vital for creating a truly inclusive environment. This includes improving access to both campus and community resources and implementing horizontal peer mentoring programs that empower students to support one another.

Tailored Recommendations

Community colleges should develop culturally sensitive anti-stigma campaigns tailored to diverse student backgrounds, incorporating peer-led elements to utilize student networks. Expanding counseling services with online, telehealth options, and extended hours will help accommodate students' varied schedules. Strengthening institutional support through investment in mental health resources, staff training, and partnerships with other institutions can enhance service availability. To address intersectional stigma, colleges should adopt an ethic of care, offering peer mentoring and improved access to campus and community resources specifically designed to support students with overlapping stigmatized identities.

CONCLUSION

The findings underscore the complex nature of mental health stigma in academic settings and highlight the need for targeted interventions to address stigma and promote help-seeking behaviors. Cultural, social, and institutional factors intertwine to create an environment where mental health stigma is prevalent. Interventions must consider the diverse cultural backgrounds of students, the social challenges they face, and the institutional barriers within community colleges. These interventions highlight the importance of a multi-pronged approach to reducing mental health stigma. Effective strategies often involve education, peer support, and improving access to services, suggesting that community colleges could benefit from adopting similar initiatives tailored to their specific context. Stigma-reduction strategies in the community college context involve a deep understanding of the unique needs and challenges these institutions face. To make significant strides in reducing stigma and improving access to mental health services, initiatives should be tailored to the cultural and social realities of community college students, ensuring that services are accessible and supported institutionally. And so, to reduce mental health stigma and improve access to counseling services, community colleges should explore interventions that are culturally tailored to diverse student populations, enhance the flexibility and accessibility of services, and strengthen institutional support for mental health initiatives. Implementing peer-led initiatives, creating collaborative partnerships with other institutions, and fostering an ethic of care that addresses the unique needs of students can further promote overall well-being and academic success. These recommendations provide a framework for future studies to enhance the effectiveness of mental health support in community colleges.

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