On Campus

Jed Foundation: Preventing Mental Illness on Campus is Everybody's Job

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John MacPhee '89CC, '12PH, the executive director of the Jed Foundation, says that colleges and universities must train more employees to recognize signs of psychiatric distress among students. Photo: Adam Schultz / Clinton Foundation

College is stressful. For many students, the pressure to get good grades, plan a career, and make new friends, all while living on their own for the first time, can be too much to take. A study conducted last year by the American College Health Association found that more than half of all college students in the US had felt "overwhelming anxiety" at some point in the previous year, while one in three had felt "so depressed that it was difficult to function." One in twelve had seriously

contemplated suicide.

In order to help students before they hit their breaking point, some colleges and universities — Columbia among them — have in recent years begun to train more employees to recognize signs of emotional distress. Sports coaches, librarians, dining-hall workers, financial-aid officers, professors, and clergy — just about anybody who has frequent contact with students — are now being encouraged to reach out to young people who appear distraught and help them get the clinical services they need, such as by referring them to a campus counseling center, or, in more urgent situations, by contacting the center directly on a student's behalf.

This past winter, the Jed Foundation, a nonprofit whose mission is to prevent mental illness, substance abuse, and suicide among college students, announced a major initiative to promote this community- based approach to mental-health care on campuses. Founded in 2000 by Phillip Satow '63CC and Donna Satow '65GS in memory of their son Jed, who died by suicide as a freshman at the University of Arizona, the Jed Foundation has joined with the Clinton Foundation to create what they say is the first independent program for evaluating whether colleges and universities are doing a good job identifying and helping troubled students.

The backbone of the JedCampus program, as it's called, is a survey that college administrators can complete about their institutions' mental-health awareness efforts. Upon submitting the survey, the administrators receive a confidential report from the Jed Foundation describing how their outreach programs compare to best practices in the field, along with recommendations for improvements. One key attribute the Jed Foundation looks for is routine communication between a university's student-health unit and other departments. A college with an especially progressive approach might, for instance, periodically send school psychiatrists into faculty meetings so that professors can easily get advice on handling worrisome situations.

"The most effective way to prevent mental illness and just about any other negative consequence of psychiatric distress is to recognize the signs of trouble early on and to reach out," says John MacPhee '89CC, '12PH, the executive director of the Jed Foundation. "The challenge is that we all lead hectic professional lives, and unless you're a student counselor, you probably don't consider this a key part of your job. But counselors can't be everywhere on campus. Everyone needs to be invested in this effort."

The recommendations that colleges receive from the Jed Foundation are confidential. However, the foundation is publicly recognizing those institutions whose mental-health outreach it judges to be exemplary, in hopes of inspiring other schools to follow their lead. The foundation recently gave a JedCampus seal of approval to thirty US colleges and universities, based on an initial round of surveys completed last year. Columbia University was among those to receive the seal; MacPhee says Columbia's training and referral networks are "among the best-integrated we have seen."

"Our evaluation program is not punitive, in that we're not revealing the names of schools that choose to be reviewed but don't earn the seal," says MacPhee. "On the other hand, we want the public to know which schools are doing this right. We hope that families will consider this as part of the college-selection process and that as more and more schools earn the seal, this will put a positive pressure on the leaders of other schools to improve their programming."

Richard Eichler, the director of counseling and psychological services at Columbia, says the Jed Foundation is performing a valuable service simply by raising public awareness of mental-health issues among young people.

"This is an underappreciated problem, in part because it's still discussed in hushed tones," he says. "There is less stigma surrounding mental illness now than there used to be, but we still have progress to make. The Jed Foundation is helping to normalize the conversation."



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