



# Customized Care

Addressing the Unique Mental Health Needs of Online Students



ONLINE LEARNING™  
CONSORTIUM



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# ABOUT OUR ORGANIZATIONS



The Online Learning Consortium (OLC) is a collaborative community of education leaders and innovators dedicated to advancing quality digital teaching and learning experiences designed to reach and engage the modern learner—anyone, anywhere, anytime. OLC inspires innovation and quality through an extensive set of resources, including best-practice publications, quality benchmarking, leading-edge instruction, community driven conferences, practitioner-based and empirical research, and expert guidance. The growing OLC community includes faculty members, administrators, trainers, instructional designers, and other learning professionals, as well as educational institutions, professional societies, and corporate enterprises. Learn more at [onlinelearningconsortium.org](https://onlinelearningconsortium.org)



Uwill is the leading mental health and wellness solution for colleges and students. Utilizing its proprietary technology and counselor team, Uwill pioneered the first student and therapist matching platform. The solution offers an immediate appointment with a licensed counselor based on student preferences, all modalities of teletherapy, a direct crisis connection 24/7/365, wellness events, realtime data, and support. Uwill supports more than 3 million students at 400+ institutions including the University of Michigan, Columbus State Community College, Rutgers University, New England Law Boston, and APUS.

# INTRODUCTION

The mental health landscape in higher education has reached a critical point, with a growing number of students facing severe psychological issues. According to a recent NEA article, “The majority of college students (more than 60 percent) meet the criteria for at least one mental health problem—a nearly 50 percent increase since 2013” (Flannery, 2023, n.p.). More specifically, a significant portion of students reported symptoms of depression (44%) and anxiety (37%) and “15 percent said they have seriously considered suicide,” which is the highest recorded rate in 15 years (Alonso, 2023, n.p.). While these statistics are alarming, it is encouraging to see that a growing number of college students are seeking mental health counseling (Levin, 2020), with Alonso (2023) noting that “Thirty-seven percent of respondents said they have received mental health counseling in the past year, a 7 percent increase from 2020” (n.p.). However, despite this increase, over 60% of students are not seeking care, indicating an ongoing challenge of addressing student mental health needs (Sutton, 2023). This persistent gap in mental health care highlights the need for institutions to better understand and continue to mitigate the barriers preventing students from seeking help.

These challenges are further complicated by shifting student enrollment trends in the U.S., particularly following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 54% of U.S. students were enrolled in at least one online course in 2022, and roughly one quarter (26%) of U.S. students exclusively took courses online (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023, n.p.; Welding, 2024, n.p.). While most U.S. institutions relied on counseling centers to support students prior to the pandemic, the spring 2020 semester saw an unprecedented shift to telemental health services, which offered benefits like convenience, flexibility for students’ schedules, and lessened stigma to seeking care (Hadler et al., 2021, n.p.). This shift has highlighted the critical need for adaptable support systems that can cater to both online and onsite students, as well as the importance of providing flexible pathways to mental health support that can address the varied needs of the student population.

The purpose of this study was to facilitate collective problem solving around the student mental health crisis by specifically highlighting online student mental health needs and support strategies. Our primary research questions included:

- How has online student demand and utilization of mental health services changed over the past year, if at all?
- What steps are institutions currently taking to provide mental health services for online students?
- What are some of the key challenges online students face in terms of mental health?
- What barriers do educators identify for online students seeking mental health support?

In order to address these questions, the OLC collaborated with Uwill, the leading mental health and wellness solution for students. We distributed a survey to members of the OLC community and sought diverse perspectives from digital learning leaders, educators, and staff currently working at US and international higher education institutions. Survey respondents represent a range of roles including instructors (49.41%), “other” roles, including librarians and instructional designers, (21.30%), student success/support staff, including those in enrollment, tutoring services, student affairs, academic affairs, and student housing services, (18.05%), program or department chairs (14.79%), academic advisors (13.91%), institutional leaders, including presidents, provosts, vice-presidents, and deans, (10.95%), and counseling services staff (3.85%). We were eager to understand these stakeholders’ perspectives since they are often directly involved in referring students to mental health support services and/or implementing mental health initiatives on campus, and they might therefore be able to identify systemic issues and barriers to accessing care. Their feedback is crucial to understanding the efficacy of current mental health offerings across student populations and identifying areas for improvement. In total, we received 338 responses, with all U.S. states and 36 countries represented, most notably Canada, South Africa, the UK, and India. Regarding institution type, 63.28% of respondents work for public institutions, 24.18% for private non-profit institutions, and 12.84% for private for-profit institutions.

In what follows, we will discuss the key findings of our research and provide targeted recommendations for institutions to refine their approach to mental health care and more effectively meet the needs of online students.

# RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

## 1. There is an increased demand for online mental health support.

**Recommendation: Invest in multiple solutions that meet the needs of online students.**

“Online students need access to mental health and wellness resources, including services sensitive to their situations as online students and to the stressors that online students face.”

“I would like there to be more options for our students. I feel as though there are not a lot of options, and I know with the increase of stress students feel, we have a greater need now than we did before.”

As was previously mentioned, a primary goal for this study was to determine whether online student demand for and utilization of mental health services has increased, decreased, or remained the same over the past year following the disruptions of the early COVID-19 pandemic years. The overwhelming majority (82.58%) of survey respondents noted an increase in demand for mental health services among online students over the past academic year, with only 15.91% of respondents saying it has stayed the same and 1.52% saying it has decreased. 50% of respondents also indicated that online student utilization of mental health resources has increased over the past year, while 39.48% said they did not know, and 9.96% said it has

remained the same. Interestingly, no respondents said that utilization had decreased in the past year.

These findings suggest an ongoing need for institutions to invest in mental health support options for online students, as educators are observing patterns of increased demand for support. Based on the survey findings, we further recommend that institutions consider providing multiple options for online students. For instance, our survey revealed that institutions primarily offer mental health services such as onsite counseling (66.67%), employee assistance programs (EAP) 63.06%, community referrals (59.01%), crisis intervention services (49.55%), stress reduction resources (48.65%), self-help/self-guided resources (45.05%), mindfulness and relaxation resources/classes (41.44%), teletherapy through third party partner (39.19%), and alcohol/substance abuse resources (35.14%). However, there is room for expansion in areas such as teletherapy, peer-to-peer support, and online mental health screenings, particularly because these offerings would be accessible to both online and onsite students.

## **2. Educators perceive differences in the mental health needs of online and in-person students.**

**Recommendation: Focus on combating isolation, accommodating diverse schedules, and proactively identifying and supporting students with less visible challenges.**

“Our online students tend to be balancing more responsibilities and have drastically varied networks of support. Our online students also tend to come from more diverse and underrepresented backgrounds (age, gender, ethnicity, etc.) that often don't have the resources needed to pick up and move or quit their jobs to attend their degree program. Many of those constraints are concomitant with precipitating factors for mental health challenges in the United States.”

“Our online student population is primarily an adult, working professional



population. This population generally has more commitments outside of school that play a factor in their daily lives and often impact mental health needs.”

A significant portion (46.69%) of respondents perceived differences in mental health needs between in-person and online students. When asked what differences they perceive in mental health needs between in-person and online students, the top answers included: increased isolation, loneliness, and lack of community for online students (26.73%); commitments outside of school are a challenge and stressor for non-traditional online students (19.8%); less visibility of online student mental health challenges (12.87%); online students present with more anxiety (6.93%); access and regional challenges for students living in other areas (countries or states) (4.95%); and more online students express distress (4.95%).

The finding that 46.69% of respondents perceive significant differences in the mental health needs between in-person and online students highlights a critical area for institutions to address. Institutions should invest in support options that can address diverse needs of a range of students in terms of life circumstance, mental health needs, and location, among other factors. The most frequently-cited mental health factor specific to online students, increased isolation, loneliness, and lack of community, underscores the importance of fostering social connections and community engagement in virtual learning environments. Additionally, the unique stressors faced by non-traditional online students due to commitments outside of school underscores the need for flexible services that can provide tailored support for the responsibilities they are juggling and the mental health challenges these might surface. Finally, the less visible nature of online student mental health challenges and higher reported anxiety levels call for proactive measures to identify and support students who may be struggling silently. While these measures might be intended to make mental health support for online students more equitable, they may also facilitate increased accessibility of services and wellbeing for all students.

### **3. Students do not generally seem satisfied with available mental health and wellness support.**

**Recommendation: Regularly assess online and onsite student satisfaction with mental health services.**

“In person students seem to receive more proper advising and [access to] ‘in-state’ resources, which are inherently inequitable to those abroad and online across the world.”

“[S]tudents who take online classes may be more inclined to online mental health resources. Students take online classes for flexibility and accessibility. Mental health [support] should be available with it.”

Educators reported varied levels of perceived satisfaction among online students regarding the mental health services offered by their institution. A significant portion (44.19%) of respondents adopted a neutral stance, indicating a lack of clear satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the mental health services provided. Additionally, 34.83% of respondents said students were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with mental health offerings, suggesting a clear need for improvement in meeting online students' needs. While 15.73% of respondents agreed that online students were satisfied by available offerings, a smaller percentage (5.24%) strongly agreed with this statement, indicating limited satisfaction among online students.

These findings highlight the need for institutions to actively assess and address online students' perspectives on mental health services. The neutral and negative responses signal potential gaps in service delivery and highlight opportunities for enhancement to better meet the diverse and evolving mental health needs of online learners. More specifically, institutions should prioritize regular assessment and feedback mechanisms to understand online students' satisfaction with mental health services. By conducting periodic surveys and focus groups, institutions can gather detailed insights into specific areas of dissatisfaction and identify aspects of their mental health support that require improvement. This approach ensures that

the services evolve in response to student feedback, thereby enhancing their effectiveness and relevance. Additionally, institutions could implement targeted initiatives, such as expanding the availability of online counseling sessions, offering workshops on stress management and resilience, and improving the visibility and accessibility of mental health resources. These measures, informed by direct student input, would help bridge the gaps identified in current services, fostering a more responsive mental health environment for online learners.

#### **4. Barriers to support for online students include lack of awareness, availability challenges, and lack of access to services.**

**Recommendation: Prioritize flexible services, increase awareness of services for all student populations, address financial barriers, and expand service availability.**

**“Mental health services are less available to online students.”**

**“I do not believe that online students are aware of the mental health resources available.”**

According to the data, the most significant barrier to online student mental health support is student time constraints. 62.1% of respondents reported that time constraints have a significant to very significant effect on hindering access to mental health services for online students. This finding highlights the pressing need for institutions to implement flexible support structures that accommodate the busy schedules of online learners. Respondents identified several additional barriers that have a significant to very significant effect on online student mental health support, including (in order of significance): limited knowledge of available services (58.64%), lack of services that meet online student needs (54.79%), insurance coverage/financial problems (46.29%), lack of services in general (45.66%), limited appointment availability for counseling (44.75%), stigma concerns (34.11%), concerns about the quality of support services (29.35%), and privacy concerns (25.12%). Addressing these

barriers is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of mental health support for online learners.

To effectively address these barriers and enhance mental health support for online learners, institutions should consider implementing several strategic recommendations. First, institutions should develop and promote flexible support structures, such as extended counseling hours, weekend availability, and asynchronous resources like self-guided modules or mental health apps. This would help accommodate the busy and varied schedules of online students while increasing availability for onsite students as well. Enhancing the overall availability of services can be achieved by hiring additional mental health professionals and exploring partnerships with external mental health organizations. In addition to providing additional availability, institutions might also consider varying service offerings to specifically meet the unique needs of online learners, perhaps by offering online counseling sessions, peer-to-peer support, and online support groups. Increasing awareness and visibility of available mental health services through targeted communication campaigns would help mitigate the barrier of limited knowledge of available resources. As part of these campaigns, institutions might address financial barriers or lack of student understanding about the cost of counseling services. Institutions should consider providing clear information about insurance coverage, offering sliding scale fees, and establishing emergency funds for students in need. While these recommendations are not comprehensive, they offer a starting point for reducing barriers to students who are increasingly seeking support.

## **5. Educators are interested in additional mental health training focused on how to support online students.**

**Recommendation: Provide training for faculty and leaders so they can better recognize mental health needs for online students and connect students seeking help to needed resources.**

“Students who experience mental health issues would be more visible in face-to-face classes compared to online. In online settings, it is hard to

identify students who are going through difficulties unless they come forward and contact the teaching team about it. In online learning, mental (or physical) health issues are less visible and identifiable.”

A significant portion of respondents (37.44%) felt inadequately trained or very inadequately trained to recognize and respond to mental health issues with online students, while 26.43% felt well trained, 26.43% felt neutral, and 9.69% felt very well trained. This finding was contextualized by comments from respondents, who noted that a key struggle with providing mental health support to online students is identifying the students who most need help. As one educator explained:

Students who experience mental health issues would be more visible in face-to-face classes compared to online. In online settings, it is hard to identify students who are going through difficulties unless they come forward and contact the teaching team about it. In online learning, mental (or physical) health issues are less visible and identifiable.

Some community members also expressed frustration with the level of care they are currently providing to students, with one respondent explaining, “Our job is to teach but over 80% is to support students mentally.”

These findings suggest that institutions should invest in additional training for faculty and leaders to help them recognize indicators of online student distress, connect online students to available resources that may meet their needs, and manage the stress of this role. The majority of respondents (83.25%) expressed a high level of interest in receiving additional training on how to support the mental well-being of online students. This foregrounds the willingness of educators and staff to improve their capacity to address the mental health needs of online learners effectively.

# CONCLUSION

This study's findings, drawn from educators and leaders in higher education, align with research that indicates increased incidence of mental health challenges and student help-seeking while adding insights into challenges and barriers online students face and potential solutions that might improve access to quality care for all students. A key takeaway from this research is that online students have unique mental health needs that necessitate targeted and flexible support services. The significant increase in demand and utilization of mental health resources, coupled with the distinct challenges faced by online learners such as isolation and less visible mental health challenges, underscores the urgent need for institutions to adapt their approach. Importantly, it is also clear that faculty are willing to play an active role in connecting students to available services and want to learn how to better recognize students who might be silently struggling. By investing in a range of mental health services tailored to online students, including teletherapy, peer-to-peer support, and online mental health screenings, as well as increased faculty training, institutions can improve their ability to identify students who need support, facilitate their treatment, and ensure access to all students. Another key recommendation is that institutions regularly solicit feedback from students about the usefulness of available resources to ensure that services evolve to meet students' needs, thereby enhancing satisfaction and effectiveness.

While we are excited about the potential for these findings to spark important conversations about mental health support for all students, we also acknowledge the limitations of this research. In particular, we are mindful of the need to engage students in conversations surrounding online mental health support, since their perspectives may vary from those of educators and leaders. Future studies should also consider mental health resources for graduate students across modalities to better understand their needs and improve mental health support outcomes. While needs and resources will of course vary across institutional and regional contexts, we hope that these recommendations can help empower institutions to create more inclusive environments, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive mentally and academically.

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