

**February 2, 2017**

## **Mental Health and Wellness at Columbia**

In the wake of student deaths, whether intentional or not, we grieve. As individuals and a community, we come together to find comfort and support. And we also come together to ask – really to insist – on understanding what more we can do to address the depression and addiction that is so often the cause of these losses. As a University, we look hard at what we are getting right and what we need to improve as we educate and support students through difficult times in their lives.

In doing this work, we face two major challenges – first, to help link those students who are struggling with mental health and behavioral conditions and who are not currently accessing services to the counseling and other resources that can help enhance their safety and ability to thrive; and second, to create an environment that fosters a caring, supportive community. There is much to say about both; for now, I focus on the first – both on what we at Columbia now provide and on what we can do going forward.

As a backdrop, the challenges posed by mental illness on campus are profound and without simple solutions. In a broader context, we know that many people, both in the United States and throughout the world, struggle with debilitating depression, anxiety and addiction, among other conditions, to the point that mental illness and behavioral disorders have been described by many as a public health crisis. According to the Centers for Disease Control, suicide and unintentional injury, including overdose, are the two [leading causes of death among young adults](#).

This tells us that a meaningful response to student mental health needs requires excellence in many ways – service provision, collaboration among students, faculty and administrators, resources dedicated to awareness and a supportive environment, and continuous research to seek effective ways to intervene and provide support.

With that, we want to share some basic information about what we have in place and, after this, what more we will do. (Those who are familiar with our resources can skip ahead to “Starting this Spring” below.)

### **What counseling services does Columbia provide?**

Columbia provides mental health services directly to students through [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) (CPS) on the Morningside campus and [Mental Health Services](#) on the Medical Center campus. Both are extensively staffed with deeply experienced psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers. Together, they see

many thousands of students per year, a number that has risen steadily in the past decade.

Both provide counseling, consultation, crisis intervention, and access to quality psychiatric services, with strict standards of confidentiality for all they do. On Morningside, CPS also offers a wide range of support groups as well as groups and workshops that promote resilience and healthy coping strategies. Students have the option of selecting their mental-health clinician ([bios and photos are available online](#)), and specialists are available in many areas, including [Body Image issues/Eating Disorders](#), [First Generation Students](#), [Multicultural Concerns](#), [Religious/Spiritual Concerns](#), [Sexual and Gender Identity Issues](#), [Trauma Support](#), and [Veterans' Concerns](#). Check this [recent Spectator coverage](#) for more on CPS resources and how they have grown steadily for many years. And [here](#) for more details on the services provided to the smaller graduate student population at the Medical Center campus.

**But how can we try to ensure that students who need help can get help, especially in emergencies?** On the Morningside campus, Counseling and Psychological Services offers students several ways to connect about themselves or to seek help for concerns about a friend – including by phone and by dropping into to one of eight satellite offices at key points on campus.

CPS uses a carefully designed screening system to quickly identify students in crisis and provide urgent care by an experienced clinician. Undergraduate student life also has a wellness-check system in place so that anyone with concerns about a student can reach out and ask that a staff member check in. Each residence hall also has a trained, live-in adviser who is another easy-access source of help. At CUMC, Mental Health Services has specially tailored its services to best reach the graduate students on that campus, including with appointments that fit with the complex schedules of students doing hospital rotations.

**And how do students know about these resources?** Before arriving on campus, the Welcome to Columbia tutorial walks with students through what it means to be a member of the University community, making clear that seeking help can be an important part of thriving in school. Orientation programming reinforces this message, and the [University Life app](#) collects these and other resources – including 24/7 contact information – so that anyone can find a number to call at any time. Much more information is available directly from the CPS and Mental Health Services websites.

Undergraduate students also generously share [their own experiences](#) in Spectator opinion pieces that do invaluable work in raising awareness and destigmatizing getting help.

**What else have we been doing?** Students have been actively involved over many years, providing input and ideas about staffing, special-interest areas, and community engagement on mental health and wellness. Last spring, President Bollinger hosted a meeting with the student-run Mental Health Task Force, reiterating his commitment to the University’s work on these issues. And this year, the Office of University Life has been working closely with students on the Task Force to design an interactive workshop about reducing stress, accessing support and enhancing wellness within our community. This follows on another interactive, University-wide workshop last year, which focused on the question: “How can we be a community where all students thrive?”

Both counseling offices do regular, data-driven analysis of their work with students and feed that back into all they do. Experts in the field also consult with and provide training to staff in both offices.

**What about resources to support well-being?**

Columbia also provides a vast array of wellness activities on both campuses – [Alice! Health Promotion](#) on Morningside and the [Center for Student Wellness](#) at the Medical Center. On Morningside, Alice! Health has also offered Fun Day activities on campus in which hundreds of students have participated; for these and other efforts, Alice! received a National Residence Hall Honorary “Of the Month” Award. For more on Center for Student Wellness offerings, check [here](#).

Additionally, there are also wellness-focused staff within individual schools, including staff specifically dedicated to wellness for undergraduates within Columbia College and SEAS.

And there is an array of arts, fitness and other activities – some within schools and others University-wide – that invite students to reduce stress and have some fun. This year, for example, together with student health and wellness organizations, the Office of University Life introduced [Yoga Tuesdays](#) and cosponsored two arts events, including a papermaking workshop with veterans and the Big Draw with the School of the Arts.

**And research?**

Columbia Health continues a biennial population-level assessment, which started in 2005, and the American College Health Association- National College Health

Assessment (ACHA- NCHA) survey will be sent out this month. Robust participation will help us to continue to refine programs and services that meet student needs.

Also, a working group that brings experts on our faculty together with leaders of student mental health and wellness services has been meeting regularly since fall 2016 to integrate state-of-the art knowledge with what we are providing to students.

**But we need to do more.**

Even with everything just mentioned, we know that, for some students, serious mental health conditions or addiction interfere significantly with their ability to fully enjoy the benefits of their education. Although mental health experts make clear that it is just not possible to find and keep safe every vulnerable person in every situation, there are some specific, immediate steps we can and will take to strengthen awareness, knowledge and skills within our community and to do more to support a caring community. Many of these reflect the specific suggestions of members of the Mental Health Task Force and leaders of the University Senate's Student Affairs Committee:

***Starting this spring:***

1. Mental health week– Starting this spring, we will work, in collaboration with students, faculty and staff, to have a “mental health week” that brings attention to a range of mental health and wellness issues.
2. On-campus training – Also starting this spring, we will invite students and other community members to join training for developing the skills needed to identify potential crises and support friends and classmates in getting help. This will build on training all students already receive regarding bystander intervention. As part of this effort, Alice! Health Promotion has also been piloting a new program, called Friend2Friend. Voluntary training sessions will be open for registration after Spring Break. CUMC is also in the midst of rolling out specialized training focused on identifying and assisting students in distress.
3. Strengthening access to services – Although students already receive extensive information and use our services in large numbers, there is more we can do to strengthen ongoing communication. This includes: a) enhancing the message that goes to all students every semester about mental health warning signs and resources; b) evaluating and adjusting, as

needed, communication about emergency help services; c) enhancing information available on the web and elsewhere about how to access services; and d) creating an easy-to-access FAQ that addresses common student questions about appointments, insurance, the intake process, referrals and other issues.

4. Providing information about off-campus resources – Some students prefer to use resources outside of the University, including text and phone hotlines. We will make that information easy to find at Columbia.
5. Enhanced resources for non-academic events – Many schools, as well as the Office of University Life and other central offices, host frequent [non-academic events](#) that complement our rich academic environment. Recognizing the importance of these events, student government leaders have asked for additional resources and support for these kinds of community-building activities. Beginning this spring, the Office of University Life will develop a program to offer University Life grants to student organizations to help support additional cross-school opportunities for coming together as a community.

As these plans develop more fully, they will be shared with the entire student body.

***Additional analysis and action to begin this spring and continue into the 2017-18 academic year:***

6. Space: Undergraduates have long asked for additional comfortable spaces for socializing on campus both for the student body as a whole and for groups within the student body, including LGBTQ+ students and students of color. There have been spaces created in the past and other options studied over many years; the University will undertake a renewed effort, in collaboration with students and undergraduate student life staff, to see what additional steps can be taken in the short, medium and long term to address this continuing request. In addition, the University will examine the space available to students in undergraduate residences to evaluate opportunities for enhancement.
7. Resources for student communities: While additional resources have been added steadily to support specific student communities, including students of color, LGBTQ+ students, students with disabilities, veterans, and international students, the University will examine the ways in which existing resources and programs should be enhanced, in consultation with students and student

life staff and with analysis of Columbia-specific data as well as data from other leading colleges and universities.

8. Faculty and senior staff awareness and engagement: Students in the undergraduate community have also long asked for additional faculty and senior administrator engagement in non-academic aspects of student life. Students have also asked for greater faculty sensitivity to student mental health and to student stress more generally. We encourage the University Senate to consider exploring ways to engage faculty in this effort.
9. Additional student engagement: The Office of University Life, together with students, faculty and staff, will strengthen ongoing efforts to consider how best to create a spring semester community-citizenship initiative that can be effective throughout the University community.
10. Communications: In addition to short-term enhancements, the University will begin to develop a strengthened web and social media presence to support broader awareness of the mental health and community-supportive efforts described above.

To help move this work forward, the Office of University Life will, in collaboration with others, convene an advisory group of students, faculty and staff from around the University.

Suzanne B. Goldberg  
Executive Vice President for University Life