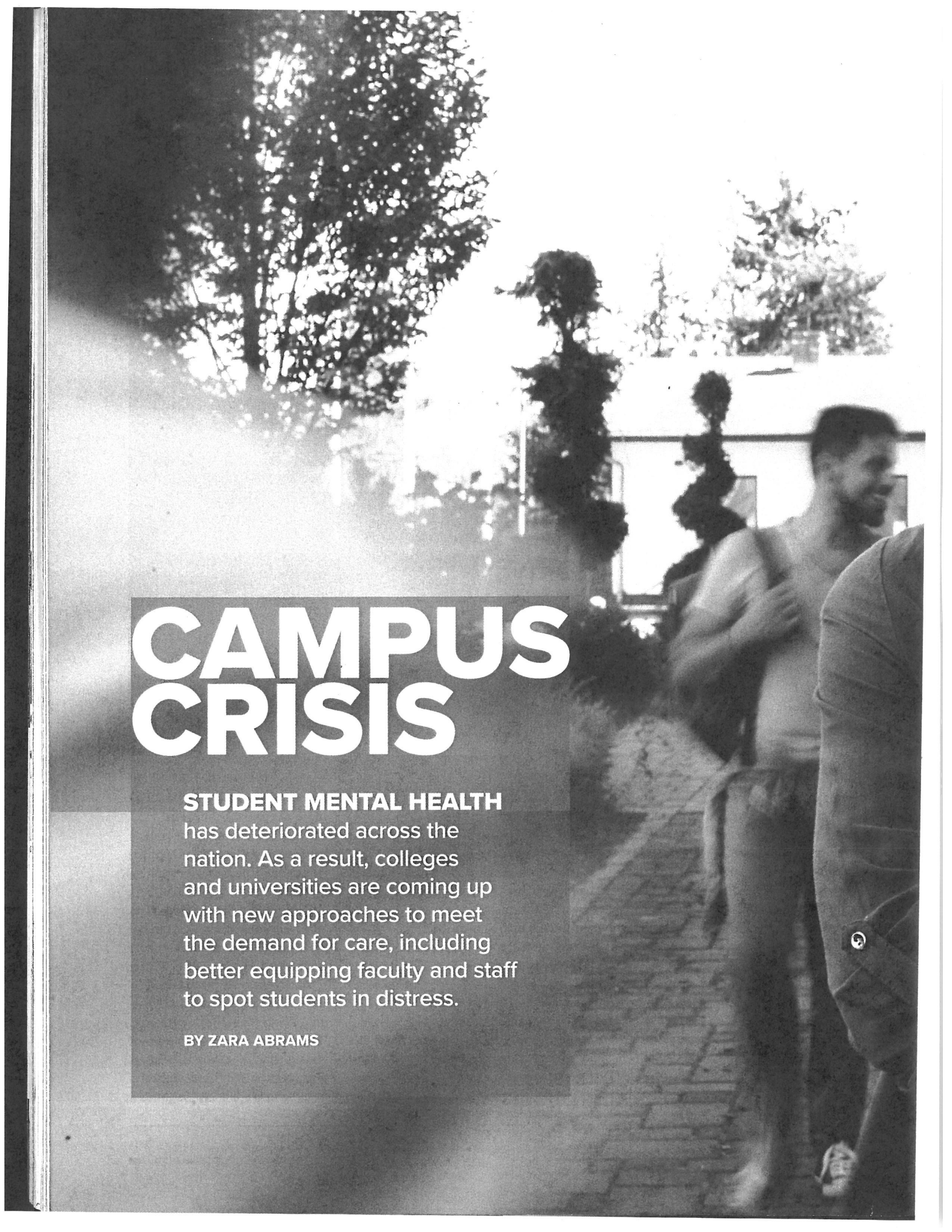
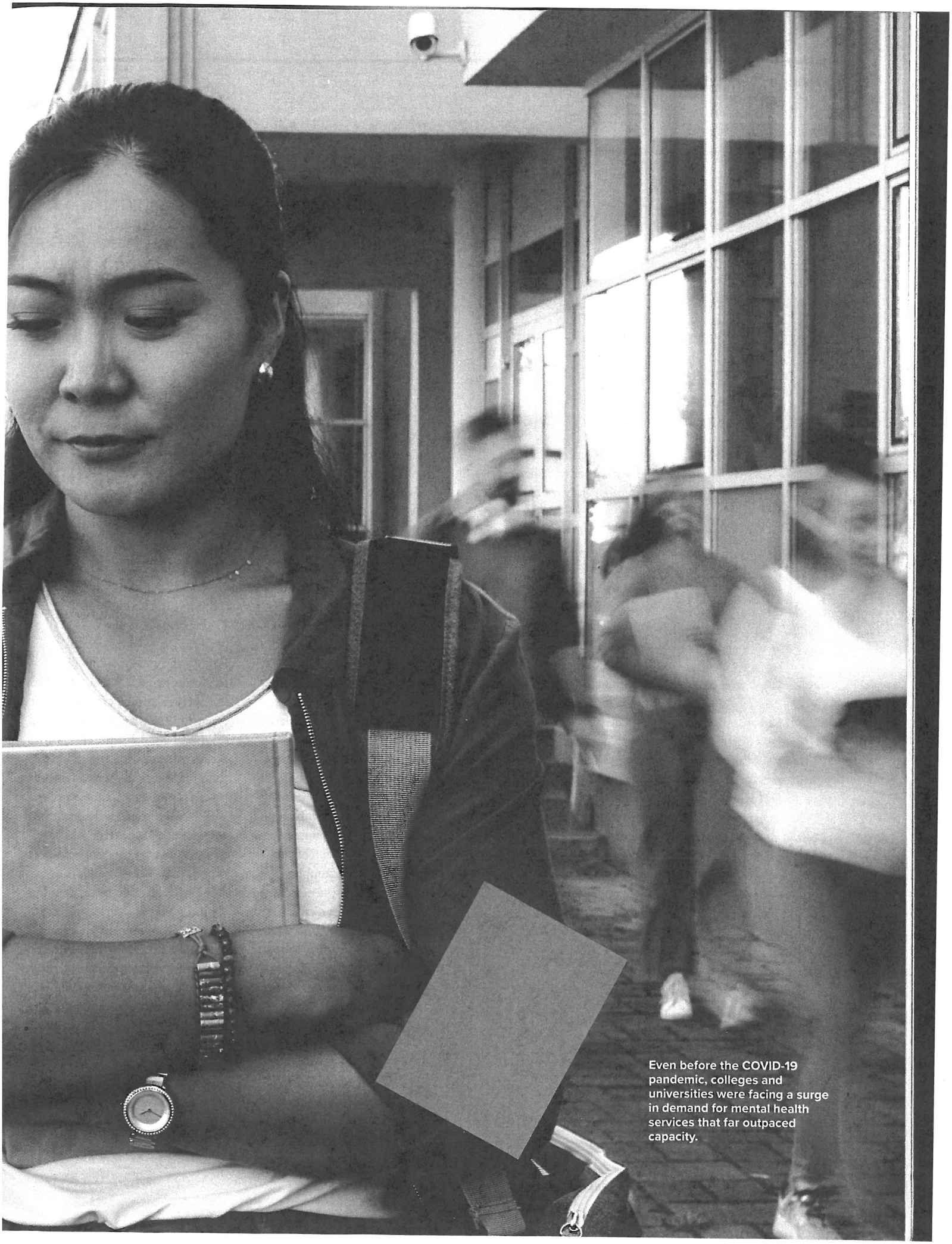


CAMPUS CRISIS

STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH has deteriorated across the nation. As a result, colleges and universities are coming up with new approaches to meet the demand for care, including better equipping faculty and staff to spot students in distress.

BY ZARA ABRAMS



Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges and universities were facing a surge in demand for mental health services that far outpaced capacity.

By nearly every metric, student mental health is worsening. During the 2020–2021 school year, more than 60% of college students met the criteria for at least one mental health problem, according to the Healthy Minds Study, which collects data from 373 campuses nationwide (Lipson, S. K., et al., *Journal of Affective Disorders*, Vol. 306, 2022). In another national survey, almost three quarters of students reported moderate or severe psychological distress (*National College Health Assessment*, American College Health Association, 2021).

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were facing a surge in demand for care that far outpaced capacity, and it has become increasingly clear that the traditional counseling center model is ill-equipped to solve the problem.

"Counseling centers have seen extraordinary increases in demand over the past decade," said Michael Gerard Mason, PhD, associate dean of African American Affairs at the University of Virginia (UVA) and a longtime college counselor. "[At UVA], our counseling staff has almost tripled in size, but even if we continue hiring, I don't think we could ever staff our way out of this challenge."

Some of the reasons for that increase are positive. Compared with past generations, more students on campus today have accessed mental health treatment before college, suggesting that higher education is now an option for a larger segment of society, said Micky Sharma, PsyD, who directs student life's counseling and consultation service at The Ohio State University (OSU). Stigma around mental health issues also continues to drop, leading more people to seek help instead of suffering in silence.

But college students today are also juggling a dizzying array of challenges, from coursework, relationships, and adjustment to campus life to economic strain, social injustice, mass violence, and various forms of loss related to COVID-19.

As a result, school leaders are starting to think outside the box about how to help. Institutions across the country are embracing approaches such as group therapy, peer counseling, and telehealth. They're also better equipping faculty and staff to spot—and support—students in distress, and rethinking how to respond when a crisis occurs. And many schools are finding ways to incorporate a broader culture of wellness into their policies, systems, and day-to-day campus life.

"This increase in demand has challenged institutions to think holistically and take a multifaceted approach to supporting students," said Kevin Shollenberger, the vice provost for student health and well-being at Johns Hopkins University. "It really has to be everyone's responsibility at the university to create a culture of well-being."

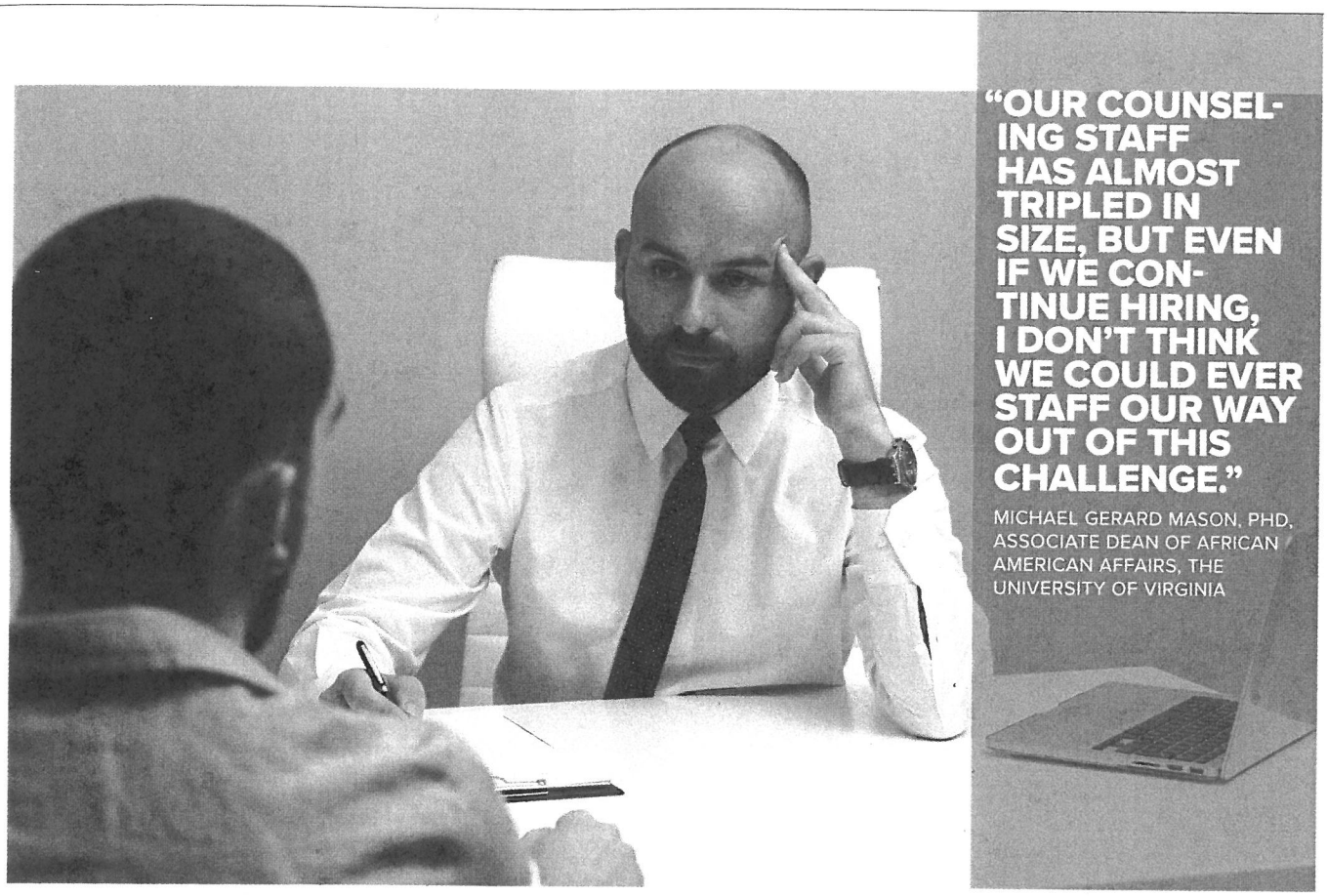
HIGHER CASELOADS, CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

The number of students seeking help at campus counseling centers increased almost 40% between 2009 and 2015 and continued to rise until the pandemic began, according to data from Penn State University's Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH), a research-practice network of more than 700 college and university counseling centers (*CCMH Annual Report*, 2015).

That rising demand hasn't been matched by a corresponding rise in funding, which has led to higher caseloads. Nationwide, the average annual caseload for a typical full-time college counselor is about 120 students, with some centers averaging more than 300 students per counselor (*CCMH Annual Report*, 2021).

"We find that high-caseload centers tend to provide less care to students experiencing a wide range of problems, including those with safety concerns and critical issues—such as suicidality and trauma—that are often prioritized by institutions," said psychologist Brett Scofield, PhD, executive director of CCMH.

To minimize students slipping through the cracks, schools are dedicating more resources to rapid access and assessment, where students can walk in for a same-day intake or single counseling session, rather than



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languish on a waitlist for weeks or months. Following an evaluation, many schools employ a stepped-care model, where the students who are most in need receive the most intensive care.

Given the wide range of concerns students are facing, experts say this approach makes more sense than offering traditional therapy to everyone.

"Early on, it was just about more, more, more clinicians," said counseling psychologist Carla McCowan, PhD, director of the counseling center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "In the past few years, more centers are thinking creatively about how to meet the demand. Not every student needs individual therapy, but many need opportunities to increase their resilience, build new skills, and connect with one another."

Many schools can't offer students unlimited weekly counseling sessions, so students who need a high level of care are often referred to a community provider.

Students who are struggling with academic demands, for instance, may benefit from workshops on stress, sleep, time management, and goal-setting. Those who are mourning the loss of a typical college experience because of the pandemic—or facing adjustment issues such as loneliness, low self-esteem, or interpersonal conflict—are good candidates for peer counseling. Meanwhile, students with more acute concerns, including disordered eating, trauma following a sexual assault, or depression, can still access one-on-one sessions with professional counselors.

As they move away from a sole reliance on individual therapy, schools are also working to shift the narrative about what mental health care on campus looks like. Scofield said it's crucial to manage expectations among students and their families, ideally shortly after (or even before) enrollment. For example, most counseling centers won't be able to offer unlimited weekly sessions throughout a student's college career—and those who require that level of support will likely be better served with a referral to a community provider.

"We really want to encourage institutions to be transparent about the services they can realistically provide based on the current staffing levels at a counseling center," Scofield said.



Faculty at many schools are learning how to better support students and show them they care about their mental health.

THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE

Faculty may be hired to teach, but schools are also starting to rely on them as "first responders" who can help identify students in distress, said psychologist Hideko Sera, PsyD, director of the Office of Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging at Morehouse College, a historically Black men's college in Atlanta. During the pandemic, that trend accelerated.

"Throughout the remote learning phase of the pandemic, faculty really became students' main points of contact with the university," said Bridgette Hard, PhD, an associate professor and director of undergraduate studies in psychology and neuroscience at Duke University. "It became more important than ever for faculty to be able to detect when a student might be struggling."

Many felt ill-equipped to do so, though, with some wondering if it was even in their scope of practice to approach students about their mental health without specialized training, Mason said.

Schools are using several approaches to clarify expectations of faculty and give them tools to help. About 900 faculty and staff at the University of North Carolina have received Mental Health First Aid training, which provides basic skills for supporting people with mental health and substance use issues. Other institutions are offering workshops and materials that teach faculty to "recognize, respond, and refer," including Penn State's Red Folder campaign.

Faculty are taught that a sudden change in behavior—including a drop in attendance, failure to submit assignments, or a disheveled appearance—may indicate that a student is struggling. Staff across campus, including athletic coaches and academic advisers, can also monitor students for signs of distress. (At Penn State, eating disorder referrals can even come from staff working in food service, said counseling psychologist Natalie Hernandez DePalma, PhD, senior director of the school's Counseling and Psychological Services.) Responding can be as simple as reaching out and

asking if everything is going OK.

Referral options vary but may include directing a student to a wellness seminar or calling the counseling center to make an appointment, which can help students access services that they may be less likely to seek on their own, Hernandez DePalma said. Many schools also offer reporting systems, such as DukeReach at Duke University, that allow anyone on campus to express concern about a student if they are unsure how to respond. Trained care providers can then follow up with a welfare check or offer other forms of support.

"Faculty aren't expected to be counselors, just to show a sense of care that they notice something might be going on, and to know where to refer students," Shollenberger said.

At Johns Hopkins, he and his team have also worked with faculty on ways to discuss difficult world events during class after hearing from students that it felt jarring when major incidents such as George Floyd's murder or the war in Ukraine went unacknowledged during class.

Many schools also support faculty by embedding counselors within academic units, where they are more visible to students and can develop cultural expertise (the needs of students studying engineering may differ somewhat from those in fine arts, for instance).

When it comes to course policy, even small changes can make a big difference for students, said Diana Brecher, PhD, a clinical psychologist and scholar-in-residence for positive psychology at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU), formerly Ryerson University. For example, instructors might allow students a 7-day window to submit assignments, giving them agency to coordinate with other coursework and obligations. Setting deadlines in the late afternoon or early evening, as opposed to at midnight, can also help promote student wellness.

At Moraine Valley Community College (MVCC) near Chicago, Shelita Shaw, an assistant professor of communications, devised new class policies and assignments when she noticed students struggling with mental health and motivation. Those included mental health days, mindful journaling, and a trip with family and friends to a Chicago landmark, such as Millennium Park or Navy Pier—where many MVCC students had never been.

Faculty in the psychology department may have a unique opportunity to leverage insights from their own discipline to improve student well-being. Hard, who teaches introductory psychology at Duke, weaves in messages about how students can apply research insights on emotion regulation, learning and memory, and a positive "stress mindset" to their lives (Crum, A. J., et al., *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 2017).

Along with her colleague Deena Kara Shaffer, PhD, Brecher co-created TMU's Thriving in Action curriculum, which is delivered through a 10-week in-person workshop series and via a for-credit elective course. The material is also freely available for students to explore online. The for-credit course includes lectures on gratitude, attention, healthy habits, and other topics informed by psychological research that are intended to set students up for success in studying, relationships, and campus life.

"We try to embed a healthy approach to studying in the way we teach the class," Brecher said. "For example, we shift activities every 20 minutes or so to help students sustain attention and stamina throughout the lesson."

CREATIVE APPROACHES TO SUPPORT

Given the crucial role of social connection in maintaining and restoring mental health, many schools have invested in group therapy. Groups can help students work through challenges such as social anxiety, eating disorders, sexual assault, racial trauma, grief and loss, chronic illness, and more—with the support of professional counselors and peers. Some cater to specific populations, including those who tend to engage less with traditional counseling services. At Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU), for example, the "Bold Eagles" support group welcomes men who are exploring their emotions and gender roles.

The widespread popularity of group therapy highlights the decrease in stigma around mental health services on college campuses, said Jon Brunner, PhD, the senior director of counseling and wellness services at FGCU. At smaller schools, creating peer support groups that feel anonymous may be more challenging, but providing clear

FURTHER READING

Overwhelmed: The real campus mental-health crisis and new models for well-being
The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2022

Mental health in college populations: A multidisciplinary review of what works, evidence gaps, and paths forward
Abelson, S., et al.
Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research, 2022

Student mental health status report: Struggles, stressors, supports
Ezarik, M.
Inside Higher Ed, 2022

Before heading to college, make a mental health checklist
Caron, C.
The New York Times, July 8, 2022

guidelines about group participation, including confidentiality, can help put students at ease, Brunner said.

Less formal groups, sometimes called "counselor chats," meet in public spaces around campus and can be especially helpful for reaching underserved groups—such as international students, first-generation college students, and students of color—who may be less likely to seek services at a counseling center. At Johns Hopkins, a thriving international student support group holds weekly meetings in a café next to the library. Counselors typically facilitate such meetings, often through partnerships with campus centers or groups that support specific populations, such as LGBTQ students or student athletes.

"It's important for students to see counselors out and about, engaging with the campus community," McCowan said. "Otherwise, you're only seeing the students who are comfortable coming in the door."

Peer counseling is another means of leveraging social connectedness to help students stay well. At UVA, Mason and his colleagues found that about 75% of students reached out to a peer first when they were in distress, while only about 11% contacted faculty, staff, or administrators.

"What we started to understand was that in many ways, the people who had the least capacity to provide a professional level of help were the ones most likely to provide it," he said.

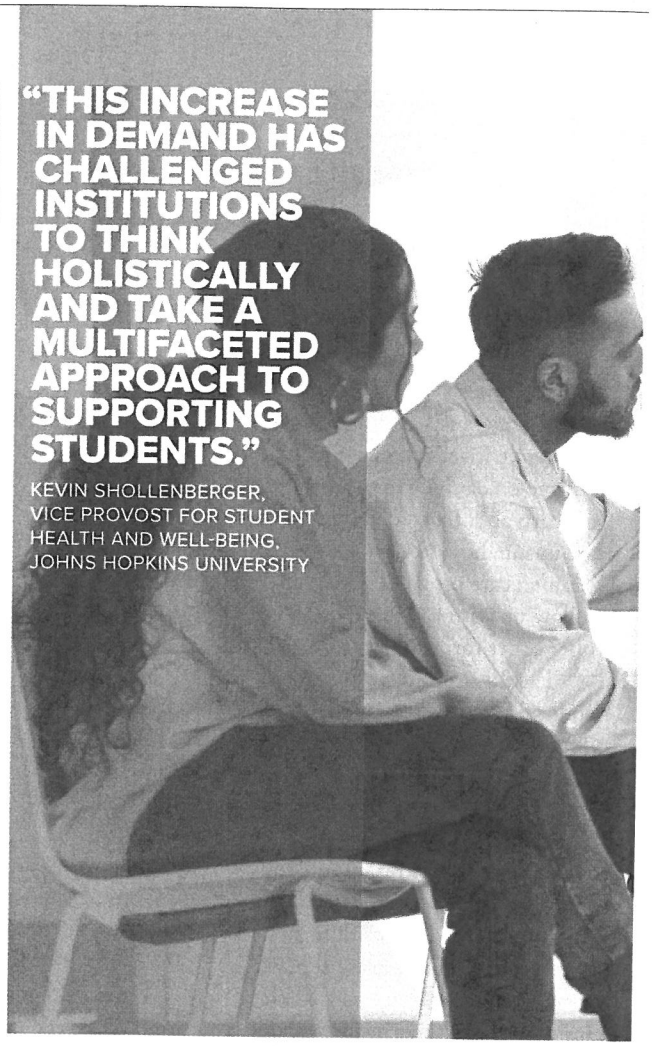
Project RISE, a peer counseling service created by and for Black students at UVA, was one antidote to this. Mason also helped launch a two-part course, "Hoos Helping Hoos," (a nod to UVA's unofficial nickname, the Wahoos), to train students across the university on empathy, mentoring, and active listening skills.

At Washington University in St. Louis, Uncle Joe's Peer Counseling and Resource Center offers confidential one-on-one sessions, in person and over the phone, to help fellow students manage anxiety, depression, academic stress, and other campus-life issues. Their peer counselors each receive more than 100 hours of training, including everything from basic counseling skills to handling suicidality.

Uncle Joe's codirectors, Colleen Avila and Ruchika Kamojjala, say the service is popular because it's run by students and doesn't require a long-term investment the way traditional psychotherapy does.

"We can form a connection, but it doesn't have to feel like a commitment," said Avila, a senior studying studio art and philosophy-neuroscience-psychology. "It's completely anonymous, one time per issue, and it's there whenever you feel like you need it."

As part of the shift toward rapid access, many schools also offer "Let's Talk" programs, which allow students to drop in for an informal one-on-one session with a counselor. Some also contract with telehealth platforms, such as WellTrack and SilverCloud, to ensure that services are available whenever students need them. A range of additional resources—including sleep seminars, stress management workshops, wellness coaching, and free subscriptions to Calm, Headspace, and other apps—are also becoming increasingly available to students.



Those approaches can address many student concerns, but institutions also need to be prepared to aid students during a mental health crisis, and some are rethinking how best to do so. Penn State offers a crisis line, available anytime, staffed with counselors ready to talk or deploy on an active rescue. Johns Hopkins is piloting a behavioral health crisis support program, similar to one used by the New York City



Police Department, that dispatches trained crisis clinicians alongside public safety officers to conduct wellness checks.

A CULTURE OF WELLNESS

With mental health resources no longer confined to the counseling center, schools need a way to connect students to a range of available services. At OSU, Sharma was part of a group of students, staff, and administrators who visited Apple Park in Cupertino, California, to develop the Ohio State: Wellness app.

Students can use the app to create their own "wellness plan"

Creating peer support groups that leverage social connectedness is another way schools are helping students stay well.

and access timely content, such as advice for managing stress during final exams. They can also connect with friends to share articles and set goals—for instance, challenging a friend to attend two yoga classes every week for a month. OSU's app had more than 240,000 users last year.

At Johns Hopkins, administrators are exploring how to adapt school policies and procedures to better support student wellness, Shollenberger said. For example, they adapted their leave policy—including how refunds, grades, and health insurance are handled—so that students can take time off with fewer barriers. The university also launched an educational campaign this fall to help international students navigate student health insurance plans after noticing below average use by that group.

Students are a key part of the effort to improve mental health care, including at the systemic level. At Morehouse College, Sera serves as the adviser for CHILL, a student-led advocacy and allyship organization that includes members from Spelman College and Clark Atlanta University, two other historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the area. The group, which received training on federal advocacy from APA's Advocacy Office earlier this year, aims to lobby public officials—including U.S. Senator Raphael Warnock, a Morehouse College alumnus—to increase mental health resources for students of color.

"This work is very aligned with the spirit of HBCUs, which are often the ones raising voices at the national level to advocate for the betterment of Black and Brown communities," Sera said.

Despite the creative approaches that students, faculty, staff, and administrators are employing, students continue to struggle, and most of those doing this work agree that more support is still urgently needed.

"The work we do is important, but it can also be exhausting," said Kamojjala, of Uncle Joe's peer counseling, which operates on a volunteer basis. "Students just need more support, and this work won't be sustainable in the long run if that doesn't arrive."