

Billboard

From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports & Call to Mind documentary.

More college students say they're struggling with depression and anxiety.

Valerie Janovic: I was very agitated and upset, and I was like (breathing) I was crying my eyes out. I was like, please, can I see someone?

Students want their colleges to offer more counseling.

Harry Fowler: Apparently there were no therapists or psychiatrists on call. So they're like, OK, well, we have to default to escorting you to the hospital.

Valerie Janovic: The school basically denied me any help at all.

Daniel Ford: Hey, I had a nightmare because, you know, my buddy died. What do I do? Do something other than give me a phone number.

Alexandra Mareello: This should be provided because we're paying so much money to come here.

But administrators say they're struggling to keep up with the demand.

Philip Glotzbach: Colleges, universities cannot be an environment where when you show up, you get a therapist.

Coming up, Under Pressure: The College Mental Health Crisis from APM. First... this news.

Part 1

Sasha Aslanian: From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports and Call to Mind documentary. And, a note to listeners, this program mentions suicide.

Harry Fowler was the kind of student Stanford University was looking for, competing in the National Chemistry Olympiad, winning races on the varsity track and cross country teams and performing on the drum line.¹ Fowler also had depression. One morning in the first quarter at Stanford, in 2017, Fowler woke up thinking about suicide.

Harry Fowler: That day is probably the most chaotic day of my life.

Sasha Aslanian: Fowler--who uses the pronoun they--got through the day with friends checking in on them. That evening, Harry told the RA what was going on, and the RA called the mental health center on campus.

Harry Fowler: It was late at night, I think it was like 10 p.m. And apparently there were no therapists or psychiatrists on call. So they're like, "OK, well, we have to default to escorting you to the hospital."

Sasha Aslanian: Fowler followed the RA out of the dorm to wait for the escort. Two campus police officers showed up. It was standard procedure for the university.² But for Fowler, who's Black, it was frightening.

Harry Fowler: I texted some friends, like, "Hey, there are police, you know, outside, like, interrogating me. Come outside, so they don't try anything sketchy." Because, of course, with the history of police brutality on Black men, it's pretty,

¹ <https://www.beaumontenterprise.com/news/article/West-Brook-alum-found-strength-in-fight-for-14515569.php>

² <https://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/news/5150-holds>

like it's pretty well-documented. And, gives, I don't know, it was giving me a sense of fear.

Sasha Aslanian: Fowler's friends came outside. A small crowd of people gathered.

Fowler decided not to go to the hospital. But now, there was no choice. More officers showed up.

Harry Fowler: To my surprise, they're starting to circle around me so that I can't walk away. And it's just, it's like, "OK, fine whatever. I'll go ahead and like let, because there's no way I'm gonna get out of this situation, right? Y'all have basically decided that this is going to happen."

Sasha Aslanian: Police handcuffed Fowler and put them in the back of the squad car. That was standard policy too: Anyone they transported had to be in cuffs. They brought Fowler to Stanford Hospital. Fowler was admitted for an involuntary hold. That's when a person is hospitalized against their will for psychiatric evaluation. Fowler tried to explain that a new antidepressant was making the symptoms worse, not better. That can be a side effect of some antidepressants. Fowler wanted help getting on the right medication.

Fowler was held for a week, and during that time, an assistant dean came to visit.

Harry Fowler: The same resident dean I'd been checking in with every week, comes in and tells me like, "Yeah, you're probably going to have to take a year off." I'm like, what? Like, a year off? Like, really? Just like, "No, that cannot happen. I cannot go back home."

Sasha Aslanian: Fowler signed the paperwork to take a voluntary leave³. But Fowler didn't understand it was voluntary. It seemed like signing it was the only way to get out of the hospital.

Fowler's mom flew in from Texas. She packed up the dorm room and they returned home to Beaumont.

³ Old leave policy in effect then:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170911034356/https://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/policies/deans-leave-absence>

Harry Fowler: It made me feel like a failure. I didn't know if I was going to stay in college. I thought I might drop out.

Sasha Aslanian: Harry Fowler believes this wasn't how the university should have handled a student in crisis, but Stanford isn't the only school that asks students having trouble like Harry Fowler's to leave. Colleges have to decide what they're going to do when they have a student with a serious mental health crisis, or more run of the mill problems.

And they're dealing with more of those. A national survey of college students in 2020 found nearly 40 percent experienced depression. One in three had anxiety, and one in seven reported they'd thought about suicide in the past year.⁴ The pandemic has called more attention to mental health, but among college students, those numbers have been climbing for decades.

I'm Sasha Aslanian.

This is *Under Pressure: The College Mental Health Crisis*. For this hour, APM Reports teamed up with Call to Mind, APM's mental health reporting initiative, to see how schools are reacting to more students struggling with their mental health. Here's Call to Mind's Alisa Roth.

Alisa Roth: Nobody's really sure why so many more students are having a hard time with their mental health these days. It may be that something has changed in the lives of young people. And it may also be that there's less stigma. It's more OK to talk about mental health, and so students are more willing to ask for help.

Sasha Aslanian: And they're doing that. Here's just one example: At the University of Richmond enrollment has been flat for the past 15 years or so. But the number of students seeking help at campus counseling services has doubled.

⁴ <https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/HMS-Fall-2020-National-Data-Report.pdf>

Alisa Roth: Brown University reported that the number of students who sought counseling went up 60 percent in the decade between 2008 and 2018, meaning that by 2018, a quarter of all students were getting mental health care on campus. And that was *before* the pandemic hit.

Sasha Aslanian: It's a similar situation at other schools around the country. In an annual survey released in 2019, almost 90 percent of campus counseling directors reported that demand for their services had gone up in the previous year.⁵

Alisa Roth: Schools are trying to figure out how far a college's obligations extend. Or if worrying about students' mental health is even the school's job.

But it's not a problem they can afford to ignore. Poor mental health can lead to students dropping out.⁶ And schools worry about liability when things go wrong.⁷ College presidents report student mental health as one of their top concerns.⁸

But offering mental health care is expensive for schools. Last year, for example, the University of California system added \$5.3 million to its budget to improve student mental health programs.⁹

Sasha Aslanian: Ohio State budgets about \$90 a student for counseling services. And increased demand has driven costs up significantly: Between 2016 and 2018, the counseling budget went up by a third, from less than \$4 million to almost five-and-a-half million.

Unfortunately for students like Harry Fowler, some colleges' strategy is to try to tamp down possible threats: students who might hurt themselves or somebody else.

But asking students like Harry Fowler to leave comes with its own set of problems.

⁵ <https://www.aucccd.org/assets/documents/Survey/2019%20AUCCCD%20Survey-2020-05-31-PUBLIC.pdf>

⁶ https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/HMN_RB_1.pdf

⁷ <https://universitybusiness.com/quote-jarring-bu-professor-notes-major-depression-in-students-in-study/>

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/12/15/series-ace-president-surveys-shows-mental-and-financial-health-concerns#:~:text=The%20proportion%20of%20college%20presidents,greatest%20concerns%20throughout%20the%20pandemic.>

⁹ <http://www.ebudget.ca.gov/2019-20/pdf/Enacted/GovernorsBudget/6000.pdf>

Sasha Aslanian: Harry Fowler went back home to Beaumont, Texas, after Stanford put them on leave.

In their racially divided town, Fowler felt they'd failed the Black community that had been so proud of them.

Harry Fowler: I was supposed to be kind of like a representative of that community. I saw myself as like a beacon of hope and I had just fallen apart because of my mental illness. Like, it didn't work out.

And when it came to caring for their mental health, Fowler went back to handling it the way they had since middle school: they just gutted it out on their own. Fowler went off the antidepressant that they blamed for causing so much trouble.

Harry Fowler: I just started to, you know, isolate myself. I just stayed in my room all day and studied. That's just how I kept my mind off. I just studied calculus.

Sasha Aslanian: One of the conditions for being readmitted to Stanford was to write a personal statement discussing why their behaviors were of concern, and what led to the suicidal thoughts and what changes they would make.

Harry Fowler: The letter I wrote was an admission of guilt.... It took me a minute to write because I kind of just had to suck it up and get back into the school.

Sasha Aslanian: Fowler had one other friend who'd also been placed on leave, and they thought they were the only ones.

Fowler didn't know that while they were away, something was brewing on campus. Students were about to challenge the university's leave policy for students in a mental health crisis.

Two of the student leaders pushing for changes were Kane Zha and Molly Irvin. They'd gotten interested in mental health their first year at Stanford when they'd

trained as peer counselors. They took phone calls at The Bridge, an anonymous helpline on campus staffed by students. This is Molly Irvin.

Molly Irvin: I often felt in over my head, just because the magnitude of people's stress or people's illness was so great. I mean, I remember my first month of counseling at The Bridge, I had three suicide calls.

Sasha Aslanian: Irvin could refer callers to get professional help from Stanford's Counseling and Psychological Services. But sometimes students told her they didn't want to let anyone at the university know they were in crisis.

Kane Zha ran into that too.

Kane Zha: There's a limit to how much you should share with the university, because, like, it's possible that that could lead to you being placed on a leave of absence.

Sasha Aslanian: By the time they were sophomores, Zha and Irvin had dealt with a lot of these calls. They wanted to do something beyond helping individuals. They wanted to do something bigger. They wanted to change the landscape of mental health.

Across San Francisco Bay, in Berkeley, attorneys at Disability Rights Advocates had been monitoring what was happening with student mental health on college campuses. Stuart Seaborn is one of the attorneys.

Stuart Seaborn: We were shocked at how ... either bad or nonexistent some of the policies were when it came to accommodating students with mental illness.

Seaborn explains that students with mental illness are protected from discrimination by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Stuart Seaborn: Colleges are required to treat mental health disabilities, just as they would any other disability or health condition, and they must accommodate or

attempt to accommodate the impact or the effects of those disabilities to the extent they can.

Sasha Aslanian: That could mean changing a student's housing, or reducing their course load, or extending deadlines on assignments.

Stuart Seaborn: And only if they cannot ... if they've kind of exhausted all possible accommodations, can they take steps to remove a student or require a student to go on something like a leave of absence.

Sasha Aslanian: Of course, in emergency situations if someone is a threat to themselves or others, colleges are within their rights to protect their campus communities.

The attorneys talked with students all over the country and found involuntary leaves weren't all that unusual, but they settled on Stanford as the place to file a civil rights case for students with mental illness.

In May of 2018, they sued Stanford University.¹⁰ They sought to put an end to what they called "Stanford University's punitive, illegal, and discriminatory treatment of students with mental health disabilities."¹¹

Stanford wasn't the first school to get sued for this kind of response to a mental health crisis. In a case that was watched by schools around the country, a student named Jordan Nott filed a suit against George Washington University in 2005.¹² Nott checked himself into the hospital because he was thinking about suicide and the university forced him to take a leave of absence. The case was settled for an undisclosed amount the following year.

¹⁰

<https://dralegal.org/press/stanford-university-systematically-violates-the-rights-of-students-with-mental-health-disabilities/> (links to PDF of original complaint)

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<https://dralegal.org/press/stanford-university-systematically-violates-the-rights-of-students-with-mental-health-disabilities/> (links to PDF of original complaint)

¹² <https://thelawofficeofkarenbower.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/p-1stamcomplaint-not1.pdf>

Yet colleges continued the practice. Seaborn says too often colleges rush to get a student off campus, without exhausting all possible accommodations. Or in some cases, without considering any accommodations.

Stuart Seaborn: I would describe it in two ways: fear in terms of liability, but also a punitive reaction that the students felt like they were being punished for something that was really a symptom of their disability.

Sasha Aslanian: In the lawsuit they brought against Stanford, three students were listed by pseudonym, and a fourth plaintiff was Stanford's Mental Health and Wellness Coalition, led by Molly Irvin and Kane Zha.¹³

The courts were a new venue for activism for both of them. Zha was inspired by students who'd shut down traffic on the Bay Bridge for Black Lives Matter a few years before.

Kane Zha: So I was kind of like, you know, compared to that, like, I think I can do this, like, this is not, this does not seem as scary as, like, trying to stop traffic, like, you know, on a major highway, like, with my body.

Filing a lawsuit did make Irvin nervous.

Molly Irvin: I do remember calling my mom one day as things are becoming more public and I was like, "Um, please don't freak out. I think I'm suing Stanford but (laughs)."

Sasha Aslanian; An underground campus newspaper broke the news of the lawsuit.¹⁴

Harry Fowler, who was back home in Beaumont, read about it online.

¹³

<https://dralegal.org/press/stanford-university-systematically-violates-the-rights-of-students-with-mental-health-disabilities/> (links to PDF of original complaint)

¹⁴ <https://us9.campaign-archive.com/?e=&u=c9d7a555374df02a66219b578&id=aea26ac1f9>

Harry Fowler: My curiosity was piqued because up to this point, I thought, you know, Oh, I shouldn't have been depressed. I put a lot of blame, and just guilt, on myself. I didn't know at that time that the leave of absence I had taken was voluntary. (laughs)

Sasha Aslanian: The lawsuit accused the university of pressuring students into taking leaves, and requiring immediate withdrawal from housing, classes, and programs, without giving students an individualized evaluation of what a reasonable accommodation might be.¹⁵

Fowler was intrigued.

Harry Fowler: And I sent a little letter. I'm like, "Oh, thank you all for what you all are doing." I had no intentions of joining the lawsuit, I was just like, "Oh, I appreciate y'all." And they're like, "Actually, we like you. Do you want to join?"

Sasha Aslanian: Fowler agreed to join the lawsuit.

After nearly a year-and-a-half of negotiations, Stanford University and Disability Rights Advocates announced a settlement.^{16 17}

Stanford declined to make anyone available for this program. In an email to students about the settlement, Stanford's vice provost announced a new leave policy.

It includes the word "accommodation" 19 times.¹⁸ The old one didn't even mention it.¹⁹ A student going through a leave process is now connected with a staff person who will help guide them through it.²⁰ And there's a two-day revocation period, so

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<https://dralegal.org/press/stanford-university-systematically-violates-the-rights-of-students-with-mental-health-disabilities/> (PDF of original complaint)

¹⁶ <https://dralegal.org/case/mental-health-wellness-coalition-v-stanford/>

¹⁷ <https://dralegal.org/press/stanford-and-students-with-mental-health-disabilities-reach-landmark-settlement/>

¹⁸ <https://stanford.app.box.com/v/involuntary-leave-of-absence>

¹⁹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20180723195036/https://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/policies/deans-leave-absence>

²⁰ <https://stanford.app.box.com/v/involuntary-leave-of-absence>

they can change their minds.²¹ But it's Seaborn's hope that fewer students will need to take leaves.

Stuart Seaborn: The school works with their office of accessible education and the student themselves to see if there's some sort of plan or accommodation they could come up with to keep the student on campus.

Sasha Aslanian: Which is exactly what Harry Fowler had wished for.

Harry Fowler: I think the best option for me was to stay in school and have a more personalized treatment plan ... individualized therapy, listening to suggestions I had, having it become more of a discussion. So much of it is about communication.

Sasha Aslanian: Stanford also later changed its policy on transporting students in a mental health crisis. They're no longer handcuffed and taken by police. Instead, they go with paramedics.²²

Before the settlement was even reached, Fowler returned to campus and started freshman year over again. Fowler refers to the semester they got sent home as their "pre-freshman year." And despite the changes Stanford has made, Fowler won't use campus resources for mental health ever again. Fowler lost trust in the system.

For the attorneys who brought the mental health disability rights case, improving the situation for Stanford students was just part of their goal. The bigger win would be how it would ripple through the higher ed system, putting universities on notice that students with a mental health disability are entitled to accommodation, and Stanford's leave policy could serve as a national model.

Alisa Roth: So colleges have to provide reasonable accommodation -- or support -- to a student with a mental health disability The question is how much mental health care a campus has to provide to all its students. Twenty-four/seven access?

²¹ <https://dralegal.org/case/mental-health-wellness-coalition-v-stanford/> (settlement agreement PDF page 3)

²² <https://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/news/5150-holds>

Unlimited counseling sessions? Support animals? It's a practical question and a moral one and students and administrators don't always answer the same way.

The day I talked to Alexandra Marello, she was at her parents' apartment where she's been living. It being New York City, we got interrupted a lot by noise from outside.

Alexandra Marello: Sorry if you hear the sirens. Um, this is the same sound while I sleep. I'm like, it just doesn't end. It's constant.

Alisa Roth: It's not the sort of thing you like to hear, especially if you've been dealing with anxiety. And Marello has felt anxious for as long as she can remember.

Alexandra Marello: I was kind of born with anxiety. (laughs) When I was a kid, it started off with having really horrible stomach aches and just thinking I was going to throw up all the time.

Alisa Roth: She says for a long time, she and her family just didn't realize it was anxiety. She did briefly see a therapist when she was in high school, but that was the extent of it. Then she went off to Skidmore College and started feeling worse.

She was in a dance class there when she had her first panic attack.

Alexandra Marello: Something about the class that made me really nervous because I was with upperclassmen. ... They made me feel uncomfortable, naturally, and I started, um, getting a lot of anxiety to go to class. I didn't want to go.

Alisa Roth: And then one day, it's the middle of class. And ...

Alexandra Marello: My face went really red. And I started, uh, feeling shaky and faint.

Alisa Roth: And she was hyper-ventilating, so she left class. She was crying. She called her dad, who told her to go to the counseling center.

Alexandra Marello: And at this point, you know, I was very agitated and upset, and I was like [makes sobbing sounds] and I was crying my eyes out. And I was like, "Please, can I see someone? There's something wrong with me."

Alisa Roth: And the receptionist asked her ...

Alexandra Marello: "Do you have an appointment?"

"No, I don't have an appointment."

Alisa Roth: And the woman asked ...

Alexandra Marello: "Do you feel like killing yourself? Are you suicidal?"

Alisa Roth: And when Marello said no ...

Alexandra Marello: She's like, "I'm sorry, we can't take you."

Alisa Roth: So now Marello is having a panic attack and she's mad.

Alexandra Marello: We didn't make an appointment ahead of time for our panic attack, so we couldn't go in.

Alisa Roth: The counseling center did offer to connect her to therapists in town, but her family couldn't afford the therapy. Marello thinks the school should have offered it.

Alexandra Marello: This should be provided because we're paying so much money to come here.

Alisa Roth: Marello isn't the only one who feels this way. From small liberal arts colleges like Skidmore to big public universities like Ohio State, students say they need mental health care and they expect to get it from their schools.

When Joan Gabel was interviewing for the job of president at the University of Minnesota in 2018, she visited all five campuses. And at every one, student leaders told her the top thing they needed was mental health support. She says colleges have an obligation to provide that support to students.

Joan Gabel: If they can't learn, if they can't do what they need to do in order to be successful, in order to partake of everything it is we're doing and thinking about on their behalf because they're experiencing a mental health challenge, then none of the rest of it matters.

Alisa Roth: But how to do it is a huge question.

Joan Gabel: So do we mean help in the clinical care sense? Do we mean help in the non-clinical care sense, because not everybody needs to see a clinician?

Alisa Roth: In other words, does a school need to provide individual therapy to all its students? Or can it offer group therapy or yoga classes or other wellness programs?

It's all part of a much larger question of how much help is enough and how much schools are obliged to provide. When Alexandra Mareello had a panic attack at Skidmore, the president of the college was struggling with that very question. Philip Glotzbach is retired now. But he says during his 17 years at Skidmore, he heard from students and parents who were asking for more and more services, which puts what he calls a "new level of demand" on schools.

Philip Glotzbach: The first manifestation of that is a demand for more staffing. We need more people in there, we need to have more appointments, and so on and so on.

Alisa Roth: The American Institutes for Research is an organization that does social science research. It recently reported that one of the places college spending went up the fastest in the last decade was student services, which includes things

like counseling and mental health centers.²³ Part of the challenge for schools is that it's not just students who are feeling, say, suicidal who are asking for help. Plenty of them are like Marelo: they're sad or anxious or overwhelmed. They may even have gotten treatment for their mental health before. But their concerns don't rise to the level of thinking about hurting themselves or serious diseases like bipolar disorder or schizophrenia.

Glotzbach says schools clearly need to address the issue. Helping students is obviously the right thing to do. And students who have a hard time with their mental health are more likely to drop out, which is bad for the schools and bad for the students.²⁴

The challenge, says Glotzbach, is it can be hard for schools to keep up because the demand is so great.

Philip Glotzbach: And my metaphor for this is that it's like freeways in Los Angeles. The freeway's clogged, so you add a lane. Well, two weeks later, that lane is clogged as well, and so you add another one. I mean, you can't build your way out of the problem.

Alisa Roth: It comes back to the question of how much mental healthcare should schools be providing and what it should look like.

Several people, including at Skidmore, explained it to me with an analogy about physical health care. Schools have campus health centers that are set up to offer basic care, like giving flu shots or deciding if a bellyache is just what happens when you eat too much pizza.

But if that bellyache turns out to be appendicitis, nobody expects -- or wants -- the campus health center to take out the infected appendix. Instead, the health center would send the student to the local hospital.

²³ <https://www.air.org/system/files/downloads/report/Delta-Cost-Trends-in-College%20Spending-January-2016.pdf>

²⁴ https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/HMN_RB_1.pdf

Schools are increasingly worried they're being asked to take on the mental health equivalent of an appendectomy.

Skidmore used to offer unlimited therapy appointments to students, kind of like a regular off-campus clinic. Andy Demaree is the director of the counseling center at Skidmore.

Andy Demaree: What has become apparent is it's a challenge to try to deliver that effectively and see 600 people a year with a staff of five or six. It would take a staff ... probably three times larger than that to do that with any kind of consistency.

Alisa Roth: The year Marelo got to Skidmore was a tough one for the college. Two students had died that year.²⁵²⁶ Neither death had to do with mental health, but they were traumatizing, especially in such a small community. The counseling center was under renovation and the school knew it was short-staffed.

When Alexandra Marelo talked to her friends, she learned she wasn't the only one having trouble getting mental health care on campus.

Valerie Janovic was also a freshman at Skidmore, from Long Island. And one day in a music class, she met Marelo. They started talking and the subject of their mental health came up.

Janovic had been in a crisis. And just like Marelo, she went to the counseling center. When she walked in the door, the receptionist told her to make an appointment and come back in a few weeks to talk to somebody.

Valerie Janovic: And I thought that was unacceptable, because, you know, a few weeks is a long time to wait if you're going through something.

Alisa Roth: A few days after she tried to get in, Janovic was still feeling terrible. So one of her friends suggested she call the school's mental health hotline to see if she could get help sooner that way. And when somebody answered, she says ...

²⁵ <https://www.skidmore.edu/president/glottzbach/blog/2016/0320-death-of-a-student.php>

²⁶ <https://www.timesunion.com/local/article/Drive-who-killed-Skidmore-student-faces-prison-6925601.php>

Valerie Janovic: They asked me if I was suicidal, and I said I was not, and they hung up on me. Um, so I just, I felt very alone in that moment when I was reaching out and asking for help and the school basically denied me any help at all.

Alisa Roth: The school told me that it couldn't talk about a specific case, but that hanging up on a student would go against all the protocols of the school's emergency hotline.

When Janovic learned that other students were also having trouble getting the help they asked for, she decided to fight.

Valerie Janovic: I realized that something needed to be done.

She went to talk to the head of the Counseling Center.

Valerie Janovic: I don't remember how I got in touch. But I think it was easier to get an appointment with the head of the counseling center than with a counselor.

Alisa Roth: The head of counseling told her to talk to the dean of students, who told her to talk to the president.

She wrote President Glotzbach a letter, which she left with his secretary.

Valerie Janovic: I never heard back from him so I had reached a dead end. And that's when Alix and I decided to create a petition.²⁷

Alisa Roth: When I spoke to Glotzbach recently, he said he couldn't remember anymore if he'd gotten the letter from her. He said he is pleased that she took a stand to try to get more mental health care: When he spoke to freshmen, he says, he always encouraged them to find a cause on campus and he is glad that Janovic found one.

²⁷ <https://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/465/729/667/?z00m=27694344&redirectID=2021924294>

In the petition, she and Marello asked for three things. They asked the counseling center to hire another psychologist, which would bring the total to five clinicians including the center's director.

They asked for a crisis counselor for students who needed help on the spot.

And they asked for a 24-hour hotline for students who were in the middle of a crisis, even if it didn't reach the same level of urgency as wanting to hurt themselves.

They collected signatures on campus and online and got more than 50,000 of them. (Skidmore only has about 2,500 students, so presumably not all those people were connected to the school.)

Then they held a protest on campus. In pictures from the local newspaper that day, there are about a dozen students standing on the green, holding signs that say things like, "Skidmore, don't wait until it's too late." and "Skidmore! We need better mental health care now."²⁸

After the protest, Janovic led the march back to the president's office. And this time, she says, she was invited in.

Philip Glotzbach: And we certainly listened to them.

Alisa Roth: Glotzbach says he told Janovic the school was in the process of hiring another counselor and was contracting with an outside company to offer a 24-hour crisis line.

But Glotzbach says schools simply can't provide everything students say they want.

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https://www.saratogian.com/news/skidmore-students-say-more-mental-health-resources-needed/article_a1d24216-c51c-51b0-b308-f792e250ad5c.html

Philip Glotzbach: Colleges and universities cannot be an environment where when you show up, you get a therapist. Again, we can provide resources that help a young person make that transition from late adolescence to early adulthood and more, more responsibility and more self-direction and self-regulation. I think that's got to be the model, and the overall framework. And so the resources that we provide need to be oriented toward that goal.

Alisa Roth: Different schools have taken different approaches to mental health care on campus. At both Skidmore and the University of Minnesota, individual counseling is limited to 8 and 10 sessions a year, respectively. But students are offered a range of group counseling and other options. And at Skidmore, and some other schools, students are encouraged to look for counselors in the community if they need more.

Other schools have taken different approaches. Brown University recently began offering half-hour appointments for students who feel they don't need a traditional full hour. The counseling center also holds several slots open for walk-ins and there's no cap on the number of counseling sessions a student can get. At the University of Texas at Austin, the school decides who gets counseling on campus based on the student's needs and his access to outside services. That means students who don't have health insurance get priority for campus services. And so do those with more serious mental health needs, since it's harder to find outside providers willing to treat those.

Valerie Janovic transferred out of Skidmore after her freshman year to Brandeis. (She says she didn't go to Brandeis because of the mental health services there, but she did find the atmosphere more sympathetic to mental health needs.) And Janovic calls the extra counselor and the 24-hour hotline Skidmore put in place a win.

Valerie Janovic: If you want to take an optimistic approach, then it's great they denied me therapy, because I was able to organize a rally and push the school to improve resources for other students. So, hopefully, I went through it so no one else will have to go through it again.

Alisa Roth: Her classmate, Alexandra Marello, ended up in the hospital after what she calls a nervous breakdown. When she came out, she still had to wait for an appointment at the counseling center, though she did eventually connect with a therapist on campus.

She says she found a new therapist after she graduated and these days she's feeling better.

Sasha Aslanian: You're listening to Under Pressure: The College Mental Health Crisis, a documentary from APM Reports and Call to Mind, APM's mental health reporting initiative.

Just ahead, some colleges are rethinking how academia contributes to students' mental distress.

April Fernandes: It felt palpable at times in the room, the level of stress. You would just see students visibly ... you know, kind of leaning or laying their head down on a desk and you're like, OK, this is not going well.

Sasha Aslanian: We have more about this story on our website – APM Reports-dot-org. You can also explore our archive of education documentaries. We have programs about the drop in the number of foreign students and the revenue they bring to American campuses and turmoil in the teaching profession.

Support for APM Reports comes from Lumina Foundation and the Spencer Foundation.

More in a moment. This is APM, American Public Media.

PART 2

Tobie Soumekh: Student Health Services is located here, so if you ever need to see a doctor or are feeling under the weather you can go right here.

Alisa Roth: From American Public Media, this is *Under Pressure: The College Mental Health Crisis*, a documentary from APM Reports and Call to Mind. I'm Alisa Roth.

Tobie Soumekh: The athletic center also has free pilates classes, yoga classes, sculpt, cycling...

Alisa Roth: On a campus visit, the tour guide might talk about the dining hall and dorms, maybe a fancy gym and climbing wall. And at some schools, mental health is part of the pitch.

At the University of Pennsylvania, tour guides are required to mention the mental health resources on campus.²⁹ The University of Chicago is happy to show off its new wellness center, where physical health, mental health and wellness services can be found under one roof in a modern building where specialists can help with everything from complicated problems like eating disorders to bureaucratic ones, like dealing with health insurance. But not all campuses are so well-equipped.

In 2020, one-fifth of community college presidents surveyed by the American Council on Education said their campuses didn't provide mental health services.³⁰ None at all.

The Virginia Community College System is like that. Some students there say it's not fair, and, like students at a lot of other schools, some of them pushed back. Sasha Aslanian has their story:

Sasha Aslanian: When Daniel Ford headed to college in 2015, he had already wrapped up one career. He spent nine years in the Marine Corps.

²⁹ <https://www.thedp.com/article/2017/12/kite-and-key-penn-tours-philadelphia-discussing-mental-health-upenn>

³⁰

<https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Senior-Leaders/College-and-University-Presidents-Respond-to-COVID-19-2020-Fall-Term-Part-Two.aspx>

Daniel Ford: Eight of those nine years I was out of the country almost entirely. I did infantry, I did intelligence. I worked at embassies. I went to Iraq, Pakistan, Israel. You know, all kinds of places. Africa, Europe, kind of all over.

Sasha Aslanian: After Ford got out of the Marines, he and his wife were living in Northern Virginia, just outside Washington D.C. He decided to use his G.I. Bill at a nearby college.

Video: Northern Virginia Community College is the largest institution of higher education in the Commonwealth of Virginia and the 14th-largest college or university in the nation."³¹

Sasha Aslanian: That's a fundraising video for Northern Virginia Community College, or NOVA. It shows the school is huge and diverse, with students from 150 countries. It has a lot of offerings, and it was geared to students like Ford.

Video: Approximately 15 percent of all NOVA students are active-duty military or veterans!³²

Sasha Aslanian: Ford had suffered some traumatic brain injury while he was deployed, so schoolwork could be a challenge. He was also dealing with trauma.

Daniel Ford: Some of it was, like, PTSD from combat. Some of it was, um, like, I had a buddy who committed suicide. I have a few actually, but one of them actually died in my arms while I was trying to, like, render first aid to him, and the system as a whole, like, didn't care. It was like suppress it ... and continue with the mission, basically.

Sasha Aslanian: Once the mission was over, and Ford was living in a suburban apartment with his wife, the memories he'd stuffed down sprang back in scary and unpredictable ways.

³¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0vCs9x398>

³² Ibid

Daniel Ford: I had a nightmare and my wife tried to, like, wake me up and I punched her in the face. Because I thought she was attacking me, because I had, I was having like a, like a flashback to when there was a dude attacking me. And I woke up and my wife had a bloody nose and I was, like, "OK, this, this is a problem. Like, I need help in the next 12 hours."

Ford had access to the VA because he was a veteran, but the appointments were booked months out. His wife found a social worker who volunteered her time through a program for veterans and their families. She was five minutes from campus, and she helped him. But Ford wondered about fellow students who didn't have access to the veterans' resources he did.

Daniel Ford: I noticed all of the students around me -- students I was trying to tutor and help with, and since I was like 10 years old than most of them, just trying to mentor them on, like, how life works -- they had nowhere to go. ... And kind of right around there is when I met Jessica, who was also facing this stuff and she was in the Navy ... and she sees these students suffering.

Jessica Bauer: I actually was studying for teacher education.

Sasha Aslanian: Like Daniel Ford, Jessica Bauer had gone through her own mental health struggles in young adulthood. She'd dealt with depression. And she started researching what kind of help was available to NOVA students.

Jessica Bauer: And I was like, what do they have for therapists or for counselors, and then I read that Virginia Community College does not.

Daniel Ford: And we're like, "OK, well why is that?" They said, "It's the policy." Started digging through finding the policies ... until we found it.

Sasha Aslanian: In the policy manual for the governance of Virginia Community Colleges, Policy 6.4 states Virginia Community Colleges "do not provide mental health services."³³

³³ <https://go.boarddocs.com/va/vccs/Board.nsf/goto?open&id=9RFDWF6D9E80>

That's for 219,000 students spread across forty campuses.³⁴ It's about half the students enrolled in public higher education in the Commonwealth of Virginia.³⁵

The reason for that goes back more than a decade.

News clips: A tragedy of monumental proportions. That's how the president of Virginia Tech described the horror that unfolded there. ... What is turning out to be the deadliest campus shooting in U.S. history. ... The full scope of what happened is still sinking in. So many dead. So many shots fired.

Sasha Aslanian: Seung-Hui Cho was a senior at Virginia Tech in 2007 when he shot and killed 32 people and himself.³⁶

Virginia lawmakers and the college administrators demanded new measures to try to stop such a thing from happening again. People with mental illness are much more likely to be victims of crimes than to perpetrate them. But one of Virginia Tech's responses to the shooting was to beef up mental health care. It nearly doubled the size of its counseling center from 33 people in 2010 to 56 today. But community colleges went in the opposite direction.

Jeff Kraus, the assistant vice chancellor for strategic communications for the Virginia Community College System, explains:

Jeff Kraus: After that incident occurred, we did a system-wide review of campus safety. ... When it came to this issue, what was quickly realized was that the resources simply did not exist to offer this in a meaningful way.

Sasha Aslanian: And the Virginia Community College System implemented Policy 6.4: Community colleges don't offer mental health care on campus.

³⁴ <https://www.vccs.edu/about/#statistics>

³⁵

<https://www.virginiamercury.com/2021/03/22/most-of-va-four-year-universities-didnt-see-a-drop-in-enrollment-during-the-pandemic-not-so-for-community-colleges/>

³⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/16/us/16cnd-shooting.html>

Jessica Bauer felt like it was an equity issue for some students to get mental health care and others not.

Jessica Bauer: OK, if I can't afford a four-year, I can't go there, I'm still learning. I'm still trying to get my degree. I'm still trying to do all this stuff. I still have the struggles, if not more, because it's a commuter school and you work or you're a parent or you have something else going on.

Sasha Aslanian: Community college students tend to be older and poorer, they're more likely to be first generation and people of color.³⁷ And they report more mental health problems than four-year students.³⁸ A national survey in 2016 by two academic research groups -- The Hope Lab and Healthy Minds -- found 49 percent of community college students reported at least one mental health condition. That's five points higher than four-year students. What really stuck out to the researchers were the high rates for young community college students: 56 percent of students under 25 reported a mental health problem, 10 points higher than their peers at four-year schools. And two-year students were more likely than four year students to report that their mental health affected their academics more than six days in the previous month.³⁹

Bauer wondered: Why prevent these students from getting help on campus?

I put Jessica Bauer's equity question to Van Wilson, the associate vice chancellor for student experience and strategic initiatives for the Virginia Community College System. He says equity is also about keeping college affordable.

Van Wilson: I know that universities charge a health service or student health services fee that's a part of their tuition and fee package. And that's something that we do not do not have. So, as we think about how one might provide that service, a part of that formula is how do you pass that cost along? And how would that impact access to post-secondary education?

³⁷ <https://www.ccdaily.com/2020/04/how-are-community-college-students-different/>

³⁸ https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Wisconsin_HOPE_Lab-Too_Distressed_To_Learn.pdf

³⁹ https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Wisconsin_HOPE_Lab-Too_Distressed_To_Learn.pdf (p. 10)

Sasha Aslanian: A year at a Virginia community college costs about \$4,600, about a third of what it costs to attend one of its four-year schools.⁴⁰ They run lean.

Jeff Kraus: And the fact of the matter is not a single person lives on a Virginia community college campus. We are entirely commuter-based.

That's Assistant Vice Chancellor Jeff Kraus again. He says the students who need help should get it in the communities they live in.

Pat Lunt: It sounds good, but I don't think it's the way to really help your students.

Sasha Aslanian: Pat Lunt retired from NOVA as a dean in 2012. She knows the community care argument well and she doesn't buy it.

Pat Lunt: They don't have time. I mean ... some of our students, I mean, they would work all night and be tired in the morning. You think they're going to go to the mental health center in the city of Alexandria and get on a waiting list so that they could get medication? That's not going to happen.

Sasha Aslanian: The options on campus are pretty minimal. They can call campus police. They could fill out an online report and get a referral, or, as of this year, they can look for a provider using a list on the college website, or scroll through a virtual self-care kit.^{41,42}

Daniel Ford and Jessica Bauer are scathing about the bare bones response.

Jessica Bauer: "I can't help you. Here's a phone number to call?" I mean, come on!

Daniel Ford: Never once got through, never once heard anything back.

⁴⁰ <https://www.schev.edu/index/tuition-aid/in-state-tuition-fees>

⁴¹ https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?NorthernVirginiaCC&layout_id=10

⁴² https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?NorthernVirginiaCC&layout_id=10

Sasha Aslanian: Ford and Bauer demanded more.

Daniel Ford: We wanted initial assessments and referrals. So if I came in, I was like, "Hey, I had a nightmare because, you know, my buddy died, what do I do?" And just do something other than give me a phone number.

In the fall of 2018, Bauer created a blog, printed some T-shirts that said, "Your Mental Health Matters" and launched the NOVA Mental Health Advocacy Group in between her classes.⁴³

Jessica Bauer: So I got balloons, I got lollipops, and I took my free time. And I asked my husband during the time, "Hey, can you please watch our daughter, so I can go ahead and go do this? This is important to me." So I spent about five hours in the cafeteria, just getting signatures.

Sasha Aslanian: In a week, she'd gathered hundreds of signatures.

They met with rounds of deans and community college presidents and pressed for answers.

Ford says the advice they got was to get lawmakers on their side.

Daniel Ford: So we were like, "OK, let's go meet our senators."

Sasha Aslanian: Ford and Bauer set up a GoFundMe and their professors chipped in for gas money and hotels so they could go down to Richmond to lobby.

After their meetings, Bauer and Ford were feeling momentum.

Daniel Ford: And we got on like the local news.

Video clip: None of the Commonwealth's community colleges have mental health services on campus so local students now are fighting for better treatment.⁴⁴

⁴³ <https://jcb277566.wixsite.com/mentalhealth/post/our-timeline-progress-updates>

⁴⁴ <https://wjla.com/news/local/nvcc-mental-health-services>

Jessica Bauer: We ended up on TV, and it was great that we were doing something to change our community.

Video clip: So she decided to fight for changes.

Jessica Bauer (on video clip): I didn't think it was really going to take off like that but I'm glad that it did.

Video clip: Briel got students and professors to sign a petition and even took their argument to leaders in Richmond.

Jessica Bauer: But over time, it started to slowly slow down. And teachers would ask us, "Hey, what's going on?" you know, and the teachers were super supportive. And we're like, "I don't, we don't know."

Sasha Aslanian: Bauer and Ford had come up against what felt like an immovable wall.

It was something Pat Lunt, the former dean, knew well. In 2009, two years after the Virginia Tech shootings, Lunt served on a task force commissioned by the Virginia Assembly to assess the state of mental health care on its college campuses. Lunt was the only person in the room from a community college campus⁴⁵.

Pat Lunt: We just went around and people said what they had at their schools, and I said, "Well, we don't have anything." And they're like, "You're kidding. You don't have, you don't?" "No, we don't." So that was very eye-opening, I think, I think, for them.

Sasha Aslanian: The final report presented to lawmakers in 2011 called the gap in mental health services to community college students "a serious problem" that "aggravates the already substantial disparities in educational achievement among people of color."

⁴⁵ http://www.campussuicidepreventionva.org/virginia_college_mental_health_study_2011.pdf

Pat Lunt: The report came out, and really nothing happened, nothing changed.

Sasha Aslanian: That was ten years ago. Lunt brought counselors to campus through a non-profit, but the effort ran out of money. She testified on behalf of a pilot project that would have used state funds, but that died after community colleges opposed it. Lunt knows they're leery of an unfunded mandate and mental health care costs money.

Pat Lunt: Somebody has to decide whether our students are worth that. And I thought they were.

Sasha Aslanian: Jessica Bauer graduated from NOVA in 2019 and moved to California.

Daniel Ford is just a few credits short on two associates degrees. He took time off during the pandemic to work because he doesn't like online classes.

Virginia's not alone in not providing mental health services to its community college students, but we couldn't find another state with a policy prohibiting it.

Alisa Roth: Community colleges didn't get any mental health care to help prevent another Virginia Tech. They did, however, get Threat Assessment Teams, which all public colleges in the Commonwealth are required to have, thanks to another statute passed in the wake of the shooting.

Threat Assessment Teams try to figure out who might hurt himself or other people before it happens. They scan students' social media accounts. They talk to professors and friends. If someone raises a red flag, people from various departments -- like campus police or the dean of students -- get together to discuss their concerns. Students may not even know they're on the watch list.

But nervous schools mean watchlists can get so long as to be effectively meaningless. At Virginia Tech, for example, there were 600 people on the list in 2019. Since 2012, there have never been fewer than 350.

And nobody knows for sure whether Threat Assessment Teams actually prevent dangerous incidents. I talked to Tony Haga, who's deputy chief of campus police at Virginia Tech, and asked him how he knows if threat assessment teams actually work. He gave me an answer I heard from lots of other people, too.

Tony Haga: You don't until it doesn't. You don't until you fail. So you have to assume that as long as nothing bad has occurred, that you're doing what you're supposed to be doing.

Alisa Roth: Not everybody is so convinced. Jillian Peterson is a criminology professor at Hamline University who's studied mass shootings.

Jillian Peterson: Unfortunately, we really don't know that they prevent mass shootings. And that gets to this problem of measuring prevention, which is just kind of a massive problem. It's hard to know when you intervene if you've stopped something from occurring, or if that wasn't going to occur in the first place. So we do a lot of things, especially when it comes to mass shootings, that we assume are preventing mass shootings, but it's impossible to know if they really have done it.

Alisa Roth: What we do know is that running Threat Assessment Teams costs money. NOVA spends \$12,000 a year for special software, plus staff time for the inter-disciplinary team.

So far this hour, we've talked a lot about what students want from schools. And parents want similar things, namely more mental health care on campus. In response to all those demands, many universities and colleges have been expanding their counseling centers, helping students get accommodations, and creating mental health wellness programs.

But what if at least part of the answer lies not in how the university is helping students deal with their mental health, but in how the university is part of the problem to begin with? Maybe schools are doing things they don't need to, things that aren't helping students learn, but are creating environments that are unnecessarily stressful.

It's an idea more and more places are looking into.

When April Fernandes was in her third year teaching in the sociology and anthropology department at North Carolina State University, she noticed something about her students.

April Fernandes: It felt palpable at times in the room, the level of stress. You would just see students visibly, just in their physical condition or the way they were sitting or, you know, kind of leaning on or laying their head down on a desk and you're like, "OK, this is not going well."

Alisa Roth: The students knew it, too. Marissa Personette is a graduate student in the department, studying how bystanders respond to sexual assaults on college campuses. She's also a cohort representative, which is kind of like a student council representative for her fellow grad students.

Marissa Personette: I was just noticing consistently a lot ofpeople talking about feeling anxious, stressed out, unable to complete certain milestones to the degree.

Alisa Roth: So the department and Personette decided to ask the students what was going on. Together, they both put together surveys; Personette organized focus groups. And what quickly became clear was that it was school that was making the students miserable. Personette wasn't surprised.

Marissa Personette: I worked myself like a dog my first and second semesters and had a really, really bad depressive episode after that because I just was not giving myself any time or space. ... If I wasn't working 24/7, I was gonna fall behind.

Alisa Roth: The department called in a counselor from the university's mental health center to see what she thought. Fernandes says the counselor told them the program was affecting students' mental health.

April Fernandes: She was very clear in saying, "I'm not the one who can tell you what to do about this, because of the fact that there are some things about your internal workings and processes that make it difficult for students to get through ... and be secure and feeling healthy at the end of it.

Alisa Roth: Nobody expects graduate school to be easy. But the sociology and anthropology department at NC State has long been known to be especially tough, with more course requirements than the university minimum and a qualifying exam midway through the program that's really really hard, which if you fail twice -- and people do fail it -- you're out of the program. Plus, most students only get five years of funding.⁴⁶

And this is on top of all the regular stress of grad school, things like trying to write a thesis and getting paid very little.

People started asking if all those tough requirements are actually necessary to turn out high-quality graduates. Like what would happen if the department changed the requirements?

A few years ago, the department started changing the qualifying exam. Students used to get two days to answer four long essay questions. The department decided to change the rules when it realized students were staying up for two days straight without sleeping to finish.

Now, students get 12 hours to do two questions. There's a mandatory break overnight. And then 12 more hours for two more questions.

It's still tough: One student told me about prepping a bunch of meals, for example, to not waste time making food. And some students and faculty members I talked to say the changes need to go beyond encouraging better sleep habits. This year, the department cut the number of courses that are required.

⁴⁶ <https://socant.chass.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2021/04/Sociology-Graduate-Manual.pdf> see pp 14-15

But Fernandes, the professor, says the test is still more stressful than it needs to be. She says making students answer four long essay questions in a short time isn't a good measure of whether the students are becoming good sociologists.

April Fernandes: It's just not in any way anything that, that kind of simulates the work that we do, nor the demands on our time.

Alisa Roth: But it takes time to change anything at a place as bureaucratic as a university. Steve McDonald is the graduate director for the department's Ph.D. program. He says it's hard to get 16 or 17 academics to agree on changes to something like the preliminary exams (or prelims as he calls them.)⁴⁷ He says it's partly because some of them have a sense that this is how graduate school is supposed to be.

Steve McDonald: Whenever we start to talk about these things, as a faculty, we think about the experiences that we had in graduate school, you know, "I had two prelim exams." Right? "You know, our graduate students only have one. Well, what are they complaining about?"

Alisa Roth: But McDonald says he sees real problems with that attitude. He says it's partly an equity issue: There are plenty of people who drop, or flunk, out of grad school because they don't have the resources they need to get through. And he worries that doing things because that's how they've always been done just perpetuates that unfairness.

He says the other problem, though, is the assumption that grad students are heading for tenured faculty positions at top research universities. Plenty of them will end up in other jobs at non-profits or in government, say, so the university should really be preparing them for that.

Marissa Personette, the graduate student, says professors should realize that healthier students are better for the department and better for the school.

⁴⁷ <https://smedonald.wordpress.ncsu.edu/>

Marissa Personette: What would be the benefits of your graduate students having more positive mental health outcomes? They could probably work with you a lot more, maybe boost your publications. They could get maybe better jobs, which would make your department look better.

Alisa Roth: Personette and her fellow students hope things will be better for future generations. Meanwhile, faculty members are still negotiating more changes to the big exam and discussing other ways they can make the program less stressful.

The idea that mental health is part of education is hardly new. I found a book written in 1942 about mental health in college. "How much responsibility should a university assume for the development of its students' emotional lives?" the authors ask. Their answer is unequivocal: "Our study suggests that no college can escape this burden if it wishes to fulfill its educational goals."

But how colleges handled that burden looked really different decades ago. In the past, students were more likely to run into an attitude of sink or swim. So, during freshman orientation, they might have been told something along the lines of: "Look to your left, look to your right. Only one of you will be here at the end of the year."

A student struggling with her mental health might have just slipped away and disappeared from campus. Or he might have suffered in silence, staying in his dorm room and failing classes, sometimes self-medicating with drugs or alcohol.

And that still happens to some students. But these days, more of them are asking for help. And they're not afraid to demand it in whatever ways they can if the schools don't step up. This new activism isn't going away and colleges know it.

They also know their campuses have changed dramatically since the 1940s: There are more students from more different backgrounds with greater needs and greater legal protections.

So colleges are struggling to figure out how to pick up this burden to decide what duty of care they owe to their students, what they can afford to do, and what they can afford to not do.

Sasha Aslanian: You've been listening to *Under Pressure: The College Mental Health Crisis*, a documentary from APM Reports and Call to Mind, APM's mental health reporting initiative. It was produced by me, Sasha Aslanian, and Alisa Roth, with research help from Alondra Sierra and Sabby Robinson. The editor is Catherine Winter. Digital editors: Andy Kruse and Dave Mann. Fact checker Betsy Towner-Levine. Music help from Liz Lyon. Mixing by Craig Thorson. The APM Reports team includes Alex Baumhardt, Will Callan, Chris Julin, Chris Peak and Emily Hanford. The Managing Director & Editor in Chief of APM Reports is Chris Worthington.

Under Pressure: The College Mental Health Crisis is one of three programs in our new season of education documentaries. You can get them all by subscribing to our podcast, Educate. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at contact-at-apmreports-dot-org. Or find us on Twitter at EducatePodcast. We're also on Facebook.

Support for this program comes from Lumina Foundation and the Spencer Foundation. This is APM, American Public Media.