Mental Health and Higher Education

Scenario

Before his injury, Anthony had been a nearly straight-A student. The quintessential student athlete, he was a standout on the tennis team and president of the student club in the school of business, with an eye toward law school after graduation. The torn ankle ligament sidelined him for a season, and just as he was getting back into form, the pandemic suspended tennis and sent everyone home. Anthony struggled to find a balance without tennis and without in-person contact with his instructors or other students.

He knew that, as someone with private space in his parents' house to participate in online learning, he was more fortunate than some students. But depression crept in, and he found himself drinking more often, sometimes taking pain medicine left from his injury. As Anthony's grades fell, he worried he was on a slippery slope, and feeling isolated only deepened his gloom. He thought if he told his parents, they would be disappointed in him.

He wasn't sure where to turn when something on the university website caught his eye, one of those notices that he'd seen before and ignored. It said, "Feeling anxious? Got the pandemic blues? It's not just you!" He followed the link and started to read about various resources available through the university. One took him to an anonymous self-assessment to evaluate mental well-being. His score didn't surprise him, but it was concerning. Other links offered suggestions for support services, some of which included Zoom meetings with other students and mental health professionals. Anthony wasn't ready to talk about his situation, but he found links to smartphone apps that would send automated notes reminding him to check in with himself, monitor and manage his sleep, read stories from others going through similar difficulty, and a range of other activities that got him thinking about mental and emotional training the same way he long understood physical training for sports. Over the weeks, he grew more comfortable thinking about his situation and even confided in some of his friends from school. More than once, his friends said they had been having some of the same struggles. Eventually Anthony was ready to talk to his parents and then started participating in some online video sessions with other students to share stories and support one another.

1 What is it?

Having long been a neglected—taboo, even—topic, mental health has become the subject of open, honest discussion. Even before the pandemic, rising awareness of the many dimensions of mental well-being was eroding our cultural uneasiness about it, enabling programs that give mental health the attention it deserves. This evolution in attitudes about mental health has been particularly evident on college campuses, often driven by students sharing personal stories about struggles and growth. Fallout from the pandemic thrust mental health into a broader, brighter spotlight, exposing long-standing sources of stress, anxiety, and depression and creating new ones. In these endeavors to grapple with mental health and wellness, information technology has a role to play, both in helping identify those at risk and in providing tools for people to help themselves and each other.

2 How does it work?

Higher education can help address mental health by exposing the sources of stress, anxiety, and depression; by developing programs that increase awareness about those issues; and by providing supports to those in need. On top of the usual stressors of college life, the pandemic added the challenges of emergency remote instruction, concerns about physical health, and social isolation, along with job losses, financial worries, and food and housing insecurity. Technology tools can correlate certain kinds of behavior with mental health problems, similar to how learning analytics searches for patterns that suggest academic difficulty. Changes in attendance and engagement, grades, and other data points constitute "technology breadcrumbs" that can be shared with students and faculty as potential signals of stress. Wearable devices can assess sleep patterns, breathing and heart rate, and physical activity. Online self-assessments offer a safe, private means to monitor one's well-being and can guide users to resources that teach mindfulness, healthy habits, and how to recognize mental health problems in others. Institutional staff might act on available information to reach out to students who might be in crisis and in need of an intervention. Mental health is shaped by a complex combination of factors, and effective wellness programs must be collaborative, spanning multiple units on campus working together to understand and attend to each individual's situation. IT, student affairs, academics, the library, health services, and other groups all have insight into who might be at risk for mental health concerns and how best to help those individuals.

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3 Who's doing it?

In response to a call to action from students, the University of Alabama at Birmingham developed an app called B Well that covers physical, emotional, and social well-being and helps users create a personalized self-care plan. The app links to resources that illustrate how practices such as physical activity, eating well, sleeping, and socializing all contribute to one's mental and emotional health. UAB also hosts "Mental Wellness Days" to raise awareness and help people talk about it, destigmatizing the topic. The University of Central Florida has long offered Therapy Assistance Online (TAO), a self-paced, commercial product that helps users work toward mental wellness. Several incidents at UCF prompted a deep look at how to proactively identify mental health problems, evaluating indicators such as attendance data and other LMS information as flags for problems. Along with the rest of the State University System of Florida, UCF (which also has a campus therapy dog) mandated Kognito simulation-based training for all employees, to help staff recognize and know how to deal with mental health issues. Many institutions maintain web pages with resources about mental health, such as this example from Middlebury College. The University of Michigan has a YouTube channel focused on mental health, and Colorado State University collaborated with Grit Digital Health to create YOU at College, an online tool that provides tips about recognizing mental health issues and where to seek help, which numerous other institutions have since deployed.

4 Why is it significant?

Mental health disorders often surface in the early adult years. The American Psychological Association reported that in 2018, one in three first-year students reported symptoms of a mental health disorder, with suicide as the second-leading cause of death among college-age people. Growing awareness exposes the toll that poor mental health takes on the entire academic community, and older students often also juggle work, childcare, and other responsibilities. Reflecting the digital divide, some groups of students are more prone than others to the stressors that undermine mental wellness, and some people, including males, students of color, and international students, are less likely to seek help with mental health issues. For those not comfortable with in-person mental health services, technology can offer an anonymous entry into support. Online tools can extend the reach and the scale of mental health services, often helping individuals identify and address problems before they escalate.

5 What are the downsides?

Any initiative that probes personal data looking for indications of individuals' well-being raises privacy concerns and ethi-

cal considerations. Services that guarantee anonymity provide no way to intervene when users are at risk of harming themselves or others. If a service is not anonymous, what obligation does an institution have to act on the information it obtains? What information do students need in order to make safe and good decisions for themselves? In some cases, science has been politicized, leading to uncertainty about how best to cultivate trust with the community being served. Mental health continues to carry a stigma for some people, and problems tend to be under-reported. Some believe their problems aren't bad enough to warrant help, and even among those who know they need help, some are simply unaware of the services that their institution provides. Mental-health training for faculty and other staff can present a challenge. Particularly during the pandemic, funding—for services and staff—can be an obstacle.

6 Where is it going?

Technology services can be valuable as a tool—not as a replacement for humans but as part of a system of data and expertise that creates a culture of gratitude and emotional intelligence. As we learn more about how best to support students and faculty, we see a coevolution of technology tools and personal awareness that balances the things we *can* do with technology with the things we *should* do. Emerging XR and AI technologies could come to play an important role in mental health. As higher education emerges from the pandemic, campus leaders will need to remember the lessons learned from this experience and understand what changes will persist so that the benefits can be sustained. The effects of the pandemic have been sobering and humbling for many people, and the empathy that develops from such situations is an important element in continuing to tear down the stigma surrounding mental health and be able to care for our whole selves.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Mental health is integral to one's ability to succeed academically, and, during the pandemic, issues of access and connectivity related to the digital divide have been significant sources of stress. The pandemic illustrated that for students without private spaces to learn, remote proctoring can be enormously stressful. Some of the technology solutions deployed during the pandemic created new obstacles for participation, and for some students, housing situation is correlated with connectivity problems. Students with disabilities face a different set of barriers, which create additional kinds of stress. Mental health issues are often difficult to recognize, however, and the stigma can discourage people from addressing them. To best support students and learning, colleges and universities must work to expose the sources and consequences of mental health disorders and find ways to address them.