



# Developing Memoranda of Understanding:

*A "How-To" Guide  
for Creating Formal Partnerships with  
Local Mental Health Providers*



**Mental Health Improvement  
through Community Colleges**



**The Hope Center**  
for Student Basic Needs

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## MHICC Mission Statement

The Mental Health Improvement through Community Colleges (MHICC) team works to improve the availability, accessibility, and equitable distribution of mental health resources for community college students across the state of Michigan.

## Funding

This project was supported by funds from Center of Medicare and Medicaid Services through the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, the Michigan Health Endowment Fund, NIH through the IMPACT Center at the University of Washington, the Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation of Michigan, and the John G. Searle Professorship at the University of Michigan School of Public Health.

## Disclaimer

This toolkit was created by the MHICC initiative to assist Michigan community colleges in formalizing partnerships with local mental health providers. The information provided is for general guidance and should not be considered legal in nature, nor should the language used be considered required language for the creation of MOU. In all cases, readers should use discretion or seek advice from professional advisors familiar with their partnership venture before constructing an MOU.

*First published June 2025.*

*Last revised June 2025.*

## Executive Summary

One approach to expanding your college's capacity to provide comprehensive mental health services to community college students is through formalized partnerships with mental health service providers in your local community. An important step in formalizing an effective partnership with a local provider is creating a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), a written document that describes key details of the partnership.

This toolkit is designed to assist key mental health decision makers at Michigan's community and tribal colleges with the process of developing Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with local mental health service providers in order to expand capacity to support student mental health. Throughout this toolkit, we: (a) discuss the purpose and potential uses of an MOU; (b) describe action steps and corresponding considerations for developing an MOU; and (c) provide tangible examples and templates for drafting a comprehensive MOU.

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# INTRODUCTION

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## Why leverage community partnerships?

The number of college students reporting clinically significant mental health symptoms continues to increase over time,<sup>1,2</sup> with over half of college students experiencing at least one mental health condition.<sup>2,3</sup> This growing proportion of students seeking mental health services often exceeds the capacity of on-campus mental health providers. Recent research from the Mental Health Improvement through Community Colleges (MHICC) initiative confirms that Michigan community colleges are also experiencing these national trends.

The MHICC initiative has illuminated that many community colleges in Michigan have invaluable embedded mental health professionals who are doing vital work to support their students' mental health. However, many colleges are experiencing a shortage of mental health professional staff, limited bandwidth among staff, and low funding for mental health services, while some colleges don't have *any* on-campus dedicated mental health providers.<sup>4</sup> As a result of these challenges, most Michigan community colleges are unable to offer long term counseling, specialized services (e.g., neuropsych testing, psychiatric services) or treat certain mental health challenges (e.g., substance abuse, eating disorders). Given this, leveraging formal partnerships with local mental health service providers offers an opportunity to expand students' access to comprehensive mental health services.

While partnerships between community colleges and local mental health service providers can develop in numerous ways, an important step in formalizing an effective partnership with a local provider is creating a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). In this toolkit, we describe considerations and guidelines for when your college may want to create Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with local mental health service providers in your community in order to expand your college's capacity to support and treat student mental health.

## What is an MOU?

An MOU is a formal agreement between two or more parties, outlining the details of a partnership and describing how the parties will collaboratively work towards an established objective. Typically, an MOU includes information on the purpose and goals of the partnership, the responsibilities of each party, the terms of the agreement, and actionable steps that will be taken in order to achieve an agreed upon outcome. MOU are used to signal a commitment to the partnership from each party involved.



## When might your college create an MOU with a local provider?

Depending on the needs of their campus, community colleges may seek a formal partnership with various types of local mental health providers, including their local Community Mental Health organization, private practice agencies, local hospitals, health centers, substance abuse or rehabilitation programs, or providers affiliated with a local 4-year university.

Two contexts in which your college might create an MOU with one of these local providers include **creating referral pathways** and **contracting on-campus services**.



### Creating Referral Pathways:

When using a partnership with a local mental health provider to establish a formal referral network, college staff will identify students in need of specific mental health services and refer them to the partnering mental health provider for treatment. Many colleges may utilize formal referral partnerships to connect students with specific mental health services that they are unable to provide on campus, including substance abuse treatment, neuropsychological testing, or psychiatric services.

The details of these referral processes may look different between colleges and across partnering providers. Factors that often vary include:

- Whether or not the provider will reserve a given number of appointment slots for students from the partnering college;
- Whether or not the provider will agree to share information about the students' services with the college (with appropriate documented consent);
- Whether the provider will bill students / students' insurance directly for the services provided, or whether the college will cover the cost of referred students' copays.



### Contracting On-Campus Services:

Another context in which a college may create an MOU with a local mental health provider is when contracting with an outside provider who is providing services to students on the college's campus. In this instance, the local mental health provider is meeting with students on the college's campus (or virtually) to provide services and/or treatment, but is not employed by the college.

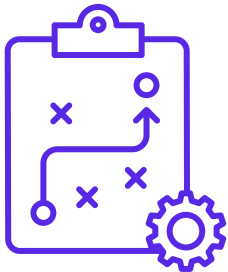
Oftentimes, this form of partnership may involve the college paying the provider a set amount for services provided, or covering the cost of the students' copays for services. Given this, an MOU is important for the college and provider to outline explicit responsibilities of each party and to highlight agreed upon expectations. This method of partnership can be appealing to many colleges as it allows students to access mental health services directly at their college campus at a lesser financial cost to the college than hiring a staff counselor.



## DEVELOPING AN MOU: ACTION STEPS AND KEY CONSIDERATIONS

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Developing an effective MOU requires thoughtful consideration about the details of the partnership. This begins well before the MOU is drafted, with a careful assessment of the needs and assets of your college, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of local mental health providers. For these reasons, the following action steps for developing an MOU are broken into two stages: **planning** and **drafting**.



The **planning stage** involves understanding the needs of your community, assessing relevant community providers, building relationships with community providers, and identifying who needs to be involved in the process of developing an MOU. In this stage, you should examine the unmet student mental health needs on your campus and identify local mental health providers able to fill this gap. This may include either leveraging existing connections with community providers or establishing new partnerships.



The **drafting stage** involves establishing clear goals for the MOU, defining the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved, and clarifying relevant processes for the partnership. During the drafting stage of an MOU's development, key decision makers are negotiating the terms of the partnership in order to ensure the needs of all parties are met while working towards the shared goal outlined by the MOU. Unlike the planning stage, the action steps within the drafting stage should be done in collaboration with the local provider(s).

Within each action step outlined in this section, we provide key questions for your college to reflect on, assess, and discuss while developing an MOU. Considerations for your college may vary based on the MOU purpose and community characteristics.

1

### Understand the needs of your campus community

- What mental health challenges are students at your college experiencing?
- What gaps exist in the care offered to students at your college?
- What services might address students' unmet mental health needs?

*Based on the questions above, does it appear that your college could benefit from establishing a formalized partnership with a local mental health provider?*

2

### Assess relevant community providers

- Do any providers have a historical relationship with your college that could be leveraged?
- Does your college have any existing informal partnerships with providers that would benefit from being formalized?
- Does the provider offer services that meet the unmet needs of your students?
- Does the provider have bandwidth and capacity to enter into a partnership?
- What is the average time from referral to intake for this provider?
- Does the provider currently (or typically) have a waitlist?
- What Evidence Based Practices does the provider utilize?
- How accessible is the provider to students?
  - *E.g., languages spoken; insurance taken; telehealth availability; weekend & evening availability; parking availability; accessibility via bus route.*
- Does the provider have a vested interest in community college student mental health, or do they have experience working with community college students?

*Based on the questions above, does the assessed provider seem to be a strong candidate for establishing a formal partnership?*

**3**

### Establish relationships with community providers

- Is there a main point of contact for the identified local mental health provider?
- How likely does the provider appear to engage with this partnership and play an active role in creating an MOU with your college?
- Is the provider interested in building a formal partnership with your college?



*Based on the questions above, are you and the local provider both ready and willing to commit to establishing a formalized partnership?*

**4**

### Identify who needs to be involved in the MOU creation

- Who from your college will serve as the primary lead in drafting the MOU and facilitating communication and meetings with the provider?
- What leaders or decision makers from your college and the partnering provider need to be involved in drafting, signing, and implementing the MOU?
  - At what stages of the process will these individuals or groups provide feedback or input?
- If there are staffing changes within your college or the local provider, how will this impact your partnership?
- Are there additional individuals, groups, or agencies with influence that would be beneficial to enlist for support in this process?



*Based on the questions above, are all stakeholders who will be involved in collaboratively drafting the MOU engaged and ready to proceed?*

### Example from the field

The quote below highlights the strengths and limitations of one college's partnership with a provider.

*"Our partnership with our CMH doesn't serve the needs of all students, but it helps us connect students with serious and persistent mental illness to treatment that we're not equipped to provide at our college. Since our CMH, like many, often has long wait lists and requires students to be insured, we still have to be selective about who we refer to CMH, even with our MOU. Because of our partnership with our CMH though, we're often able to have really streamlined and collaborative information sharing between us and the agency, which is really beneficial in supporting the success of our students who we refer for care there."*

*-Mental Health Provider at a Michigan Community College*



1

### Establish clear goals of the MOU

- What is the shared goal that all parties involved are working towards?
- Are there specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time bound, inclusive, and equitable (SMARTIE) outcomes that this partnership should result in?

2

### Define all parties' roles and responsibilities

- What are the responsibilities of the college in the partnership?
  - How will the college screen or identify students in need of services?
  - What presenting problems or chief complaints will lead the college to refer a student to the local provider?
  - Will the college provide compensation to the provider in any way? If so, under what circumstances or for what actions will the provider be compensated?
  - If entering into a co-located partnership, will the college be providing office space on campus for the provider to deliver services in?
- What are the responsibilities of the mental health provider in the partnership?
  - What services will be provided to students?
  - What modality (e.g., in-person, virtual, or hybrid) will be used to administer services?
  - What location (e.g., on-site at the college, at the provider's office, or at students homes) will services be provided at, if offered in-person?
  - If entering into a referral based partnership, will the mental health professional hold appointment slots for students who may be referred?
  - If entering into a co-located partnership, are there specific days or times that the provider should be on site at the college?
  - Will the service provider be responsible for the hiring, staffing, and maintenance of licensure for all clinicians and staff?
  - What follow up information about students who initiate services will the provider share with the college?

### 3

#### Clarify relevant processes

- What is the process for referring students?
- What is the follow up process after a student has been referred?
- What additional information might need to be shared between the college and the provider, and in what instances will this need to be shared?
- How will the college and provider ensure confidentiality (abiding by all relevant policies) through all forms of information sharing?
- How (and how often) will the parties communicate to discuss the partnership?
- How will the effectiveness of the partnership be evaluated or assessed over time?
- How will the provider receive compensation for services provided to students?
  - Will the provider bill students' insurance / charge students directly for services?
  - Will the student be responsible for any applicable co-pay for services provided, or will the college cover this cost for students?
  - Will the college compensate the provider a set fee for each session/service provided to a student?

### 4

#### Review and provide final authorization

- Who from your college is designated to authorize the agreement?
- Who is designated to authorize the agreement on behalf of the local provider?
- Are there additional important stakeholders for each party who should review the MOU prior to signing?

## Looking to the Future: Evaluating Partnership Effectiveness

After an MOU has been signed and gone into effect, it's important to regularly assess the effectiveness of the partnership to ensure that both parties' needs are successfully being met. Most MOU are generated for a fixed term, meaning the MOU will either expire or need to be renewed at the end of the outlined term. Therefore, evaluating a partnership's effectiveness is important for understanding whether or not the MOU should be re-signed for a new term, or (under certain circumstances) whether the partnership should be terminated earlier than the outlined term.

# KEY ELEMENTS OF AN MOU

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Memoranda of Understanding vary in purpose and scope, and their content may be flexibly adapted accordingly. Below, we outline several key elements that may be important to include when developing an agreement between your college and a local mental health professional. Example language for each element can be seen in the subsequent “MOU Templates” section of this toolkit.



## **Purpose and Objectives**

State the parties entering into the partnership (e.g., “college X” and “provider Y”) and include a brief description of the purpose of the agreement, noting the vision, goals, and objectives that this partnership aims to achieve.



## **Term of Agreement**

Specify the dates in which the partnership will be honored and the agreement is valid. Describe the process of making modifications to the agreement and the terms in which the agreement can or should be terminated.



## **Roles and Responsibilities**

Document key actions that the partnership entails, which party will be responsible for each action, and any additional steps that are needed to achieve these actions. Though the role and responsibilities may vary greatly depending on your partnership and the services involved (*see the key considerations under “Drafting Stage: Defining the roles and responsibilities of each party” within the previous section of this toolkit*), these may include:

- Description of services to be provided
- Process of referral for services
- Service recipients / Clients appropriate for referral
- Billing of services
- Location of services provided
- Staffing & accrediting of service providers

When drafting an MOU for contracted on-campus services, it can be helpful to include language clarifying that the provider is an independent contractor rather than an employee of the college. It may also be important to define whether or not the contract is non-exclusive (i.e., if the provider could enter into similar agreements with other parties) within this context. This language can be added within the roles and responsibilities section of the MOU, or built out into its own section (*see MOU template B below for an example of this*).



### ***Communication and Collaboration Plan***

Describe the plan for communication between the college, the local provider, and any other relevant stakeholders, including the needed contact information and the preferred modes of communication for each party. This may include regular meetings, monthly phone calls, case conferences, or routine email check-in messages regarding the partnership.



### ***Confidentiality, Record Keeping, and Information Sharing***

Discuss how student mental health records will be stored, what information will be shared between parties, as well as how and when this information will be shared. Provide assurance that student information will be kept confidential during record storage and sharing, including adherence to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), if applicable.



### ***Liability***

Depending on the contexts of your MOU, it is sometimes common to state the liability that will be assumed by each party. This may indicate that the college will assume liability for its actions and the actions of its employees, and that the service provider will assume liability for its actions and the actions of its employees. Oftentimes, both parties may commit to defending the other against lawsuits related to the partnership.



### ***Signatures***

Both parties should sign and date the MOU to codify the partnership and indicate agreement with the information outlined in the memorandum.

## **MOU TEMPLATES**

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### **Referral Based Partnership MOU**

This template can be used for colleges establishing a partnership where the college will refer students in need of mental health services to the provider for treatment at the provider's office location.

### **Contracted On-Campus Services MOU**

This template can be used for colleges who are contracting with a local mental health provider to provide specified mental health services to students directly on the college's campus.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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This toolkit was adapted from existing best practice resource guides on creating MOU, in conjunction with expertise from the MHICC research team and topic experts at local community colleges, in order to be specific to Michigan community colleges interested in creating MOU with local community mental health providers. For further information, the resources used to inform this guide can be accessed below:

Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (2023). *School & Behavioral Health Partnerships: A resource guide*. Retrieved from: [https://www.azahcccs.gov/AHCCCS/Downloads/Initiatives/BehavioralHealthServices/SBH\\_ResourceGuide.pdf](https://www.azahcccs.gov/AHCCCS/Downloads/Initiatives/BehavioralHealthServices/SBH_ResourceGuide.pdf)

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2. Lipson, S. K., Zhou, S., Abelson, S., Heinze, J., Jirsa, M., Morigney, J., Patterson, A., Singh, M., Eisenberg, D. (2022) Trends in college student mental health and help-seeking by race/ethnicity: Findings from the national healthy minds study, 2013–2021. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 306: 138-147.
3. Lipson, S.K., Phillips, M.V., Winkvist, N., Eisenberg, D., & Lattie, E.G. (2021). Mental health conditions among community college students: A national study of prevalence and use of treatment services. *Psychiatric Services*, 72(10): 1126-1133.
4. Mental Health Improvement through Community Colleges (MHICC)(2023). Landscape Analyses. Retrieved from <https://mentalhealthcc.org/landscape-analyses/>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The MHICC team would like to acknowledge the invaluable support in creating this toolkit that was provided by mental health and higher education professionals from Michigan and across the United States, including but not limited to: Christina Banton, EdD, LMFT; Thaddeus Mantaro, PhD, LPC; Precious Miller, LMSW; Leslie Navarro, LMSW; Amy Reddinger, PhD; Chris Stroven, MA, LPC; Melissa Ware, LMSW; & Eric Wood, PhD, LPC.



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