Mental Health Screening:

Strategies and Best Practices for Community Colleges

Mental Health Improvement *through* Community Colleges

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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

Disclaimer

This toolkit was created by the Mental Health Improvement through Community Colleges (MHICC) initiative to assist Michigan community colleges in implementing evidence-based mental health screening strategies on their campuses. The information contained in this toolkit is for general guidance. In all cases, readers should use discretion and seek advice from licensed mental health professionals familiar with mental health screening tools and strategies when developing and administering screening strategies.

First published June 2025.
Last revised June 2025.

Executive Summary

Mental health screening is an important component of a comprehensive approach to supporting student mental health. However, many approaches to mental health screening that are implemented in K-12 schools or at residential 4-year universities don't translate to community college contexts, given differences in school structure, student demographics, and available resources. With this in mind, this toolkit provides actionable mental health screening strategies that are specific to community college contexts, taking into account the unique strengths and challenges of Michigan community colleges. In addition, this toolkit outlines best practices for developing and implementing a mental health screening strategy on a college campus. Lastly, a curated list of empirically supported screening tools that can be used by mental health clinicians and other higher education practitioners is provided.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

Background:

Research indicates that more than half of community college students are experiencing symptoms of a diagnosable mental health disorder.[1,2,3] Yet, the majority of these students do not receive or access the treatment services they need and deserve.[3,4] Untreated, mental health challenges may negatively impact student success outcomes such as grade point average and degree completion.[5,6,7] Therefore, the early identification and referral of students experiencing mental or emotional distress is critical for connecting students with the appropriate resources, services, and treatments that will enhance their holistic success and well-being.

Defining Mental Health Screening:

Mental health screening is the systematic process of identifying students experiencing signs of mental or emotional distress that might be associated with a mental health condition and referring these students to relevant resources and care. Screening can be conducted for a variety of mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, substance use, suicidal ideation, and post-traumatic stress.

Though often used interchangeably, mental health *screening* and mental health *assessment* are two unique practices that are important to distinguish. *Screening* is conducted at the population level with the intended outcome of recognizing and referring students who may need additional support and resources. Mental health screening is not a tool for clinical diagnosis and does not result in the formal diagnosis of a mental health disorder. Screening does not have to be administered by a licensed mental health professional; Screening can be conducted by any trained individual or can be completed independently by students.

On the contrary, mental health *assessment* is the clinical process of formally assessing for the presence of a specific mental health disorder. Assessment is conducted at the individual level among those who have already been recognized as experiencing signs of distress. Assessment is typically conducted for the purpose of formally diagnosing an individual with a mental health disorder and can only be done by a licensed mental health provider. While assessment is an important element of mental health care, this toolkit focuses specifically on mental health screening.

Benefits of Mental Health Screening:

Many students on college campuses are experiencing symptoms of a mental health disorder and would benefit from mental health services, yet have never accessed these services at their college or elsewhere. Screening is a key strategy to identify these students and help connect them with the most relevant forms of care. Given individual mental health needs are unique and evolve over time, **screening can help identify and match students with the right level of support at the right time**.

In addition to referring students to resources and treatment, implementing strategic mental health screening processes within colleges can offer the opportunity to:

Develop a data-informed understanding of the prevalence of certain mental health challenges among students	Destigmatize mental health by embedding conversations about mental health and help seeking within the campus culture	Inform campus health promotion and prevention strategies	Drive equitable innovation in campus support services by identifying disparities in student mental health and service utilization

Therefore, implementing mental health screening as part of a comprehensive approach to supporting student mental health offers benefits beyond the individual level by driving system, practice, and cultural changes, supporting a public health framework for promoting student mental health. In short, screening students does more than identify students in need of support, but plays a key role in fostering a health promoting campus.

Example from the field

The quote below illustrates how one Michigan college is using screening to cultivate a culture of health promotion among their staff and students.

"It's so great when we can connect students to mental health resources and help get them into care because of our screenings. However, in my eyes, the real benefit of offering mental health screens is being able to break down some stigma by raising awareness of mental health challenges and getting people talking about it. When we ask students to complete a screen, we always frame it by saying, "Do you have a few minutes to fill out a short mental health screener? It's really useful for helping keep our campus healthy." Because it's about more than just connecting that one student with any resources they might need, but about creating a campus culture that's focused on prioritizing and supporting one another's well-being."

-Melissa Selby-Theut, Associate Director of the Grand Valley State University Counseling Center

SCREENING STRATEGIES

There are a number of strategies that colleges can use to screen students for mental health challenges. Some screening strategies are designed to reach all students, whereas other screening strategies are focused on reaching a targeted sub-group of students. In this section, three approaches to screening are discussed: Universal Screening, Opportunistic Screening, and Targeted ("Selective") Screening. For each approach, actionable screening strategies that might be implemented in a community college setting are described.

Within each screening approach outlined below, there can still be huge variance in how screening is implemented. For example, some screens are directly administered by trained staff, whereas others are completed by the student independently and/or electronically.[8] When considering which screening strategies your college may implement, it's important to weigh factors such as your college's size, available resources, and student needs. Further considerations for selecting a screening strategy that's right for your campus can be found in the "Screening Best Practices" section of this toolkit.

Universal Screening

Screening is considered "universal" when delivered to an *entire* population, rather than a smaller, more specific subset of the population. Universal screening typically occurs during a predetermined period, such as at the start of the academic year. Examples of universal screening on a community college campus may include screening all students enrolled at the college, screening all incoming students, or screening all students in a given course.

Research points to universal screening as a best practice among college students, youth, and young adults, given the reach and opportunity for early detection that universal screening presents.[9,10,11] In addition, universal screening can capture individuals who might not engage with campus support services, where other screening efforts often occur.

However, common barriers to implementing universal mental health screening often include:

    (a) a lack of needed resources,
    (b) limited knowledge about how to carry out a universal screening program, and
    (c) concerns about meeting an increased demand for services resulting from screening.[12]

These barriers may be particularly prevalent at community colleges, creating challenges for the feasibility of adopting a universal screening strategy. While this toolkit cannot improve resource constraints at a college, the subsequent section, "Screening Best Practices," provides guidance for carrying out a screening program as well as considerations for ensuring students have access to appropriate mental health resources following screens.

Opportunistic Screening

Opportunistic screening occurs during chance encounters with students. Unlike universal screening, opportunistic screening is not meant to capture an entire population, and instead aims to screen students that simply have the opportunity to engage with the screening materials due to outside factors not associated with mental health (i.e., students are at the right place at the right time). While opportunistic screening may conveniently capture many students, students who are less engaged with campus spaces, events, and services may be less likely to be screened in this approach.

Examples of opportunistic screening strategies that may be implemented on a community college campus include:

Offering screening at campus events
Similar to how colleges may promote student opportunities during various campus events (i.e., "tabling"), offering mental health screens through "tabling" at campus events offers the unique opportunity to engage students and connect them with resources.

Making screens available through campus common spaces
Providing convenient access to screens through campus common spaces can be achieved in a number of ways. Some colleges strategically place stickers, magnets, fliers, or art installations featuring a QR code for students to scan that will take them directly to a free and confidential mental health screening tool. Some colleges have implemented semi-private kiosks that allow students to complete an electronic mental health screening any time they pass the kiosk.

Conducting mental health "screening days"
Having dedicated days each semester where screening stations are set up in commonly trafficked areas of campus can raise awareness for mental health and the importance of screening, while allowing staff to engage with all students willing to stop and complete a screen.

Screening in student health centers
Mental health screening has become common within healthcare settings, with many primary care offices delivering brief mental health screens to all patients. College health centers are often the most accessible sites for students to seek healthcare, and therefore, serve as an ideal setting to screen students for mental health conditions if your college has a student health center on campus.

Targeted ("Selective") Screening

Selective screening targets students at elevated risk for mental health challenges. Unlike universal screening, targeted screening is not meant to capture an entire population. Targeted screening is also different from opportunistic screening in that it's focused solely on screening students at elevated risk for mental health challenges, rather than a random sample from the student body. A major benefit of targeted screening is the ability to engage with students who may have the greatest need of mental health support. However, students who may need lower levels of support may be missed through this approach, which can lead to these students' mental health symptoms worsening or remaining undetected.

While there are various ways that students can be deemed at elevated risk, one approach to categorizing this is through their use of campus resources that are correlated with mental health challenges. Following this approach, potential locations that targeted screening could occur on a community college campus might include:

Academic advising
Academic distress can frequently be exacerbated by or correlated with mental health challenges.[13,14] Academic advising is oftentimes the first place students go when they're experiencing academic distress, therefore creating an opportunity for early identification of students in need of mental health support among those at elevated risk.

Student success coaching
Similar to academic advising, students who present to campus success coaches for sub-clinical wellness coaching may be at elevated risk of experiencing mental health challenges. Screening students who engage with success coaching staff offers the ability to identify additional mental health supports that these students may need.

Mental health related campus events
Students who attend campus wide mental health events, training sessions, and other related programming may be experiencing mental health challenges themselves. Given this, offering mental health screenings to attendees may be a way to connect these students in need with additional supports and resources.

Food pantries and other basic needs resources

Students struggling to meet basic needs are often experiencing mental health challenges either in addition to or correlated with their basic needs challenges.[15] While students engaging with basic needs resources, such as campus food pantries, are receiving assistance with these needs, they may not be receiving support for their mental health needs.

TRIO events

Many community college campuses participate in TRIO programs, which are federally funded programs aimed at supporting and motivating first generation students, low-income students, and students with disabilities. Connecting students to additional support and resources by screening for mental health challenges at TRIO events offers an opportunity to further support their holistic success.

Veteran services

Some colleges offer veteran affairs resources for veterans on campus to receive specialized guidance, services, and support. Given the high prevalence rates of mental health challenges among veterans, [16,17] conducting mental health screening among students engaging with veterans services offers a targeted approach to capturing students at elevated risk.

Faculty offices

College instructors often report that they're the first person a student discloses signs of a mental health challenge to.[7] Therefore, training college faculty or staff on how to screen students they engage with for mental health challenges offers a unique opportunity to equip these individuals with better tools to support students' mental health.

Screening Strategies Summary

Targeted

Opportunistic
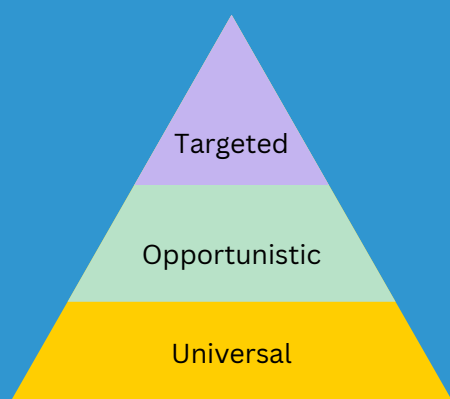
Universal

Each approach to screening discussed in this section - universal, opportunistic, and targeted - have specific strengths and limitations that should be weighed when considering what screening strategies may be the best fit for your college. The next section of this toolkit walks readers through the process of developing and implementing a screening strategy, which will shine additional light on factors that may influence the screening strategies employed at your college.

SCREENING BEST PRACTICES

Below are a series of best practices for developing and implementing a mental health screening process at your college. These best practices are listed in the general order in which decisions are likely to be made, though it should be noted that creating a screening process is often iterative and cyclical in nature.

Engage Relevant Stakeholders

The first step in developing a mental health screening process is to assemble a work team who will assist with the screening process. Consider mental health professionals, college faculty, and administrative staff who may have relevant knowledge, interest, or experience with student mental health. In some cases, your college may choose to collaborate with mental health agencies or service providers in the local community in order to leverage external expertise or momentum.

In addition, it's imperative to generate buy-in and support from college administrators and leaders. Sharing any existing data on student mental health at your college and illuminating gaps in your college's current screening process may be helpful in generating buy-in from these stakeholders. Aligning your campus's screening process with institutional goals or priorities may also be beneficial in garnering support from campus leaders and administrators.

Establish Clear Goals

Critical thought should be given to what your college's primary goals and intended outcomes for the screening process are. This will help inform screening logistics including the screening tools and modalities used. The goals of your college's screening process should be informed by data on student mental health at your college as well as the priorities and directions of your college. Without establishing clear goals, a screening process may not match the needs or priorities of the campus community and may struggle with being too broad or narrow in scope.

Example:
If one goal of your college's screening strategy is to increase student awareness of campus mental health services, developing a screening program that allows for student interface with your college's mental health professionals may be more beneficial in achieving this goal than a screening program where students independently complete electronic screens.

Example:
If one goal of your college's screening strategy is to collect data on the prevalence of student mental health challenges, it will be critical to implement a screening program that allows for college staff to view aggregated screen results.
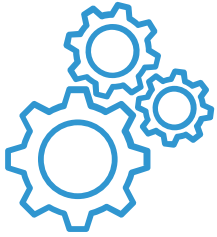
Define Logistics

Once the overarching goals and objectives of the screening process have been identified, specific logistics that will impact future steps should be clarified.

These may include:

- Establishing a timeline for when the screening process will be implemented
- Determining the budget allocated to the screening process
- Deciding which screening strategy/strategies that will be prioritized *(see the "Screening Strategies" section of this toolkit for examples)*
- Define the preferred screening modalities (i.e.., self-administered vs. professionally administered, electronically administered vs. administered in person)
- Clarify whether screens will be anonymous or whether college staff will have access to respondents' identifying information.

When establishing your screening timeline, you might consider the impact of the academic calendar on students' mental health.

Certain time frames, (such as during exam seasons or at the end of the semester) tend to be associated with higher levels of distress in students, which may lead to higher rates of reporting mental health symptoms on screening. On the contrary, screening at the very start of the academic year may lead to lower reporting on screens since students' academic distress is typically lower during this time.

While there is no right or wrong time to screen students, you may consider using your college's academic calendar to implement screening at a time that aligns with the goals and priorities of your college's screening goals.

Select Validated Screening Tools

Colleges should always use screening tools that are reliable, valid, and evidence based. In order to assist with this process, a curated selection of evidence based screening tools can be found at the end of this toolkit.

When selecting which screening tools to implement, consider the aforementioned logistics of your college's screening process in order to ensure the tools are a fit for your college. Specific factors that may be considered include:

- Is the screening tool free to use?
  - If not, how much will the screening tool cost to use at your college? Will your college's budget for the screening process allow for this?

- How is the screening tool administered?
  - Will the screening tool be self-administered by students or administered by a professional?
  - Will the tool be administered electronically or via pen and paper?
- Does the focus of the screening tool match the goals and intended outcomes of the screening process?
- Does the screening tool allow college staff to view individual or aggregate student responses in order to understand student data and respond to students in need of support, or are the screens completely anonymous?
- Is the screening tool age appropriate for your campus's student population?
- Is the screening tool culturally reflective of your college's student demographics?
- Is the screening tool available in multiple languages?
  - Do the available languages match the demographics of your student body?

Determine Consent Requirements & Processes

While there's significant debate surrounding the importance of informed consent in screening programs,[18] it's important for your college to determine to what extent consent is needed for students on your campus to complete the mental health screening process being implemented. Given the number of high school students who dual enroll at community colleges, an important consideration is whether students under 18 will be screened as part of your college's mental health screening process, and whether parental consent will be needed for these students. Additionally, if your college plans to use data from student screens for purposes beyond connecting students to resources (such as using aggregated data to understand the prevalence of mental health conditions at your college), additional consent may be needed from students.

Develop Processes for Data Collection

The process of screening students for mental health concerns should always prioritize privacy, confidentiality, and accuracy of information. When administering screens, consider how the process is ensuring that student responses are private, as well as how the process may contribute to honest and accurate responses from students. In addition, it's important to consider how/where data from students' screens will be stored, how this impacts privacy of the data, and whether this aligns with regulations from the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), if applicable. Finally, in centering equity, your college may consider whether the process of collecting and storing data will allow for data to be disaggregated (e.g., by race, ethnicity, or gender) in order to better understand what disparities and inequities exist among students.

Ensure Access to Adequate Treatment

It's critical that your college have a clear plan of what to do when students' screens indicate various mental health conditions or challenges. This means having a concrete referral process in place for services that address various needs that may arise from the screening process. This may include referring students to on-campus mental health resources, referring students to off-campus service providers in the local community, or a combination of both internal and external referrals. Therefore, ensure all staff who play a role in administering the screening have access to a comprehensive and up-to-date list of internal and external resources for students.

As previously mentioned, the fear of being unable to meet an increased demand for mental health services resulting from screening often prevents colleges from implementing screening strategies. However, referring students to off-campus providers through established referral pathways can ensure students have access to the appropriate mental health services, even if your college doesn't have the capacity to provide these services internally. For more information on creating partnerships with local mental health providers, refer to the MHICC Toolkit _Developing Memoranda of Understanding: A "How-to" Guide for Creating Formal Partnerships with Local Mental Health Providers._

Define Communication and Follow Up Procedures

In addition to ensuring students have access to mental health treatment and support upon completing a screen, your college should define the protocol for following up with students who had elevated scores on their screen. This process will vary depending on the screening modality used (e.g., electronic, self-administered, clinician administered).

Considerations may include:

- If a student completed a self-administered electronic screen, how and when will staff follow up with the student to connect them to resources?

- If a student is referred to off-campus services based on their screen, will there be any follow up communication between campus staff, the student, or the local provider?

- Will any information pertaining to screening results be communicated to other college staff, student caregivers, or other forms of student support systems?

Identify and Train All Involved Staff

Based on the logistics of your screening strategy, identify who will be administering the screening measures (e.g., mental health professionals, faculty members, or college administrators) and ensure thorough training is given to these individuals. Beyond this, it's important to consider what information other college faculty and staff might need to know to support the screening initiative and address any questions that arise from students.

Although an individual doesn't have to be a mental health provider to administer screenings to students, these professionals are often positioned best for this role given their background experience with mental health. Mental health screens can sometimes lead students to disclose challenges and adverse experiences to the individual administering the screen, making it imperative that staff are properly trained on how to support students through mental health crises.

Foster Campus Support for Screening

Creating a campus culture that's supportive of screening can be critical to the success of your screening initiative. One step of this is to strategically plan how your college will communicate the screening initiative to students, staff, and other members of the campus community. This may include announcements and social media messages about the screening initiative that are targeted towards encouraging students to screen and reminding them of the importance of this. Including students in this messaging can help influence other students to complete screens - for example, some colleges have students serve as a sort of peer wellness influencer to bridge the gap between staff and students.

Regardless of the screening strategy used, encouraging students to meaningfully and honestly engage with the screening process also involves supportive messaging from faculty and staff. For example, instructors reminding students of upcoming opportunities to complete mental health screens - or even completing a screen themselves - can help embed support for screening within your campus culture.

Consider Piloting the Screening Process

In order to minimize unexpected challenges, consider testing your screening process with a smaller group of students prior to fully launching this screening. One way you might do this is through a student focus group. Information to gather from a pilot of the screening process may include students' perceptions of the screening method and tool, privacy and data confidentiality concerns, and how likely students may be to access mental health resources after the screening.

EMPIRICALLY SUPPORTED SCREENING TOOLS

Below is a collection of mental health screening tools that your college might use when screening students. This inventory is not an exhaustive list of all screening tools that could be used, but rather a selection curated for community college contexts due to each tool's empirical support, target age range, cost, and availability.

Counseling Center Assessment of Psychological Symptoms (CCAPS) Screen

The CCAPS-Screen is a mental health screening instrument that assesses the most common domains of distress experienced by college students. The CCAPS-Screen is a 36-item instrument with eight subscales as well as an item related to the report of Suicidal Ideation within the last two weeks.

Administration:
Can be either self administered or clinican administered

Platform:
Electronic / web-based

Cost:
Variable: based on institution size.

MindWise College Screening Tool

The MindWise screening tool is an online questionnaire that allows students to assess their current mental health, get tailored informational materials, and be connected to resources. Colleges can customize the MindWise screening tool with their logo and custom resources, while administrators receive access to anonymous screening reports.

Administration:
Self-administered

Platform:
Electronic / web-based

Cost:
Variable:
$1,500 - $2,000

Mental Health America Screening

Mental Health America offers a collection of free, web-based screenings that can be completed by anyone wondering if they might be experiencing a mental health condition. After each mental health screen, users see information, resources, and tools to help understand and improve their mental health.

Administration:
Self-administered

Platform:
Electronic / web-based

Cost:
No cost

Patient Health Questionnaire 9-Item Scale (PHQ-9)

Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-Item Scale (GAD-7)

Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT)

Social Needs Screening Tool

The Accountable Health Communities Health-Related Social Needs (ACH-HRSN) Screening Tool

Satisfaction with Life Scale

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) Screening Tool

The Structured Trauma Related Experiences Symptoms Screener (STRESS)

Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale (CSSRS)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This toolkit was created by adapting existing best practice resource guides on mental health screening using expertise from the MHICC research team and professional experience from topic experts at local colleges in order to be specific to Michigan community colleges interested in implementing evidence based screening strategies on their campus. For further information, the resources used to inform this guide can be accessed below:

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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