



Supporting Minds, Strengthening Communities:

*The Case for Investing in Community
College Student Mental Health*



**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 in partnership with Michigan community colleges to improve the availability, accessibility, and equitable distribution of mental health resources for students across the state.

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Disclaimer

This resource was created by the MHICC initiative to assist Michigan community colleges in understanding the importance of supporting student mental health. The information provided in this toolkit is for general guidance and should not be considered legal in nature.

Executive Summary

Mental health challenges among community college students are common, yet often go untreated, leading to significant consequences for student persistence, completion, and overall success. As such, prioritizing student mental health is not only a matter of care, but a strategic investment in institutional outcomes and community well-being.

This resource is designed to support community college mental health decision makers in making informed, compelling cases for prioritizing student mental health. This resource highlights key data, evidence-based talking points, and practical framing to demonstrate the value of mental health investments for students, colleges, and the communities they serve. Additional tools, resources, and action steps that colleges can utilize to strengthen and inform their case making are provided.

Contents

Introduction	4
The Case for Investing in Student Mental Health	5
<i>Student Benefits</i>	6
<i>College Benefits</i>	8
<i>Community Benefits</i>	10
Recommendations & Resources for Action	12
Conclusion	15
References	16

INTRODUCTION

The number of students facing mental health concerns is substantial, both across community colleges (CCs) and 4-year institutions.¹ National data from the Healthy Minds Survey show that over half of college students are experiencing a clinically significant mental health concern.²

In Michigan specifically, data from 3,804 students across 8 CCs reveal that 53% of CC students are facing clinically significant symptoms of depression, anxiety, non-suicidal self-injury, or suicidality.³ Applying this rate across the number of CC students enrolled in the state, **there are an estimated 127,400 students experiencing symptoms consistent with a diagnosable mental health condition across Michigan's 31 community and tribal colleges.⁴**

With so many students experiencing clinically significant symptoms - as well as 74% reporting that their mental health is interfering with their academics³ - there is a clear need for students to have access to high quality and comprehensive mental health care. However, students often face significant barriers to receiving mental health services in their community, including difficulty identifying available resources, insurance requirements, high out of pocket costs, and transportation and other logistical barriers. As such, CCs can play a critical role in ensuring students' mental health needs are met by connecting them to free or low cost evidence-based mental health services offered by the college, contracted providers, or partnering external resources.

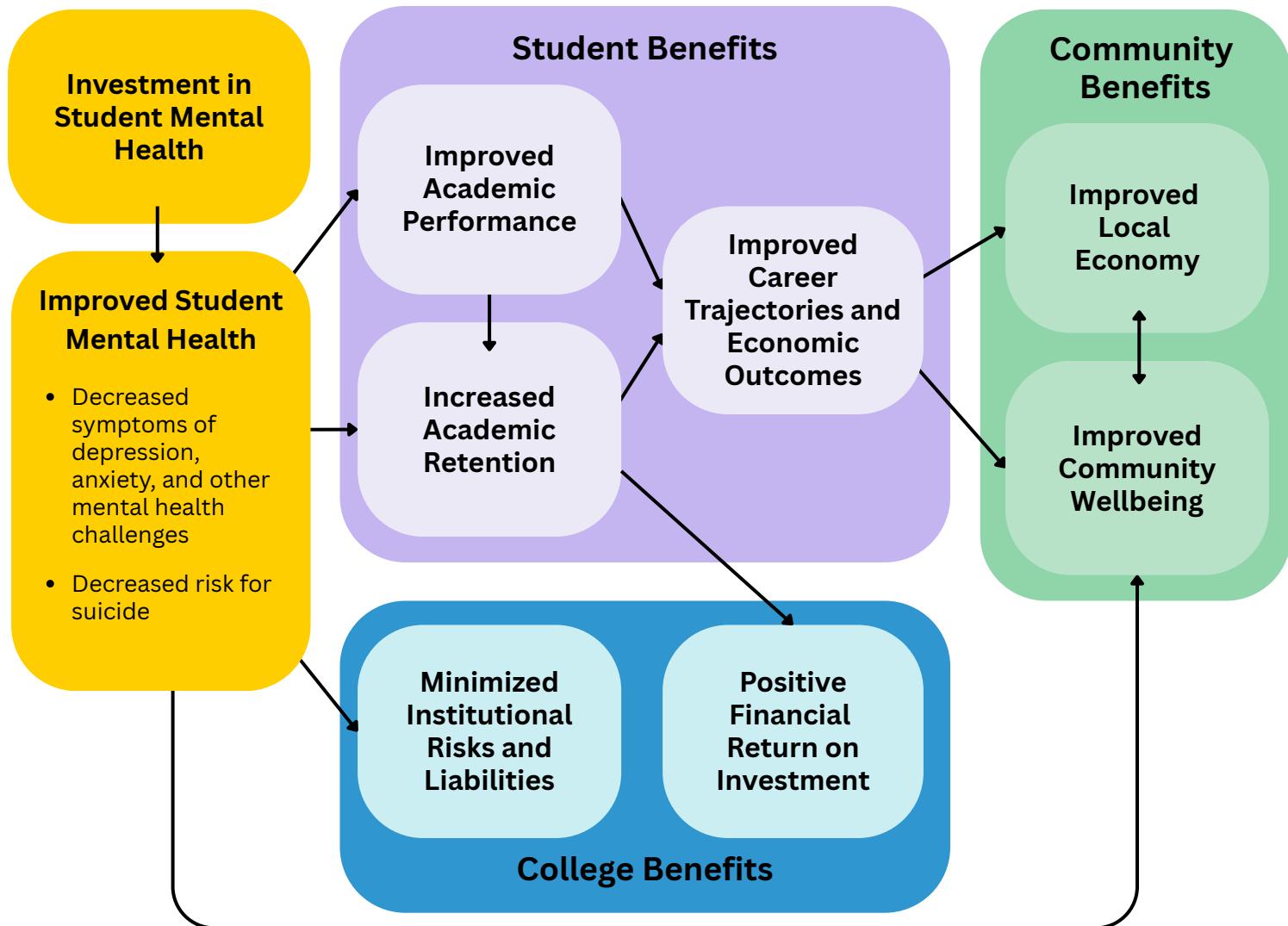
Although many Michigan CCs recognize mental health as a key priority, CCs often contend with limited capacity and funding to support student mental health, particularly compared to 4-year institutions. Research from the Mental Health Improvement through Community Colleges (MHICC) initiative shows that 85% of Michigan CCs fall below the recommended full-time counselor-to-student ratio, while 30% of Michigan CCs don't offer *any* in-house counseling services to students.⁵

For more information on mental health service availability at Michigan CCs, see the [MHICC mental health landscape reports](#).

This guide is designed to support efforts to promote student success and community well-being by highlighting the vast benefits of investing in student mental health services. By equipping readers with evidence of the short- and long-term benefits of student access to mental health services, this resource aims to aid CC mental health decision makers in advocating for expanded resources for their students.

THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Institutional investment in student mental health has benefits at multiple levels, including direct benefits to students, benefits to the college, and benefits to the broader community. The model below illustrates a high level overview of each of the key benefits within these levels and the pathways connecting each benefit.



The following page describe the above benefits to students, colleges, and communities in greater detail, highlighting the actionable talking points and supporting research of each benefit highlighted above.

Note: Aspects of the model above were adapted from “[The Value of A Campus Counseling Center](#)” [infographic](#) created by The Healthy Minds Network and collaborators.

STUDENT BENEFITS

Improved Academic Performance



Key talking point:

Investing in our students' mental health will lead to direct improvements in their academic performance.

Supporting argument:

Significant research has shown that untreated mental health challenges negatively impact students' performance in college. When untreated, mental health challenges can lead to lower GPA.⁶⁻⁹ Untreated mental health concerns have also been linked to decreased motivation and time management, which can further impact student success.^{10,11} As evidence of this in Michigan, Healthy Minds Study data collected from 8 Michigan CCs show that **74% of CC students feel that their mental health has negatively impacted their academic performance** in the past month.³

However, access to campus mental health care can play a powerful role in mitigating these impacts: $\frac{2}{3}$ of students who have accessed college counseling services attribute counseling for boosting their academic performance, demonstrating the positive impact that access to mental health treatment can have on student success.¹²

Increased Academic Retention



Key talking point:

Investing in our students' mental health will increase our college's completion rates.

Supporting argument:

Mental health is an important predictor of graduation. When untreated, mental health challenges can lead to an increased likelihood of dropping out.^{8,13-15} Recent data from the Lumina Foundation-Gallup 2025 State of Higher Education Study show that 1-in-3 college students in the US have considered stopping or dropping out of their program, with this rate being the highest among those in the most common programs at CCs: associates degree and certificate programs. Among these students, nearly half attributed their thoughts of withdrawing to emotional stress and/or mental health challenges.¹⁶ In contrast, **60% of students that accessed college counseling centers expressed that campus counseling services supported them with finishing their degree.**¹² Given this, access to mental health support is vital for guiding students across the finish line.

Improved Career Trajectories & Economic Outcomes



Key talking point:

By our college investing in students' mental health, our students are more likely to graduate, earn more over their lifetimes, and succeed in the workforce.

Supporting argument:

Degree completion is directly associated with higher earning potential and a higher sense of workplace satisfaction.^{8,9,14,17,18} A Michigan-based study found that **students who graduated with an associate degree from a CC earned between \$5,600 - \$9,400 more per year** than their non-credited peers, while students who completed long-term certificate programs from a CC earned between \$2,500 - \$3,600 more per year than non-credited peers.¹⁹ Therefore, investing in students' mental health as a strategy to promote degree completion can lead to long term financial benefits for students.

Beyond this, **untreated mental health challenges across one's lifespan can interfere with the ability to establish meaningful social relationships, complete work requirements, manage household responsibilities, and develop social capital.**²⁰⁻²² Work impairments resulting from mental health challenges are associated with significant economic costs for individuals across their lifespan.^{22,23} However, improvements in mental health symptoms through treatment can reduce work impairment, and in turn, lessen personal economic costs that come from lost productivity, absenteeism, or difficulty performing at work.²⁴ As such, early intervention is key: by providing enrolled students with access to mental health care, CCs are proactively mitigating students' future losses in social capital stemming from mental health challenges, demonstrating the lasting impact that investment in mental health can have on students' lives.

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“When we look at the data and talk to students, it's clear: the **emotional stress** that students are bringing into the classroom **is the leading reason why students are stopping out and dropping out.** These are challenges that students can't just leave in the hallway - they impact their ability to focus, prioritize school work, and complete the requirements of their degree. This means that **we truly can't support student success without addressing students' mental health needs.**”

-Precious Miller, LMSW, Program Director, Michigan Community College Association (MCCA)

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COLLEGE BENEFITS

Positive Financial Return on Investment



Key talking point:

Our college will see a positive return on funds invested into supporting student mental health, improving our college's long term financial success.

Supporting argument:

Investment in student mental health can lead to institutional financial returns through both **tuition revenue** and **state appropriations**.

With regards to revenue from tuition, research has shown that elevated student retention is directly associated with increased tuition income for CCs.^{8,9} Therefore, by supporting students to the finish line of their degree by investing in their mental health, colleges are also promoting their own economic success by mitigating lost tuition dollars from students who stop or drop out.

Additionally, a significant proportion of state funding appropriations that Michigan CCs receive is impacted by the number of degrees/certificates completed, their completion rate compared to the statewide average, and improvements in their completion rate over time.²⁵ As such, promoting student retention and completion by investing in students' mental health can yield increased state funding.

Minimized Institutional Risks and Liabilities



Key talking point:

Investing in student mental health saves lives, which will mitigate legal, financial, and reputational risks to our college.

Supporting argument:

Beyond supporting academic success and broader community well-being, investing in student mental health is also critical for preventing loss of life to suicide and minimizing legal risks to the institution. Given that **14% of Michigan CC students report experiencing suicidal ideation within the past year**,³ the risk of losing a student life to suicide is probable yet often preventable. **The death of a student by suicide can be deeply traumatic for the entire campus community** - students, faculty, and staff often experience emotional distress and may face increased risk for mental health challenges and suicide themselves in the aftermath.²⁶ These impacts can disrupt learning, strain campus resources, and have lasting effects on campus climate.

In addition to the human cost, student suicide can expose institutions to significant legal and financial risks. **Some colleges have faced lawsuits** and been held liable following a student's death.²⁷ Even when liability is not ultimately established, **institutions frequently incur substantial legal expenses, lose valuable staff time, and may experience reputational harm**. Therefore, proactively investing in student mental health - by expanding access to comprehensive, timely, and responsive mental health services - helps prevent crises before they escalate. These investments not only save lives and support campus well-being, but serve as a critical strategy for mitigating legal, financial, and reputational risks to the institution.

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"Too often, I've been called in to help colleges and universities address student mental health **after they experience a tragedy on their campus**. It's devastating to think about the **lives cut short and the tragedies that could have been prevented**. We're proud to work hand in hand with community colleges to help them prioritize mental health *before* students' educational paths are upended and lives are lost."

-Sara Abelson, PhD, MPH

Co-Director, Mental Health Improvement through Community Colleges

Senior Director, The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs

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COMMUNITY BENEFITS

Improved Local Economy



Key talking point:

Investing in our students' mental health strengthens our local economy while reducing costly health and workforce inequities in our community.

Supporting argument:

CCs are important hubs of educational and economic opportunity, particularly in resource constrained areas.^{28,29}

Research has estimated that America's community colleges contribute over \$1 trillion in total benefits to society, stemming from graduates' increased lifetime income and correlated increased business income.³⁰ In Michigan specifically, the state's GDP increases by approximately \$122,047 per additional college graduate, strengthening the economy and driving investments in local businesses.³¹

Since CCs help build the local workforce, increasing graduates' earning potential directly strengthens the area's economy. As an example of this in Michigan, a case study of North Central Michigan College found that ***one in 66 jobs in the area can be tied back to the CC in some way*** and \$61.4 million was added to the local economy from alumni being employed in the community.³² As this example shows, promoting student retention and completion by investing in students' mental health strengthens local economies and enhances community success.

Additionally, there are significant societal implications of unaddressed mental health concerns for communities. ***Absenteeism and lost productivity stemming from mental health challenges are estimated to cost the US economy around \$300 billion per year.***³³ Beyond this, premature deaths resulting from mental health challenges (e.g., deaths due to suicide or deaths resulting from substance use challenges) lead to a staggering economic burden, one that is inequitably pronounced for Indigenous and other racial and ethnic marginalized communities that CCs serve.³⁴ As such, by investing in student mental health and increasing student access to mental health care, CCs can bolster their local economy while mitigating health inequities in their community.

Improved Community Wellbeing



Key talking point:

Through the reach our college has across generations of learners, investing in student mental health strengthens long-term health, justice, and social service outcomes community-wide.

Supporting argument:

CCs play a critical role in fostering social mobility, ending cycles of poverty, and combating socioeconomic inequity.^{35,36} Investing in student mental health can compound these benefits and strengthen community well-being in a number of ways. While mental health challenges have been associated with an increased risk for physical health conditions such as cardiac disease, hypertension, stroke, and diabetes,³⁷ **mental health service utilization has been shown to result in decreased engagement in future medical care for physical ailments**, illuminating the connection between poor physical health outcomes and underlying mental health challenges.^{38,39} Therefore, by increasing access to mental health support through CCs, communities are likely to see decreased future medical expenditure. Additionally, access to mental health services is associated with lower rates of incarceration.⁴⁰

The widespread reach of CCs in their communities cannot be understated: one Michigan CC estimated that one out of every eight people in their region between the ages of 17 and 70 has taken classes at that CC, while **another Michigan CC stated that 70% of county residents or their immediate family members had taken classes at the college.**^{41,42} Given this expansive reach, CC investments in student mental health have the potential to yield meaningful improvements in community well-being.



“Our mission as a community college is driven by student success, community success, and a culture of success. If we’re not **supporting students holistically** – mentally, physically, and emotionally – we are not truly preparing them for the workforce or for life beyond our campus. Of course we care about getting their degree conferred, but helping students reach the finish line of their degree is all for naught if we haven’t given them the tools they need to thrive. Serving our community means **nurturing the whole student**: mind, body, and soul.”

-Dr. Nerita Hughes, President, Bay College



RECOMMENDATIONS & RESOURCES FOR ACTION

The recommendations below outline key action steps that colleges can take to better understand, advocate for, and prioritize student mental health on their campus.

These recommendations are designed to strengthen and inform the talking points outlined in the previous pages, by ensuring that these arguments are tailored to the unique needs and existing assets of your college. Each recommendation includes actionable tools and resources that can be used to support each of these efforts.

Understand your college's current capacity for mental health service provision.

The International Accreditation of Counseling Services recommends a ratio of 1 full time mental health provider for every 1,000 students, which serves as the standard for the profession within college counseling.⁴³ When colleges fall below this ratio, counselors are likely to become limited in the support they can provide to students and the broader campus, and students are more likely to experience long wait times for services. Falling below this ratio also increases a college's vulnerability to liability risks following student suicide deaths, as the college can be deemed as not abiding by the standards for the profession.⁴⁴ Given this, understanding your college's current capacity for supporting student mental health - and how this compares to professional standards - can be a powerful data point in the case for increased investment in student mental health.

The MHICC team calculates the counselor to student ratio for all MI CCs that complete MHICC's annual Michigan Mental Health Landscape Survey. View your college's [Mental Health Landscape Analysis Reports](#) to examine your counselor to student ratio and explore how your college's mental health service provision compares to other MI CCs.

Assess the mental health needs of your students.

Data drives action. Demonstrating the portion of your student body that is struggling with mental health and experiencing academic consequences has helped secure investments in student supports. Fielding the [Healthy Minds Study](#) - the nation's largest survey of student mental health needs - is one way to systematically collect data on student mental health needs. Other approaches to understanding student mental health on your campus might include conducting student focus groups or fielding either the [American College Health Association's Well-Being Assessment](#) or the [Hope Center's Student Basic Needs Survey](#).

Determine the model of mental health service provision that aligns with your resources and needs.

Some colleges aim to provide long term counseling services to students, while others focus on providing short term services coupled with referrals to outside agencies. The model of care that's right for a college depends on a variety of factors, including the college's budget, student mental health needs, student utilization of campus services, and the availability of community resources. The Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) developed the [Clinical Load Index \(CLI\) tool](#) to quantify these factors and help inform institutional decisions regarding the resourcing of college mental health services.

Learn more about how CLI can be used to guide counseling staffing and models to care through CCMH's interactive [Alignment Model tool](#), and use their [CLI Calculator tool](#) to quantify your college's Clinical Load Index.

Explore the return on investment for specific mental services at your college.

When discerning how to best invest institutional funding into specific mental health services and supports, it can be helpful to quantify the economic returns on these investments. [The Healthy Minds Network's Return on Investment \(R.O.I\) tool](#) calculates the economic returns of services or programs that improve student mental health. Simply input your college's enrollment size, drop out rate, and tuition rate alongside the amount to be spent on a student mental health service, and the tool will generate the economic returns that this service will lead to for the college and for students. This data can be powerful in influencing stakeholders about the financial benefits to the institution that would stem from investing in specific service offerings.

Tailor your argument to whom you're making the case

Based on whether you're making the case for student mental health to college leadership, policymakers, funders, community members, or other relevant stakeholders, it's important to tailor this argument to their interests and priorities in order to effectively impact them.

For more information and guidance on how to effectively engage various key stakeholders, we recommend reviewing The Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute and The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs' "[Making the Case for Investments in Postsecondary Mental Health](#)" report, and KnowHow2GO's comprehensive "[State your Case](#)" toolkit.

Consider innovative approaches to expand students' access to comprehensive mental health care.

While providing in-house mental health services to students is imperative for reducing barriers to treatment, expanding student access to mental health support doesn't necessarily mean that colleges need to offer all services that students may need, as we recognize this is unrealistic for many colleges. Rather, colleges can consider innovative approaches to connecting students to care, such as leveraging formal community partnerships and digital mental health interventions. For actionable information on these approaches, explore the resources below.



[Developing Memoranda of Understanding: A “How-To” Guide for Creating Formal Partnerships with Local Mental Health Providers](#)

This resource discusses the purpose and potential uses of formal partnerships between colleges and local mental health providers, describes action steps and considerations for developing an MOU with local mental health providers, and provides tangible examples and templates for drafting a comprehensive MOU.



[Digital Approaches to Supporting Student Mental Health: Key Considerations for Michigan Community Colleges](#)

This resource discusses the role of Digital Mental Health Interventions (DMHIs) in supporting student mental health, while serving as a guide to aid CC administrators and mental health providers in making informed decisions about implementing DMHIs at their college.

Identify students who may benefit from mental health support.

Leveraging the efforts described above to make mental health care available to students is only as beneficial as these services are utilized. As such, the early identification and referral of students experiencing mental or emotional distress - also referred to as “mental health screening” - is critical for connecting students with the appropriate resources, services, and treatments. For actionable information on campus mental health screening, explore the resource below.



[Mental Health Screening: Strategies & Best Practices for Community Colleges](#)

This toolkit offers practical mental health screening strategies tailored to the unique needs of Michigan CCs. It includes best practices for creating and launching a campus-wide screening approach, along with a curated list of evidence-based tools for college staff and mental health professionals.

CONCLUSION

This resource was designed to present key data and talking points that can be used in making the case for why CCs should invest in student mental health.

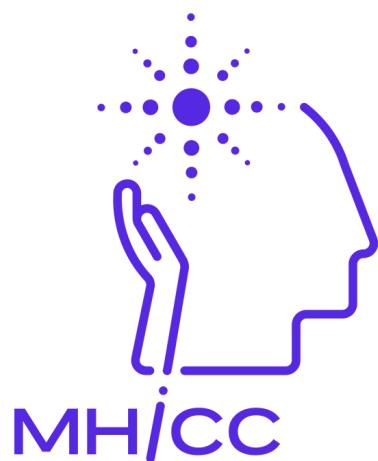
As discussed throughout this report, student access to mental health care has been tied to numerous benefits for students, colleges, and their broader communities, including:

- Strengthened academic performance and resilience among students
- Decreased drop out rates, which can yield additional tuition revenue for institutions
- Enhanced local economies and strengthened community well-being, including lower healthcare expenditure, decreased unemployment rates, and crime reduction

As such, it's imperative for Michigan CCs to invest in student mental health. Actionable tools and strategies to support college mental health leaders in strengthening these talking points while tailoring them to their campus were provided.

If you would like to discuss these talking points and resources further with the MHICC team, or receive additional support in making the case for student mental health, we welcome you to connect with us!

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