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## Community college counselors face challenges, survey shows <sup>[1]</sup>

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Four-year college and university counselors [for years now](#) <sup>[3]</sup> have watched their budgets shrink even as their workloads increase in quantity and difficulty. The same is true for community college counselors – but, as shown by the second edition of an annual survey of those in the profession, they've also got a whole barrage of other circumstances that make their work even more complicated.

The two types of campuses share some major similarities – [like four-year institutions](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, community colleges are seeing a rise in the number of students with severe psychological problems. More than seven in 10 have created threat assessment or behavioral intervention teams, which more and more four-year colleges are using to identify potentially harmful individuals. And anxiety and depression are among the top conditions for which students seek help (though on two-year campuses, academic problems and stress are slightly more common), counselors reported in [the survey](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, conducted by the American College Counseling Association's Community College Task Force. Respondents included counselors from 294 colleges in 44 states.

But despite their campuses employing fewer mental health counseling staff than four-year institutions, a striking 97 percent of community college counselors also have duties that extend well beyond mental health -- among them, 70 percent do academic advising, 68 percent do career counseling, and 49 percent have administration or management duties. This creates obvious time constraints, but can also pose ethical quandaries when, say, the student you're counseling for bipolar disorder comes into your other office for job advice.

**Q: What other duties do you regularly perform (or are provided by your office) in addition to providing mental health counseling for students?**

Duties	Percentage of counselors
N/A	3.2 %
Academic advising	70.0 %
Career counseling	68.2 %
Admissions advising	38.2 %
Disabilities services	35.5 %
Teaching	41.9 %
Tutoring	6.5 %
Administration/Management	49.8 %
Committee work	78.8 %
Psychoeducational programming	51.2 %
Other	28.1 %

"Most people wear several hats, which a lot of times can really interfere with the process of working with a student, particularly if they're in a crisis," said Amy M. Lenhart, chair of the task force and a counselor at Collin County Community College in Texas. "When you're expecting people to do all those other things and -- oh, by the way -- be there for the student, you know something's got to give."

Sixty-eight percent of community colleges provide mental health counseling services. The majority of those without on-campus services refer students to off-campus ones, but even the former must sometimes direct students elsewhere because they simply don't offer the necessary services (such as prescribing medicine) or don't have the funding to employ enough staff. Sixteen percent of counselors said there isn't a single full-time counselor or therapist on staff; 53 percent reported having no part-time counselors or therapists. Nearly 88 percent don't have a psychiatrist or other licensed prescriber either on staff or contracted to provide services, and 57 percent don't provide any suicide prevention resources or programming.

**Q: What is your average weekly caseload size for mental health counseling?**

Number of cases	Percentage of counselors
1 to 5 cases	36.2 %
6 to 10 cases	26.6 %
11 to 15 cases	13.6 %
16 to 20 cases	11.6 %
21 to 25 cases	4.5 %
26 to 30 cases	4.5 %
31 to 40 cases	1.5 %
More than 40 cases	1.5 %

But the reluctance of students to seek off-campus help in settings where they're likely to feel less comfortable has led more two-year colleges to realize they need in-house counselors, Lenhart said. That became especially true after Jared Lee Loughner, who had been suspended from Pima Community College until he could get medical clearance to return, was charged with gunning down six people and wounding 13 just over a year ago in Tucson, Ariz.

After the shooting, many critics came down hard on Pima <sup>[6]</sup>, accusing the college of not doing enough to prevent the tragedy. But those criticisms were largely blind to the fact that community colleges just don't have the resources or abilities to do so.

Residential colleges and universities have employees keeping an eye on students in the dorms, and professors who notice when an individual is acting strange in class. It's a different story on commuter campuses, where thousands of students are constantly coming and going, and might not be taking classes regularly. (On top of that, the students cover a far wider spectrum of ages and mental health issues.) The nature of such campuses means they typically don't offer many of the services that four-year colleges use to monitor and treat students with mental health problems. For example, 87 percent of community college counseling services don't provide on-call or after-hours emergency coverage. Those services are fairly common at four-year colleges and universities.

Further, community colleges are more likely (53 percent do so) to limit the number of counseling sessions students may have.

Still, as always, financial stressors are the biggest burden on the counseling centers. States generally don't fund these services for community colleges, and many have responded to continuous budget slashes by cutting corners on the number and education levels of staff, Lenhart said.

"Administrators have a harder time deciding what's necessary," she said.

**Q: What percentage of your student body does your office see for mental health counseling in any given academic year?**

Percentage of student body	Percentage of counselors
1 to 5 %	44.8 %
6 to 10 %	20.8 %
11 to 15 %	6.1 %
16 to 20 %	5.7 %
21 to 25 %	2.4 %
26 to 30 %	1.9 %
31 to 40 %	0.9 %
41 to 50 %	0.5 %
More than 50 %	0 %
Don't know	17 %

**Q: What is the average number of counseling sessions in any given semester?**

Number of sessions	Percentage of counselors
1 to 2	21.2 %
3 to 5	34.0 %
6 to 10	17.7 %
11 to 15	3.4 %
16 to 20	2.5 %
21 to 25	2.5 %

26 to 30	2.5 %
More than 30	16.3 %

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