Depression on College Campuses Conference: Addressing an Evolving Crisis

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Enrollment in institutions of higher education in the USA is currently estimated at over 20 million and expanding [1]. While the field of college mental health has seen many improvements over the past 20 years, depression and related illnesses have consistently been an urgent, yet often neglected, public health problem among college students. According to data from the Healthy Minds Study, which has a sample comprising 155,026 students from 196 campuses, the percentage of US college students with lifetime diagnoses of a mental health condition increased from 22 to 36% between 2007 and 2017 and the rate of past-year mental health treatment increased from 19 to 34%, leading to greater demand on already-strained campus counseling and mental health centers [2]. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported similar findings among first year college students from eight countries [3]. Though Stepped Care and upstream solutions including universal prevention programs, rapid referral to community treatment, and digital mental health tools have been recommended [4], adoption has been slow and the immense strain on institutions of higher education remains. Moreover, immediate mental health crises and the collective upheavals that follow deaths by suicide on campus continue to occur.

A conventional academic method of tackling a societal issue such as college mental health is to call together experts, those with lived experience, and other stakeholders in order to foster open dialog and collaborative learning, gather community input, convey needs and concerns, and identify opportunities for growth and improvement. In this spirit, and in response to a tragedy within the University of Michigan community, the University of Michigan Depression Center (UMDC) (recently renamed the Eisenberg Family Depression Center) began the Depression on College Campuses Conference (DoCC) in 2003 [5]. To offer a successful conference of

this nature, support from high level university leadership was needed and attained. Since its inception, DoCC has received encouragement and commitment from leadership, faculty, staff, and attendees. This support has continued throughout the lifespan of the conference. For instance, the University of Michigan's Director of Counseling and Psychological Services and the Chief Medical Officer have co-led the conference along with the Founding Director of the UMDC. In addition, the Office of the Provost has provided financial support for the conference and several University Presidents and leaders have presented opening remarks.

DoCC is a national/global conference that calls attention to and works to destigmatize the issue of depression and related illnesses on college campuses by presenting a focused review of recent research, practical advances, and innovative educational and public health strategies to aid our understanding of depressive illnesses in young adults. The conference specifically explores more effective and efficient strategies for providing support to a large population of students with unique and varying needs. Over nearly two decades, DoCC has educated thousands of individuals, illuminated new developments in the college mental health landscape, brought college mental health into the conversation, and moved the needle on the problem of college depression and related illnesses. DoCC is now recognized by many as the “go-to” college mental health conference. To take a deep dive into the impact of the conference since its initiation and to reflect on its themes, the content of its sessions, and the outcomes of evaluation surveys, we present an overview of the conference and key takeaways.

Overview of the Conference

To better understand DoCC and themes around college mental health in general, we examined the conference format and annual conference and individual session themes

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since its launch. The methods we used to analyze these themes were inspired by qualitative research methodology (described below). We also examined attendee satisfaction survey results from the most recent in-person conference and broadly compared those results to conference survey results from previous years.

Conference Objectives and Format

The 2-day conference addresses depression and other mental illnesses in our campus communities by (1) covering the scope and consequences of depression and mental illnesses among college students; (2) discussing optimal strategies for responding; (3) identifying existing deficiencies and barriers to implementation of those strategies; and (4) addressing ways to impact public policy to overcome identified barriers and catalyze a coordinated, comprehensive approach.

Each year, after obtaining collective suggestions from national leaders, a timely theme and expert speakers are selected by a conference committee that includes members from across the University of Michigan campus. Themes have centered around topics including fighting stigma, promoting resilience, preventive approaches, and tailoring precision-based treatments. Sessions address the central theme from varying viewpoints with a focus on real-world examples and practical solutions that attendees are encouraged to implement on their own campuses. To keep attendees engaged and have the greatest impact, the conference features a variety of session types such as keynote presentations, panel discussions, concurrent sessions, and interactive workshops. DoCC is targeted at key stakeholders including academic advisors, counseling center staff, faculty, health educators, psychiatrists, psychologists, student affairs administrators, parents, and students. In recent years, the conference has convened a group of 400–600 attendees with representation from 19 states and over 80 different colleges, universities, and community organizations. A special part of the conference is an awards ceremony honoring two students each year with the Student Mental Health Advocate Award, which recognizes outstanding student leadership in the area of campus mental health.

Moreover, as an adjunct educational event to DoCC, the Healthy Minds Network hosts an annual College Mental Health Research Symposium specifically for individuals interested in research on college student mental health. The interdisciplinary symposium brings together leading researchers, clinicians, practitioners, research/practice networks, and other key stakeholders. Over the course of 2 days, attendees discuss current work in the

field, collaborate, and participate in an innovation tournament aimed at creating a strategy to address system-wide challenges.

Analysis of Conference Session Topics

To identify salient themes that emerged over the history of DoCC and to reflect on and uncover the evolution of college mental health as a discipline, we systematically analyzed conference session titles/topics. Atlas.ti 8 software [6] was used to aid with the analysis of session titles from the past 17 in-person DoCC conferences (excluding the 2021 virtual conference). Textual data from 79 session titles (including keynotes and panel discussions, but excluding concurrent sessions and workshops) were extracted and synthesized by two researchers (DT and WH) based on a grounded theory approach in which similar concepts were grouped together into themes. First, the text was coded line by line. Following this, the codes were organized based on similarities and salient features. Overlapping themes were then collapsed and refined.

Satisfaction Surveys

Conference attendees are asked to complete a 12-item satisfaction survey for each individual session they attend. At the conclusion of the conference, attendees are also given a 10-item overall conference evaluation survey. The overall survey is offered in both pen-and-paper format and online via Qualtrics to strengthen the response rate.

Examining the Conference

Conference Themes

Past in-person conference themes are highlighted in Table 1. Codes were organized into 26 themes. Further thematic analysis of recurring concepts reduced these concepts to five overarching themes. First, Theme 1 is *Campus mental health services as multipurpose systems*. Representative examples of session titles corresponding to this theme are as follows: Advocacy and Action at the University of California—Lessons Learned from a System-Wide Approach; Helping Severely Distressed Students—University Policies and Protocols; and Stepped Care 2.0—A Framework for Rapid Access, Flexible Care Options, and Improved Outcomes. Theme 2 is *Maximizing prevention and resilience*. Representative examples are as follows: A Public Health Approach to Depression on College Campuses—Implications of Recent IOM Prevention Studies; Motivational

Table 1 Depression on college campuses conference themes (2003–2019)

Year	Theme
2003	Best Practices and Innovative Strategies
2004	Connections to Stress, Sleep, and Alcohol
2005	Fighting Stigma with Knowledge and Understanding
2006	The University's Role in Responding to Crisis, Disaster, and Loss
2007	New Challenges, New Approaches
2008	Creating Healthy Communities
2009	Changing Perspectives
2010	Many Faces—A New Look
2011	Early Detection and Intervention
2012	Prevention, Resilience, Positive Mental Health
2013	Moving Toward Healthy Self-Care
2014	Fostering Student Success
2015	Managing the Culture of Stress
2016	Interpersonal Relationships & Student Mental Health
2017	Best Practices and Innovative Strategies after 15 Years of Progress
2018	Redesigning Structures, Spaces, and Processes to Promote Wellness
2019	One Size Does Not Fit All: Aligning Levels of Care to Student Mental Health Needs

Interviewing in the Prevention and Treatment of Depression; and Protective Factors to Prevent Depression in College. Theme 3 is *Deepening our understanding of college depression and mental health*. Representative examples are as follows: A Long-term View of the Student Mental Health Crisis—Lessons Learned over 25 Years; Remembered if Outlived—Transforming the Experience of Depression in College; and Depression—The Ill of the Age. Theme 4 is *Student engagement as a necessity*. Representative examples are as follows: Creative Ideas for Student Involvement; Students Helping Students; and Depression on College Campuses—Student Perspectives. Finally, Theme 5 is *Diverse experiences and stories matter*. Representative examples are as follows: Willow Weep for Me—A Black Woman's Journey Through Depression; How Do Culture and Gender Affect Students with Depression?; and Removing Barriers and Promoting Inclusion.

Satisfaction Survey Outcomes

In 2019, nearly all (92%) respondents indicated that the event met the stated learning objectives and over 90% planned to utilize/implement information gleaned from the conference on their own campus. For instance, several respondents shared that they plan to bring a version of the Wolverine Support Network, a peer-led support network at the University of Michigan, to their

campus. Throughout the years, conference speakers and attendees have been uniformly enthusiastic about the educational and social impact of the conference. A presenter from the most recent in-person conference said, “Not only was it a memorable experience in my mental health advocacy journey, but I truly believe that we had the opportunity to empower others to start something similar, and have already connected with attendees about this.” An attendee noted, “I say truthfully that this was one of the most beneficial conferences that I have ever attended, and I plan to attend again and bring students with me in the future.” This sentiment is common; over half of the 2019 attendees had attended the event previously, with some attending numerous times. Apart from the knowledge gained during the conference, attendees have shared that one of the most valuable takeaways is the lasting and productive relationships made through networking. Finally, while most of the feedback has been favorable, when asked in what ways the conference failed to meet their expectations, the following responses were shared: some of the programs and resources shared were not publicly available; some sessions did not go into enough depth; and some of the presentation material was not directly applicable to their school setting (e.g., community college). All feedback received is taken into account when planning future iterations of the conference.

Discussion and College Mental Health Conference Best Practices

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health needs in college student populations are greater and more complex than ever [7]. Data suggest that an increasing number and percent of college students experience the persistence, exacerbation, or first onset of mental health and substance use problems while possibly receiving no treatment or inadequate treatment [8]. One of the essential ways to grow and learn about changes and recent developments in the field is through educational conferences. Indeed, a space for discussion of college mental health issues, new research studies, model programs from campuses across the country, and best practices is an important ingredient for overcoming existing deficiencies and

barriers to healthy campuses. Gathering people with varied expertise and experiences has led to new initiatives, publications, and enhanced multidisciplinary learning. DoCC serves a role similar to that of a trade show, providing a sampling of potential programs and initiatives to bring to one's own campus. With diverse attendees, the topics discussed can be quickly translated to many campus mental health stakeholders.

For instance, at DoCC in 2019, one panel presented on a Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) embedded model of service delivery in which counselors are allocated to work with students from specific departments and learn their unique needs and culture. Session attendees could develop a version of this model to benefit students on their own campuses. Another speaker shared about YOU at College, an online tool to support student

Table 2 College mental health conference best practices

Presentations

- Provide a variety of presentations that will please a diverse audience (e.g., small colleges/large universities, targeted for clinicians/academic advisors, theory-based/practice-based)
- Offer variety of presentation modalities (i.e., a mix of plenary sessions, 3-h workshops, 90-min mini-workshops, and 75-min concurrent sessions, along with poster presentations)
- Include session options (especially when catering to a broad audience), but not too many. This keeps things focused and ensures that each session provides added value

Planning committee

- Have people on your planning committee who are well connected to other colleges and universities across the country
- Have a diverse planning committee that includes representatives from different campus units (e.g., health service, counseling and psychological services, housing, academic advising, Services for Students with Disabilities). It helps to have a variety of perspectives of how college student mental health shows up on campus to create the larger picture
- Include committee members who are knowledgeable about the latest national trends in college student mental health (research, programming, etc.) in order to keep the conference theme and session topics relevant and timely

Funding

- Aim to keep conference registration fees low for attendees and free for students through donor support along with support from campus schools and colleges
- Garnering support from schools and colleges also serves to create cross-campus buy-in
- It is important to keep the conference free for students to ensure access to information

Logistics

- Keep the conference to 1–2 days to make it more manageable for speakers and attendees who need to travel
- Stay detail oriented! Keep a detailed timeline to stay on track

Virtual events

- Provide opportunities for engagement by hosting semi-structured networking sessions, having an event hashtag for attendees to engage with on social media, and allowing attendees to create virtual profiles so other attendees can reach out to them
- Do not eliminate certain types of sessions just because it is a virtual event; many virtual event platforms (both simple and advanced) allow for poster sessions, for example
- Send frequent reminders out prior to the event, particularly on the day of the event, to ensure that conference-goers have the links to join handy and have not mistakenly forgotten about the event!
- Hold presenter trainings prior to the event to make sure you can troubleshoot and that they are familiar with how the technology works; collect telephone numbers so you can quickly reach all presenters if any issues arise
- Consider time zone differences when arranging the timing of the event
- Leave time for breaks in between sessions to give attendees a chance to stretch and step away from their screens, as well as to allow time to transition over to their next session during events with multiple sessions; record the event and send it to registrants; this is helpful both for those who were unable to join live and those who want to re-watch a particular session
- Provide closed-captioning for the sessions to enhance accessibility

success and well-being, originally launched at Colorado State University. Attendees could reach out to the speaker to potentially bring the tool to their campuses. Or, with new knowledge of available digital programs, they could bring another digital solution to their campuses.

Feedback from the conference over the years has been positive, shaping, and encouraging, and attendees keep returning year after year. Based on our experiences from offering DoCC over nearly two decades, certain strategies improve the effectiveness of conferences, particularly those in the area of college mental health. Table 2 provides a set of college mental health conference best practices. In addition, like many conferences, DoCC was canceled in 2020 due to the pandemic and shifted to a virtual platform in 2021. Table 2 also provides specific suggestions for offering successful virtual college mental health events. Indeed, many conference organizers will continue offering virtual or hybrid events in the future.

The conference does have limitations that are important to note. First, advertising has traditionally been targeted regionally, particularly because the in-person conference has space limitations. Despite attendees from many states and campuses, the limited capacity of the conference has restricted representation and prevented a potentially broader perspective and impact on college mental health. Moreover, the survey feedback received is from self-selected participants, meaning those who did not complete the surveys or attend the conference may offer different viewpoints. Finally, survey feedback suggests that some of the tools and programs presented are too resource-intensive for some campuses, particularly for smaller colleges with fewer students. Therefore, even if the intention to improve student mental health at one's campus is there, large-scale changes cannot always be implemented.

Overall, DoCC has been a public health/educational system/societal mainstay for almost two decades. The main reasons for its continued success seem to be its broad range of speakers (from researchers to social workers to government agency leaders) and attendees (from students to parents to campus leaders); an eagerness to collaborate, bond, and share; growing recognition that college students everywhere need assistance; and the willingness of college campus leaders to recognize the importance of support and even financially enable attendance at these events. When we reflect on the conference, it has been and will continue to be a way to address important issues on campus, shape service delivery, use campus resources to improve college mental health, and, in the process, enhance both educational and mental health/brain-behavior objectives.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval This work involved the evaluation of an educational event, which qualifies for an exemption from the University of Michigan IRB.

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