

# Identifying the Experiences of Two-Year College Students Seeking Mental Health Support

ECMC Foundation Report

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## Executive Summary

### Introduction

Project College Success at VCU was supported by the ECMC Foundation, which funds postsecondary programs focused on College Success and Career Readiness. Due to the rise in the numbers of college students with mental health conditions (McBride, 2017), we chose to examine the mental health of students transferring from two-year community colleges to four-year colleges/universities.

While some 4-year colleges are working to meet the needs of students requiring mental health services, very few community colleges have the resources to address this problem. This problem is brought to light in Virginia through legislation that limits supports available within the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) system. Legislation states VCCS will provide a referral to a mental health professional for a student who requests services; however, they will not provide services on campus (Code of Virginia, 2017, Section 6, p. 11). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the need for mental health supports and inadvertently positioned the timing of this research project to examine the mental health needs of students.

This research study consisted of Phase 1, during which staff conducted focus groups with Virginia Community College System (VCCS) students and interviews with VCCS administrators; Phase 2, which consisted of developing, administering, and analyzing data from a survey taken by VCCS students who had transferred to a 4-year college or university; and Phase 3, where we focus on dissemination efforts.

### The research questions were

- What practices and policies exist in the community college system in Virginia for students who express a need for mental health services? (Phase 1)
- What are administrators' and students' views on the existing practices and policies in Virginia for students who express a need for mental health services? (Phase 1)
- What are the concerns of Virginia community college transfer students, in terms of mental health supports, to make a smooth and successful transfer? (Phase 2)
- What are the facilitators and barriers to transferring from a 2-year community college to a 4-year college or university in Virginia, as self-identified by transfer students with mental health concerns? (Phase 2)
- What services or supports did transfer students find most helpful once in a 4-year setting that those students believe will contribute to retention and completion of their degree? (Phase 2)

### Results

#### Phase 1:

- Academic advisors were supportive and students had positive experiences with them.
- Mental health awareness needs to be heightened, and faculty need to be aware of student accommodations.
- The mental health stigma, while decreasing, still exists.
- Students want to be more engaged in the campus community, perhaps with mental health peer support groups.
- One person at each VCCS site oversees mental health for that campus.
- Mental health professionals are needed on each campus.

#### Phase 2:

- The majority of survey respondents were white women, between the ages of 18-22, attending their 4-year university as a full-time student.
- The top 5 concerns during the transfer process were:
  - Anticipating academic demands
  - Experiencing increased anxiety and depression

- Staying healthy
- Making sure their credits transferred
- Making friends
- For the most part, those top 5 concerns were easily resolved once transferred, mainly on their own or with help from a faculty or staff member, with the exception of experiencing increased anxiety and depression.
- The top contributors to their anxiety and depression were:
  - Personal and family life
  - School
  - Work
  - Finances
- Resources most accessed for mental health issues were an academic advisor, faculty member, and special interest group.

## Recommendations

- Focus funding for researching needs of 2 and 4-year, as well as transfer college students with mental health concerns
- Earmark funding for mental health services on community college campuses
- Provide more training to all college faculty and staff on mental health topics
- Continue to provide virtual options for engagement of students
- Create specialized services for transfer students
- Collect data on needs of students, including mental health

## Conclusion

- This report highlights the need for increased mental health support for college students.
- Resources must be allocated for mental health initiatives.
- This will contribute to the overall well-being of our students.

## **Review of the Literature**

According to Active Minds (2023), a national nonprofit organization supporting mental health awareness and education for students, 39% of students in college experience a significant mental health issue. Mental health issues in the college student population, such as depression, anxiety, and eating disorders, are associated with lower GPA and higher probability of dropping out of college (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2023). Compared to older adults, the 18 to 24-year-old age group has the lowest likelihood to seek help for their mental health. Among the college student population, first-generation and community college transfer students are at an even greater risk. According to new research from Campus Labs, first-generation college students display educational

commitment, self-efficacy, and academic engagement, but lag behind their multigenerational counterparts in resiliency, the ability for students to overcome challenging situations (LaCount, 2018). The increase in college students experiencing mental health challenges is well documented.

According to the ADAA (2018) website, almost 42% of college students surveyed stated that anxiety is a major problem for them. A comparative analysis by Katz and Davidson (2014), found that community college students had more severe psychological concerns and fewer institutional mental health resources than traditional university students. In a study of students at community colleges in 10 states, Eisenberg et al., (2016) found that student usage of mental health services was lower than the prevalence of mental health conditions, which appears to relate to being uninsured or reliant on public insurance. Community college students are also more likely to work during school and to come from low-income families in comparison with students at four-year institutions (Ma and Baum, 2016).

While some 4-year colleges are working to meet the needs of students requiring mental health services, very few community colleges have the resources to address this problem. In fact, the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) states that it will provide a referral to a mental health professional for a student who requests services; however, they will not provide services on campus (Code of Virginia, 2017, Section 6, p. 11). In 2021, this policy was changed to allow Virginia Community Colleges to contract with third party providers to provide mental health services to students although they are not required to do so.

Most community colleges track little, if any, data on the mental health needs of their students. Thirty-seven percent of students in the Virginia Community College System are first generation, (JLARC, 2017) yet there is little research pertaining to the factors which contribute to their lack of postsecondary degree attainment. JLARC also found a reduction in the number of students finishing their degrees at community colleges in Virginia and even fewer transferring to 4-year colleges.

Mehr & Daltry (2016) looked at the differences between transfer and nontransfer students who sought services through a university counseling center. They found that transfer students had significantly higher scores on several mental health factors as compared to non-transfer students. Transfer students were also less involved in athletics and campus organizations but engaged in more work hours per week.

Beiter et al (2015) conducted a survey of undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 24 attending a university in Ohio. Students identified their top three concerns as academic performance, pressure to succeed, and post-graduation plans. The most stressed, anxious, and depressed students were transfers, upperclassmen, and those living off campus.

McBride (2017) states, “the lack of literature and small number of studies relating to the need for mental health services on community college campuses highlights a gap, one that warrants further discussion and investigation. Such research can contribute to the matriculation and retention of students attending a two-year campus” (p. 147). With the development of a survey to collect and interpret data on the mental health challenges and needs of community college students, our study seeks to bring attention to this important issue, providing data to help two- and four-year institutions, higher education governing boards, and legislators make strides in addressing the unmet needs of these students and improve student success.

## **Grant Overview**

The goal of Project College Success is to collect and disseminate data that will increase knowledge of and practices for reducing mental health barriers to students who transfer from a community college to a four-year college or university. Through a grant funded by the ECMC Foundation, project staff surveyed Virginia students who transferred from two-year colleges to four-year colleges to collect information on the barriers and facilitators to obtaining the services and supports needed during this process of entering a new educational environment. Major activities were:

- Conducting interviews with community college administrators (Phase 1)
- Conducting focus groups with current community college students (Phase 1)
- Disseminating a survey to transfer students at six colleges/universities in Virginia (Phase 2)

## **Study Procedures**

In Phase 1, we conducted interviews and focus groups for survey development purposes, with recruitment efforts starting as soon as we received approval from our Institutional Review Board (IRB). Our goals were to schedule interviews with one administrator at each community college in Virginia and complete at least two focus groups with 6-10 community college students in Virginia. Focus group participation was based on convenience, on a first-come, first-served basis. Focus group size was capped at 10 participants, although we had fewer than 10 sign up for each scheduled focus group. Our original recruitment plan involved in-person focus groups within each of the 5 regions as defined by the Virginia Community College System to ensure representation from all over Virginia. We had additional recruitment plans via VCU CTI's [FaceBook](#) and [Twitter](#) accounts. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were unable to pursue in-person meetings. Therefore, we amended our IRB to recruit for virtual focus groups through Zoom.

We utilized IRB approved recruitment emails distributed to our advisory board members along with news blasts shared by key stakeholders throughout the Commonwealth. The

same language from the focus group recruitment email was used in social media, which directed them to contact the researcher's VCU email or phone if they would like to participate or have any questions answered. Potential participants then completed a Focus Group Interest form (Google form). Also included in the focus group protocol, participants were reminded that they were not required to answer any questions, and they could stop participation at any time with no negative effects. They were also asked to not discuss any responses outside of the focus group.

Following the completion of the focus groups, project staff analyzed responses to review for themes or repeated narratives. While taking notes, project staff shared their computer screen to allow respondents to view responses during the Zoom calls to ensure accuracy of recorded responses. The answers from the focus groups were then moved and grouped based on each individual question. No identifying or demographic information was recorded during the call or used in the analysis of answers. Project staff categorized the answers to look for themes, services students listed, and a category for other notes of importance. Project staff shared their analysis with other staff to review for any reviewer bias.

For the administrator interviews, project staff followed the approved IRB protocol for recruitment, using recruitment language that was sent to VCCS staff via email. Project staff then followed up by phone to ensure delivery and offer additional information. Appointments were scheduled for phone interviews.

In Phase 2, we developed the survey based on the interview and focus group results, collected the data, and analyzed the results. We pilot-tested the survey with a small, representative group, consisting of 30 community college students who have sought or accessed mental health services and 2-3 experts in mental health and postsecondary education. The survey was revised to reflect suggested changes by the pilot group and expert review.

Each project staff member worked closely with the chair of the statewide committee of four-year universities and colleges, which is highly involved in Virginia's transfer initiatives. Study staff decided to distribute the survey to community college students who transferred to a four-year institution in spring, summer, or fall semester of 2021. Due to varying protocols at the colleges and universities, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) office at each location was engaged for approval to distribute the survey. Once IRB approval at each institution was obtained, the Director of Research gave the email language and survey link to a representative at the college or university for distribution to their transfer students. They had the option to send out one reminder.

The survey was developed in REDCap, which was chosen because of VCU's security protocols. The REDCap research database software system does not collect IP addresses,

and no email addresses or names were collected. At the end of the survey, respondents had the opportunity to click on a link to a VCU Google form so they could enter their information for an e-gift card to be paid to them for their time spent responding to the survey. The information they provided could not be linked to their REDCap survey responses in any way. In addition, the Google form did not collect IP addresses.

The first and third questions on the survey were screening questions and were required. If a respondent had not transferred from a Virginia community college to a 4-year Virginia college or university, then they did not meet our study criteria. In addition, if they had not experienced any feelings of anxiety or depression, they did not meet our study criteria. After those questions, they were not required to respond to any others to move through the survey. Six universities in Virginia agreed to distribute the survey from November 2021 through November 2022. A total of 263 responses were received.

## **Phase 1 Results**

### Student Focus Groups

Research questions for Phase 1 were:

1. What practices and policies exist in the community college system in VA for students who express a need for mental health services?
2. What are administrators' and students' views on the existing practices and policies in VA for students who express a need for mental health services?

We conducted three focus groups with Virginia Community College System (VCCS) students in July, August, and September of 2020, and we engaged in individual interviews with eight administrators in the VCCS, also from July through September 2020. The qualitative data was reviewed and analyzed to start development of the survey.

The three focus groups across Virginia in 2020 cumulated to eleven participants. These focus groups were conducted virtually over the Zoom platform with two staff members present for each call. Participation in the focus groups was below our projections and should be noted as a limitation to the study. Project staff feel that recruitment and involvement was hindered due the COVID-19 pandemic; however, the information provided was invaluable for the creation of the subsequent survey tool.

Each focus group consisted of five questions being asked with a sixth question providing them the opportunity to offer any additional comments on topics not covered.

Participants were asked the following questions:

1. How do current demands in your life affect your ability to meet the challenges in college?

2. What challenges have you faced in accessing campus supports and services?
3. What campus services or supports have you received that have been effective in assisting you?
4. What recommendations do you have to improve or create services and supports in the community college setting to assist students experiencing mental health challenges?
5. If you are planning to transfer to a 4-year college or university, what concerns do you have about accessing supports and services?
6. What additional comments do you have?

From the focus groups, project staff reviewed the answers and identified four themes. These four themes centered around academic advising, mental health awareness, mental health stigma, and community engagement. From those four themes, participants went into more detail about the challenges, barriers, or positive aspects. For instance, under academic advising, some students shared very positive experiences with supportive and informative advisors at their campus. Overall, it was agreed that this was an area of their respective institutions that were understaffed and, as such, experienced communication delays. During the discussion, students shared their expectations, hopes, and concerns regarding their upcoming transition to a new institution. Specifically, they expressed their anticipation of either reliving their positive experiences or addressing any negative encounters they had encountered with academic advising.

Mental health awareness emerged and echoed across the focus groups that professors and college staff did not always demonstrate an understanding of the Disability Support Service (DSS) office procedures related to a student's accommodations. There were instances shared where college professors 'outed' students by disclosing to classmates that a student had accommodations. Others spoke of the need for more education to professors around the DSS's Memorandum of Accommodation (MOA) between a student and professor. MOAs are the documentation that students provide to professors to relay what accommodations the student has been approved to use from the DSS office. Additionally, several of the remarks from participants related to the need for awareness also shined a light on the mental health stigmas they perceived on their college campuses.

And finally, the theme of community engagement surfaced. Students shared how they would like to see more mental health peer support groups or more campus-wide engagement opportunities. One focus group participant shared how the COVID-19 pandemic positively impacted their community college in that they worked to use technology to increase opportunities for connection. Prior to the pandemic, they had not felt connected to the campus as they had family and work obligations. Through the increased technology and efforts from the college, they saw a positive change happening to get connected.



The responses from the focus group participants played a crucial role in the development of the survey tool questions.

### Administrator Interviews

The request for interviews went out at the same time as the start of the pandemic (Spring 2020), during which administrators were planning for virtual instruction. Through help from the VCCS and through individual contacts, we were able to conduct an interview with over 30% of the schools in the VCCS.

Each administrator interview consisted of seven questions with a potential follow up question as noted below:

1. What is your role at your college? What is your involvement with students?
2. In what specific areas do you believe that your campus has been most responsive and supportive to the needs of students with mental health challenges?
3. In what specific areas do you believe your campus could be more responsive to the needs of these students?
4. Do you believe that faculty/administration at large, is equipped with the necessary knowledge, information and resources necessary to adequately provide support services to students with mental health challenges attending your college? Why or Why not?
5. What are some specific ways in which you believe faculty/administration need to be supported and encouraged to seek out information and assistance when working with students with mental health challenges?
6. What are your thoughts on potential barriers that students with mental health challenges might face when transferring to a four-year college or university?  
**Follow-up question for #6:** Are there strategies or practices that you would like to see in place?
7. Would you like to add any additional comments not covered in the interview? Why or Why not?

Responses were quite consistent across schools. Each administrator indicated that their college has a point person who oversees mental health as one part of their job. At the time of the interview, all schools in the VCCS refer students out to the community for mental health services because of their statewide policy; however, they are varied in their procedures for dealing with mental health issues. One difference between the administrator interview responses and student focus group responses is that administrators feel that the faculty members have been the most important points of contact for the students, or at least the most important initial contact. Those interviewed stated that faculty members have some training to recognize the signs of mental health

issues and make the referrals. However, all respondents believe that they need more training.

Every administrator interviewed would like to have a mental health professional on campus. They also believe that students will have better resources on 4-year campuses, but different stressors (this aspect was not discussed during the focus groups because the students had no idea what to expect). Administrators stated that those new stressors include things such as the students might be leaving home and familiarity for the first time, needing to navigate a new campus, and developing new relationships. They will also need to advocate for themselves. Some of the respondents talked about the idea of a transfer boot camp, while some provide transfer services and advice. Finally, because of the pandemic and the focus on mental health, the stigma of reaching out for help has been reduced even more. And with that is an awareness that communication needs to be improved.

*Phase 1, Research Question 1: What practices and policies exist in the community college system in Virginia for students who express a need for mental health services?*

The administrators indicated that their policies are similar across the VCCS. Each college has a person who oversees mental health as a part of their job (but not the main part of their job). The students in the focus groups did not mention this. After the COVID-19 shutdown and the raising of the awareness of mental health issues across the country, the standing policy of referring students out to the community for services has changed. In September 2021, VCCS announced that the VCCS State Board approved a policy change regarding mental health services. VCCS State Board approved for VCCS colleges, “to contract with third-party providers to offer mental health services to students” (Babb, 2021). It should be noted that the VCCS State Board stated that these services were approved through the use of available federal funds related to COVID-19 and not a long-term sustainable solution. Furthermore, “Virginia’s current state budget includes language prohibiting the usage of state tax dollars to continue programs started with federal COVID-19 relief funding” (Babb, 2021).

*Phase 1, Research Question 2: What are administrators’ and students’ views on the existing practices and policies in Virginia for students who express a need for mental health services?*

At the time of the interviews, administrators would like to see a change in the existing policy of referring students out to the community. They believe that their transfer students will receive more timely and cost-effective services once they start at their four-year college or university. On the other hand, the participating community college students would like to see a higher level of awareness and likelihood of providing the necessary accommodations from their instructors.

## Phase 2 Results

### Survey

Research questions for Phase 2 are as follows:

1. What are the concerns of Virginia community college transfer students, in terms of mental health supports, to make a smooth and successful transfer?
2. What are the facilitators and barriers to transferring from a 2-year community college to a 4-year college or university in Virginia, as self-identified by transfer students with mental health concerns?
3. What services or supports did transfer students find most helpful once in a 4-year setting that those students believe will contribute to retention and completion of their degree?

### Demographics of respondents

First generation students who completed the survey were representative of the population, according to the JLARC (2017) report. As mentioned earlier, JLARC's 2017 findings revealed that 37% of community college students are first generation. Our survey results also support this, with 37% of our respondents indicating that they are first generation. The following tables show the demographics of our participants.

Table 1: Gender breakdown of respondents

<b>Gender Category</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
Woman	166 (63%)
Man	79 (30%)
Gender variant/Non binary	15 (6%)
Prefer not to answer	3 (1%)

The majority of respondents to our survey identify as women, at 63%. According to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia's (2023) research report on demographics of Virginia transfer students during the 2019-20 academic year, 56% of all transfer students were women, with 44% men. Because of this, one limitation to our study might be that the gender breakdown of respondents is not representative of the population. However, another explanation could be that more women who transferred during 2021 had feelings of anxiety or depression.

Table 2: Race/Ethnicity of respondents

<b>Race/Ethnicity Category</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
Asian	19 (7%)
Black/African American	22 (8%)
Hispanic/Latino	25 (10%)
White/Caucasian	168 (64%)
Two or more	14 (5%)
Not listed	5 (2%)
Prefer not to answer	10 (4%)

The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) Fact Sheet from 2020-21 shows that 43% of transfer students during that year were students of color. This is compared to our results, which show that 32% of respondents are students of color.

Table 3: Age breakdown of Respondents

<b>Age Range*</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
18-22	174 (66%)
23-26	36 (14%)
27-30	28 (11%)
31 and older	25 (7%)

\*Does not add up to 100% because some respondents chose not to answer this question.

Most of the respondents (66%) are of traditional college student age of 18-22 years.

Table 4: Full or Part-time status of respondents

<b>Full or Part-time</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
Full-time	230 (87.5%)
Part-time	33 (12.5%)

Most students who participated in our study (87.5%) were enrolled full-time when they responded to the survey. In addition, community college transfer students from across Virginia responded to the survey (see Addendum, Figure 2) and were representative across all regions of the Commonwealth.

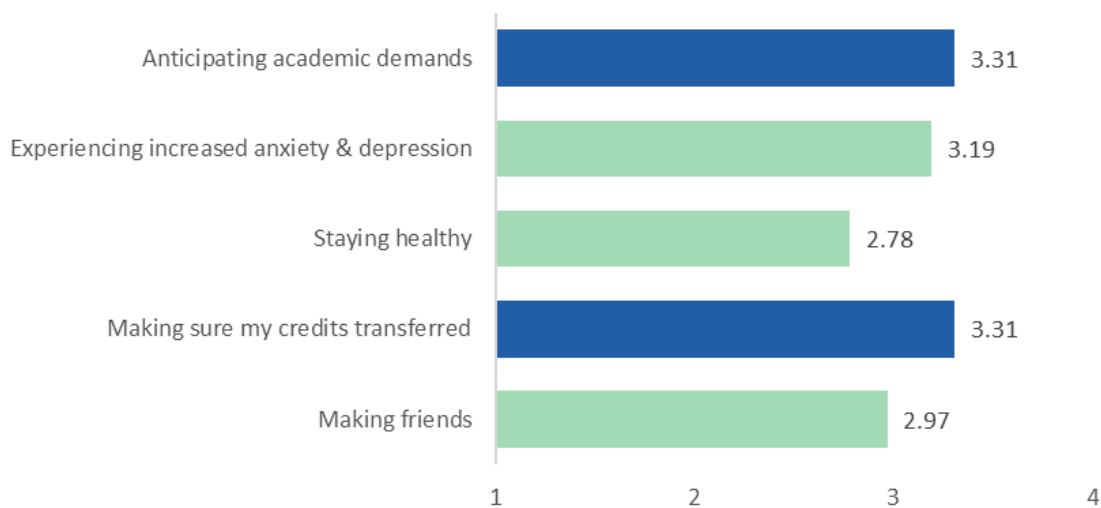
## Concerns and contributions during the transfer process

Eisenberg, et al, (2016) found that student usage of mental health services was lower than the prevalence of mental health conditions, which appears to relate to being uninsured or reliant on public insurance. Transfer students were eligible to participate in our survey if they indicated that they had feelings of anxiety and/or depression. Of our respondents, 159 (or 60.5%) stated they knew how to locate resources on campus to help with mental health. On the other hand, only 46 (or 17.5%) of respondents accessed a mental health counselor.

Respondents were asked to indicate how concerned they were about certain aspects prior to transferring to a 4-year college or university. They were then asked about whether or not those concerns were resolved after the transfer process. Most respondents were able to resolve their concerns with the help of friends or with the help of a staff or faculty member. Of note is that only about half of respondents who were very concerned with experiencing increased anxiety or depression were able to resolve that concern after they transferred. This graph represents the top 5 concerns, as indicated by the respondents.

Figure 1: Top 5 concerns anticipated by respondents during the transfer process

Transfer students were most concerned with **anticipating academic demands** and **making sure their credits transferred**.



Note: Responses were based on a scale from 1-4, with 1=Not concerned at all; 2=A little concerned; 3=Somewhat concerned; and 4=Very concerned

Table 5: How the top 5 concerns anticipated by respondents during the transfer process were resolved

Concern	How concern was resolved*			
	On my own	With help from a friend	With help from faculty or staff member	Not able to resolve
Anticipation academic demands	162 (62%)	10 (4%)	51 (19%)	30 (11%)
Experiencing increased anxiety and depression	79 (30%)	25 (9.5%)	15 (6%)	131 (50%)
Staying healthy	185 (70%)	18 (7%)	4 (1.5%)	27 (10%)
Making sure my credits transferred	71 (27%)	1 (.4%)	162 (62%)	7 (3%)
Making friends	132 (50%)	40 (15%)	4 (1.5%)	52 (20%)

\*Percentages will not add up to 100 because the category “Not a concern” is not included.

The survey data results indicate that most respondents were able to resolve their concerns during transferring on their own or with help from a friend or faculty/staff member. However, half of the students who were concerned with experiencing increased anxiety and depression were not able to resolve that concern.

Table 6: Top four aspects that contribute to anxiety and/or depression for first and non-first generation respondents during the transition process

<b>Contributors to anxiety and/or depression (% total of Occasionally and Very Often contributes)</b>	<b>First generation</b>	<b>Non First generation</b>
Personal/Family Life	81%	79%
School	91%	93%
Work	59%	56%
Finances	77%	71%

An independent samples *t*-test indicates no significant differences between first generation and non-first generation respondents in the top aspects contributing to anxiety and/or depression.

Another notable finding was that 71% of respondents did not attempt to contact anyone on campus for mental health resources. Of the remaining, 20% contacted someone and received help, while 9% attempted to contact someone and did not receive help.

### Resources accessed

The next section of the survey listed out the resources available to students on college campuses. Participants were asked to indicate which resources they accessed once they transferred to their four-year college or university. The next table shows the top 3 resources accessed by the respondents.

Table 7: Resources accessed by respondents after transferring to a 4-year college or university

<b>Resource</b>	<b>% Accessed</b>	<b>% Did not Access</b>
Academic Advisor	45%	55%
Faculty Member	32%	68%
Special Interest Group	20%	80%

Resources that were accessed by a very small percentage of our respondents were the Food Pantry, the CARE Team, Administrators, and Military Student Services.

Finally, when asked to indicate their agreement with the following statement - With the existing resources available at my college or university, I feel like my mental health needs are being met - many respondents chose “neither agree nor disagree” (49%). Twenty-three percent disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 27% agreed or strongly agreed.

## **Discussion & Recommendations**

Both the quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately, then examined together for triangulation of the data. In reviewing the responses from the focus groups, administrative interviews and surveys, there were some commonalities and differences. Most notably, all three groups spoke to the importance of academic advisors and their role in students’ lives. Another similarity surfaced around the perceived role of the college in providing access to mental health services. The difference between the groups centered around who played the crucial role in supporting students to locate mental health supports either on campus or in their community. In both the student focus groups and the survey, respondents accessed their academic advisors or a faculty member to help with their mental health concerns; however, very few students indicated that they sought help from a licensed mental health provider.

*Phase 2 Research Question 1. What are the concerns of Virginia community college transfer students, in terms of mental health supports, to make a smooth and successful transfer?*

Mu and Fosnacht (2019) explored the important role academic advisors play on postsecondary education systems and articulated that academic advising is the most important function within student affairs. As mentioned in Figure 1, the top 5 concerns of transfer students were:

- Anticipating academic demands
- Experiencing increased anxiety & depression
- Staying healthy
- Making sure my credits transferred
- Making friends.

Survey respondents and focus group participants both reflected an increased need for access to academic advising resources at their institution. The majority of respondents stated the resource they accessed most was academic advising. This project supports the existing literature that speaks to the important role advisors have across a student's educational experience. Academic advising culture differs across institutions in terms of caseload, meeting frequency, and program models. For a transfer student, timely access to their academic advisor is critical for student success. Ensuring that academic advisors are well versed on campus resources related to mental health challenges will only strengthen the students' learning and career outcomes.

From the administrator interviews, focus group responses, and survey responses, Virginia college students and administrators spoke to the need for mental health support on college campuses. VCCS and 4-year universities alike were confronted with that need through the COVID-19 pandemic and began looking for solutions.

*Phase 2 Research Question 2. What are the facilitators and barriers to transferring from a 2-year community college to a 4-year college or university in Virginia, as self-identified by transfer students with mental health concerns?*

Transfer students with mental health concerns as represented in the survey and focus groups spoke about the stigma of seeking mental health services through campus but also not following through with seeking help. Half of the students in the survey who were concerned with experiencing increased anxiety and depression were not able to resolve that concern.

Regardless of first-generation status, the top contributors to transfer students' anxiety and/or depression are school, personal and family life, finances, and work, which could be a barrier to transferring to a four-year college or university. Additionally, their top concerns



indicated in the previous section (academic demands, anxiety and depression, staying healthy, transferring credits, and making friends) can also be barriers. In the next section, we discuss the resources the participants accessed once they transferred, to help facilitate the transfer process.

*Phase 2 Research Question 3. What services or supports did transfer students find most helpful once in a 4-year setting that those students believe will contribute to retention and completion of their degree?*

In reviewing responses across all three groups, students in both the focus groups and survey, indicated academic advising as one the most sought supports on campus. This again matches the literature of the role academic advising plays in overall student success for college students (Holland, Westwood, & Hanif, 2020). What was more notable however, was the placement of special interest groups within both groups. In the focus groups, students spoke to specific special interest groups that positively attributed to their successful participation in college, accessing services, or navigating transfer situations. Specific programs, such as NOVA Cares, were mentioned in addition to collaborating with vocational rehabilitation counselors off campus and campus extracurricular activities. Survey respondents did not have an open-ended format to submit specific resources by name but listed special interest groups as their 3rd highest response.

As such, community engagement activities in the form of special programs supporting transfer students, extracurricular groups, and academic advisors combined build upon a student's strengths in navigating and successfully transitioning to their transfer school of choice.

## Limitations

This study has three main limitations. The first limitation of our study is that we did not have a question about how to make it easier to access mental health resources on campus. The second limitation is that our access to all Virginia community college transfer students was limited due to IRB regulations and protecting students from being inundated with surveys. The third limitation is that the survey results are based on self-reporting on events that had occurred one year prior to taking the survey.

While we do not believe these limitations affected the overall findings in our research, we do have recommendations to address the limitations. First, we recommend adding a question that focuses specifically on facilitating access to mental health resources on their college campus. Second, we suggest partnering with a faculty member on each campus to guide the researcher through that college or university's IRB process, as well as to find the best time to approach students at their particular school.

## Recommendations

Based on our results, we have recommendations for the following groups:

### Funders/Researchers

- Focus funding priorities on research on the needs of college students with mental health challenges on 2-year and 4-year campuses
- Expand the body of research on the needs of transfer students
- Replicate the study on a national level

### Policymakers

- Initiate JLARC study on college student mental health at Virginia's 2 and 4 year colleges and universities
- Appropriate funding for mental health services on community college campuses
- Increase funding for mental health services at 4-year colleges and universities

### Colleges and Universities

- Provide training for students, faculty, academic advisors and staff to increase their awareness and identification of students who demonstrate symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions.
- Contract with third-party providers to offer mental health services to students when services on campus are not provided
- Provide virtual options for students to access and engage in campus activities
- Create specialized services and outreach, such as One Stop services and Transfer Centers, for transfer students.
- Collect data on the basic needs, including mental health, of students at individual institutions.

## **Closing**

In conclusion, this project highlights the pressing need for increased mental health support for college students throughout Virginia. Through a comprehensive analysis of the focus group respondents, administrative interviews, and survey respondents, it is evident that campus-wide policy and practice changes are needed to address this critical issue.

Our findings underscore the far-reaching impact of mental health on the well-being and academic success of college students. The alarming statistics regarding the prevalence of mental health disorders and the rising demand for services emphasize the urgency to expand and enhance the existing support systems. To effectively address this challenge, it is imperative for educational institutions, policymakers, and community stakeholders to collaborate and allocate resources towards implementing proactive and accessible mental

health initiatives. This should include the provision of counseling services, awareness campaigns, and the integration of campus based and community-based services.

By prioritizing mental health support, we can foster a nurturing and inclusive environment that enables students to thrive academically and emotionally. Investing in mental health not only contributes to the overall well-being of students but also positively impacts their prospects and the broader society.

Considering our research, we recommend a series of actionable steps to increase mental health support for college students in Virginia. These measures include increasing funding for mental health services on community college campuses, for counseling centers, staffing, and training mental health resources on campuses, and implementing preventive mental health programs. Additionally, fostering partnerships between colleges, mental health organizations, and community resources can help create a comprehensive support network for students.

By implementing these recommendations and ensuring their sustained commitment, we can pave the way for a brighter future, where mental health is given the attention, it deserves.

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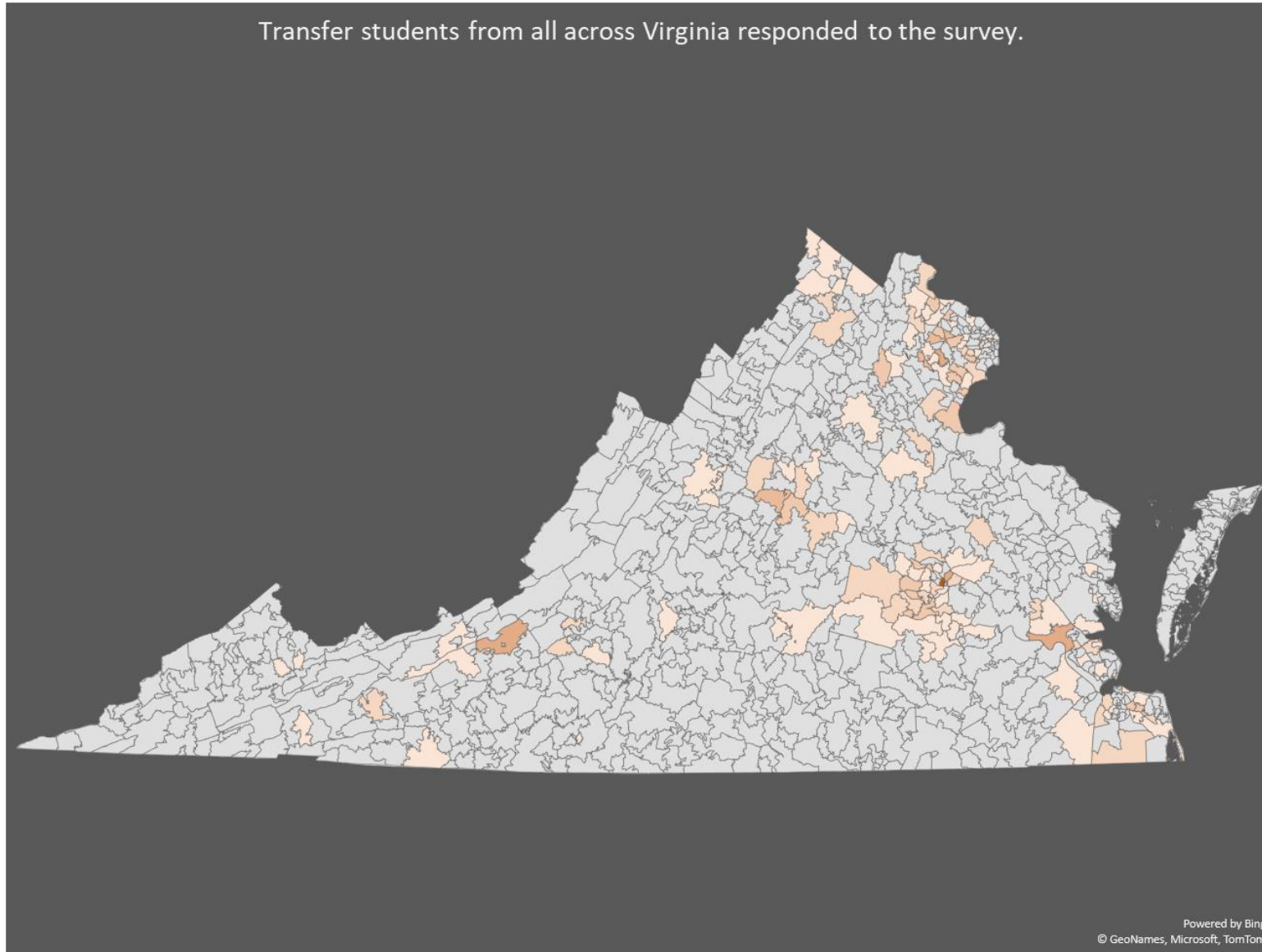
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Addendum

Figure 2: Geographic distribution of responses



# Mental Health & College

## Understanding the Needs of Community College Transfer Students

In 2018, the Anxiety and Depression Association of America revealed a shocking truth: anxiety affects nearly 42% of college students. Project College Success conducted a study across Virginia and surveyed 263 community college transfer students, uncovering the profound influence of anxiety and/or depression throughout their college journey. This project aimed to find out what community college transfer students' needs were and how best to serve them.

### What we Found?

**136** zip codes

Participants from the survey represented **136 zip codes** across Virginia.



The **top 4 contributors** to anxiety and depression were personal/family life, school, work, and finances.

*"The biggest thing for me is anxiety - I have constant anxiety."*

-Community College Student, 2020



Academic advisors were the most accessed resource on campuses.



5 out of 10 were not able to reduce their anxiety after transfer.

### What Can Be Done?

#### Allocate Resources

Develop legislative initiatives that permanently fund third party vendors or other mental health support across all colleges in Virginia.

#### Focus Funding

Utilize funding for first generation college students and other groups that will positively impact their outcomes as well as create pathways for social mobility. It is of note that 37% of respondents from the survey were first generation community college transfer students.

#### Increase Awareness

Support programs and messaging to students that their mental health needs matter and can be supported.

#### Provide Training

Collaborate with campus and community resources to develop, implement, and create partnerships across departments, faculty, and staff.