

“They're Coming in Pretty Defeated:” Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

Limited research explores postsecondary disability resource professionals' (DRPs) perceptions and experiences supporting students during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of a larger study utilizing national survey and interview data, this paper explores DRPs' experiences and observations related to student mental health during the pandemic-related lockdowns and subsequent transitions back to in-person campus settings. The findings of this study reveal DRPs are grappling with increasing student numbers, continuing need for expanded mental health accommodations and supports, and a persisting urgency to re-examine the role of the disability resource office (DRO) on campus related to student mental health. Implications and strategies for practice.

Keywords: disability resource professionals, mental health, higher education

Summary of Relevant Literature

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively influenced postsecondary community members' mental health because of the disruption of daily routines, access to life necessities, and other associated factors (Caron, 2021; Flaherty, 2020; Petty, 2021; Scott & Aquino, 2020, 2021). Postsecondary students are experiencing additional stress and anxiety (Son et al., 2020), with a large proportion of young adults impacted by mental health problems associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Anderson, 2020; Center for Postsecondary Research, 2021; Sontag-Padilla, 2020; Wood, 2021). Educators and other members of the higher education community have also experienced pressures impacting their overall mental health (Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021; Zhai & Du, 2020). As research continues to document the changing and developing impact of the pandemic on mental health (Grubic et al. 2020; Madaus et al., 2021; Savage et al., 2020; Weissman, 2021), there is growing recognition of the long-term need to pay increased attention

to mental health of students and the broader campus community (Carrasco, 2022). This brief explores the practice of disability resource professionals (DRPs) supporting mental health needs during the pandemic.

Participants

Data for this paper were collected from a national project exploring the experiences and perceptions of DRPs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, three distinct data collections —two survey data collections in May and December 2020

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Table 1

Change in Access to Counseling and Mental Health Services for Disabled Students, December 2020, By Percent

DRP Perceptions of Change	
Improvement	44.9
No Improvement	13.7
Gotten Worse	15.7
Never a Barrier	9.4
Do Not Know	16.3

Table 2

Change in Students Registering with DRO for Psychological Disabilities Related to Mental and Emotional Health, Fall '19 to Fall '20, By Percent

Trends in DRO Data	
Increase Reported	59.4
No Increase Reported	9.2
	7.7
Not Applicable	3.7
Do Not Know	20.0

counseling centers.

kind of see what was going on with their mental health and figure out okay, this is something that they've struggled with, or maybe something developed because of the pandemic for some students. So, I think that it is going to be really important that universities keep tabs on students' wellbeing.

Thomas, a DRP in a rural, private four-year institution with less than 1,000 students in overall enrollment, has tried to find creative outreach approaches to support students' mental health. Through collaborations with other administrative areas, he is committed to support student mental health before accommodations are needed:

I've been working with the dean's office. I've been working with the director of athletics to create these morning programs, having morning yoga, breathing exercises and breathing techniques, just those small things that I feel like can help our students cope a little bit more...it's those students who I see more often, they're struggling with just everyday coping. So, it was just always kind of, okay, let's talk about it, let's get it out. Now, let's work on strategies for success. They needed this kind of every day, checking in with themselves type of help. And so I feel like that we need to just have, whether it's flyers all throughout their dorms, or, like I said, the morning yoga... these wellness classes to help develop the student holistically, instead of just kind of looking at, they need accommodations.

While DROs may not always have the capacity to support mental health outreach, some participants noted that their institutions bring in other administrative areas to better support this work. For Tim, an accommodations specialist in a private urban four-year institution, student mental health can be an institution-wide collaboration before formal self-disclosure occurs:

I would say I know that the university as a whole is definitely focusing more on those things. We've got extensive outreach, especially for students who were online only last year, whether they were living close to campus or living literally anywhere around the world. So I would say that our office has not, we're not necessarily increasing anything, anything in those areas, but the university as a whole certainly is.

Although pre-disclosure may be an area beyond the traditional scope of DROs, many participants noted that student mental health is still important to be

aware of and support well in advance of students' self-identification and request for accommodations.

Disability Resource Professionals' Mental Health

DRPs work to support student needs, including mental health-related accommodations. In order to do this important work, participant comments revealed that a new type of mental health support was needed—their own. Within the interviews, participants indicated two emerging themes related to DRP mental health: (1) factors impacting their own mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic and (2) the need to create work environments to support colleagues' mental health. For Yvonne, an assistant director at a public two-year institution whose office serves approximately 1,000 students annually, it was important for her to make intentional changes to better safeguard their own mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic:

I've had to work on being able to separate myself because it's taken a lot...it also takes a toll on you. I hear the desperation and the worry [from the students] and it's me, myself, I'm trying to help them. But on the flip side, on the personal side, I have those same concerns and those same worries and that self-care, that has been a big challenge because I'm so focused on work. And then my family. At times, I'm like, well, I need a minute. You know, I need to think about me, because if I can't, if I'm not good, how productive am I going to be for my students or for my family?

And while institutions may not have anticipated the need to safeguard employee mental health throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, administrators in leadership positions can still create supportive environments

In the constantly changing institutional return-to-campus plans, many members of the institutional community may feel left out in the process. Throughout the pandemic, administrative roles changed, and work may have increased. As the shift to remote learning impacted not only students and faculty, but DRP administrators as well, being more aware and supportive about the mental health of all institutional members will continue to be important in this post-lockdown transition for the higher education environment.

network of support, and promote strategic campaigns for overall mental health and equity (JED, n.d.). As campus initiatives (including, for example, mental health summits, awareness campaigns, listening sessions, town halls, and task forces) bring together campus constituents to share expertise and problem solving, DRPs have a valuable perspective to share. DRP knowledge and skill sets in the areas of promoting equity, destigmatizing disability, and supporting inclusive design strategies have great potential for informing the conversation about proactive mental health support on campus.

Recognize and Support Professional Mental Health Needs

An incidental but important finding emerging from the interviews with DRPs was the candid report of mental health strain. Working to support the growing number of student requests and within the rapidly changing working conditions, DRPs experienced their own personal challenges to health and wellbeing while also supporting their institutions. Eikenberry (2022) described “leadership fatigue” (para. 1) as a current hazard in the workplace that requires moving past an achiever mindset, to recognize personal levels of strain and fatigue that may impact work performance. Emerging resources such as those generated by the American College Health (ACHA) Co-VAC initiative (ACHA, n.d.) highlight the importance of campus personnel strategies. Practices such as virtual drop-in groups supported by a mental health professional are needed to ameliorate individual-level symptoms of burnout (H. Zesiger, personal communication, February 9, 2022).

DRP supervisors are encouraged to extend flexibility and new capacities for remote work where possible. Strategies to reduce some forms of work load such as acquiring a DRO data management system take on new importance in alleviating DRP role strain. On a personal level, DRPs are reminded it is more important than ever to take advantage of the vibrant community of DRO professionals available to problem solve dilemmas, vent frustrations, and celebrate successes. Whether colleagues on campus, online list serves, or state and national level professional gatherings, sharing experiences and brainstorming solutions has never been more important for supporting the important work of DRPs.

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