



MUS Suicide Prevention & Mental Health Task Force Recommendations Review & COVID- 19 Update

The Montana University System

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Submitted on behalf of the MUS Suicide Prevention & Mental
Health Task Force

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About the Task Force

The task force was created under the direction of Commissioner Christian to address mental health and suicide prevention throughout the entire university system. The task force was charged with assessing student mental health services and suicide prevention efforts, establishing best practices, and making recommendations for improvements. Made up of mental health and wellness providers and practitioners, faculty, staff, students, and administrators, the task force has approached this charge from a holistic, evidence-based, and systems perspective by focusing on supporting and advancing education, clinical services, and cultures of care through system-level strategies.

Executive Summary

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, student mental health has been a **top priority and concern** for many across the Montana University System. This concern is reflected nationally. In an American Council of Education survey, more campus presidents across the country ranked student mental health as the most pressing issue facing them—above enrollment, online learning, and the many other challenges that the pandemic has presented.ⁱ

There is reason to be concerned. The JED Foundation and Active Minds both indicate that **60% of college students report that their mental health has worsened during the pandemic.**ⁱⁱ The Center for Collegiate Mental Health reports that **85% of students nationally have experienced significant mental health impacts in at least one area of their lives** including academics, loneliness and isolation, career development, basic needs insecurity, relationships, and finances.ⁱⁱⁱ

Even while the pandemic has brought new mental health challenges for students, many campus and system leaders, administrators, clinicians, faculty, staff, and students know that **student mental health has long been a rising concern.** MUS institutions consistently report an increase in students presenting with mental health concerns and upticks in the need for services. Student well-being is inherently important, and mental health distress also has significant impacts on student's academic performance. The 2020 Healthy Minds Study, a decade-long national study of college student mental health, shows that within a month of taking the survey, **83% of students experienced emotional or mental difficulties that hurt their academic performance.**^{iv}

83% of students experienced emotional or mental difficulties that impacted their academic performance

In the Montana University System, supporting student mental health has long been a **foundational part of our system-wide approach to student success.** At the direction of Commissioner Clayton T. Christian, the MUS Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Task Force was formed in 2015 to assess student mental health services and suicide prevention efforts throughout the system. In 2016, the task force developed a set of **eleven recommendations** intended to support the implementation and ongoing maintenance of best practices across the Montana University System.

85% of students nationally have experienced significant mental health impacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic

Throughout the pandemic, maintaining these best practices has been as important as ever. At the same time, the pandemic has also demanded rapid response and adaptability, innovative problem-solving. While supporting student mental health will always be a necessary and ongoing part of student success and student affairs, the MUS **rose to the challenge.**

This report details MUS campus and system **response to student mental health challenges brought on and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.** The report provides an update on the ongoing work of the MUS Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Task Force to better student mental health, create holistic cultures of care across the system, and promote effective suicide prevention efforts.

Montana University System COVID-19 Pandemic Response Highlights

MSU Billings created a Student Health Ambassador program that supported students in being strong COVID safety advocates, supported others in quarantine and isolation by sending care packages, and supported the university in keeping student well-being at the forefront.

Montana State University's Counseling and Psychological Services hosted virtual "connection spaces" for student groups who experience more significant COVID-19 impacts including international students, student parents, graduate students, and mindfulness skills sessions.

Montana Technological University created social media campaigns to share wellness activities, provide students with information about norms during the pandemic, and promote health and safety protocols.

At Great Falls College, the Student Engagement department provided outreach and created virtual exercises for students' mental and physical health.

Flathead Valley Community College created a COVID Quick Response Team, hired a COVID Support Specialist, and strengthened relationships with the on-campus Student Health Clinic.

Miles Community College participate in the JED Foundation's "Embrace the Awkward" campaign intended to reduce mental health stigma and give students valuable knowledge and tools in helping peers in distress.

Helena College created a Student Wellbeing Resource & Crisis Protocol Handbook to bring the right resources to students and to share knowledge of student mental health resources and strategies with the larger campus community.

The University of Montana launched Mindful Minutes, a pilot program intended to increase resilience, reduce stress, and improve mental well-being by providing students with brief 5-10 minute sessions that include evidence-based skills and practice using them.

The Counseling Center at MSU Northern hosted group classes and sessions on common COVID-related mental health issues such as grief and loss and burn-out. MSUN connected counseling graduate students to help facilitate sessions and to provide real-world training for students.

UM Western held a collaborative self-care workshop to acknowledge the efforts of staff in their work to support students throughout the pandemic.

You Matter MUS

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on student mental health, the MUS Suicide Prevention & Mental Health Task Force has worked with the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education to launch **You Matter MUS**, a set of services intended to augment campus efforts to support increased student mental health needs resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through You Matter MUS, every student and employee in the MUS will have access to **three online mental health and wellness services and supports**—a provider referral platform, a mental health literacy and suicide prevention training, and a mental health and wellness mobile app.

Because the mental health impacts of the pandemic will be long-lasting, You Matter resources will be available to students and employees in the MUS for the **next three years**. These services were funded through Coronavirus Relief Funds of the CARES Act monies allocated by Governor Steve Bullock in November 2020.

The online services are intended to **directly address** the specific needs of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the mental health supports that are part of You Matter MUS also represent the holistic approach to student mental health and **longstanding priorities** forwarded by the MUS Suicide Prevention & Mental Health Task Force including increased access to clinical services, evidence-based education, and strategies that promote and build cultures of **care and wellness**.

Kognito is an online, interactive training geared at supporting mental health by giving students, faculty, and staff training in mental health literacy and suicide prevention. The trainings include education on positive coping strategies, tools for recognizing students in distress, strategies for communicating concerns, and how to take action to find more support.

 **Kognito**

Thriving Campus is an online referral platform where student and employees can search for mental health providers and specialists in their campus and home communities. Users can search for providers by a variety of filters, including telehealth delivery, location, accepting patients, accepted insurance, and more. Campus providers can also use the platform to refer students to specific providers and close the referral loop by tracking whether students used the referral.

thrivingcampus

You at College is a mobile app that brings evidence-based content, interactive tools, and resources to MUS students and employees. You at College gives users personalized content to meet their specific needs including mental health and wellness needs, suicide prevention, strategies for campus life, connection to campus and community resources, and supports for academic success.

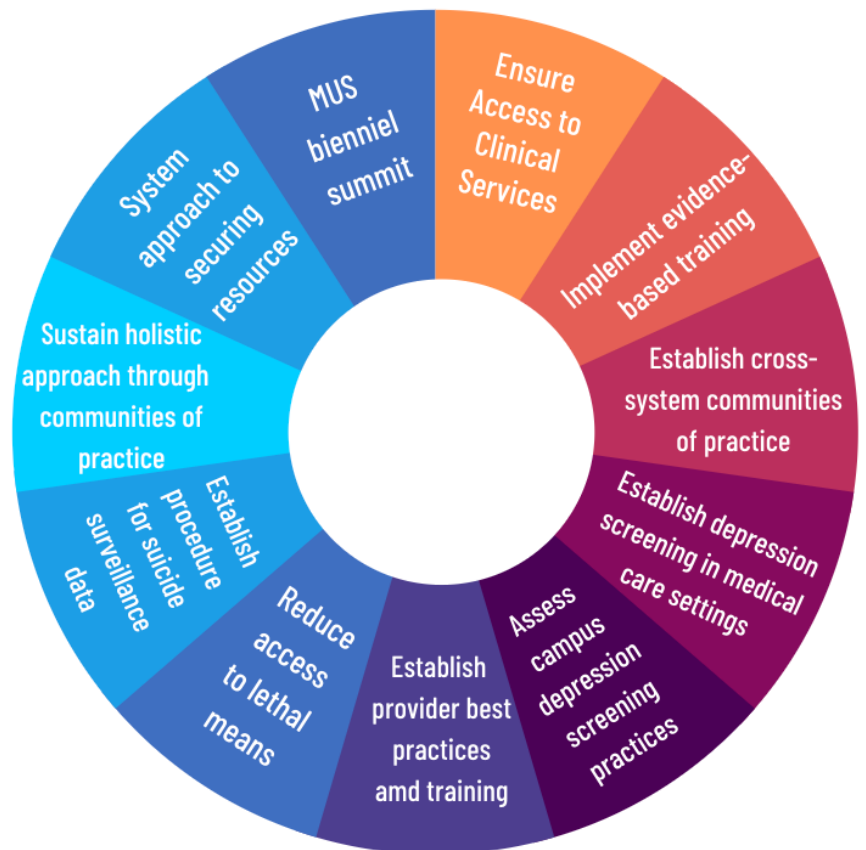
 **YOU**^{at} COLLEGE

MUS Suicide Prevention & Mental Health Task Force Recommendations Review

In 2016, the MUS Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Task Force developed a set of recommendations intended to establish shared best practices for supporting student mental health and enhancing suicide prevention efforts across the system. Even while most institutions implemented most recommendations shortly following the 2016 report, the recommendations remain **foundational touchpoints** for a robust system-level approach to student mental health and suicide prevention.

The task force periodically requests campuses to report on recommendations to highlight and share out successful approaches to implementation, to identify persistent challenges to implementing recommendations, and to **identify potential areas of new or increased need**. This report shares key highlights from recommendations and points to avenues for continued work in these areas.

MUS Suicide Prevention & Mental Health Task Force Recommendations



*A full list of MUS Suicide Prevention & Mental Health Task Force Recommendations can be found at www.mus.edu/che/arsa/mentalhealth/task_force_recommendations.html

Key Findings

Demand for clinical services continues to increase.

High-quality, adequate clinical staffing continues to be an **essential component** of supporting student mental health. MUS institutions and students have benefitted from the recommendation to have an on-staff counselor or to contract with community providers so that students have access to clinical services. MUS campuses report a consistent increase in the need for counseling services and strain on staff to meet that need, the shortage of community mental health care providers in rural Montana, and Institutions also report the need for staff support to address burnout and the importance of competitive salaries in this high-demand field. For institutions that do not have on-staff counselors, campuses report the need for strong partnerships with community providers, robust cultures of care on campus, and clear communication to students about availability and ease of access to counseling resources.

MUS campuses value common training, education, and communities of practice.

MUS institutions report delivery of robust suicide prevention training and focus on providing evidence-based education, reducing stigma, and creating cultures of care. Many institutions in the MUS provide Question, Persuade, and Refer (QPR) training, Mental Health First Aid, and Kognito. Institutions report the value in sharing common trainings across the system and building communities of practice through the Task Force, informal networks, and the Montana College Counseling Association.

MUS institutions emphasize the importance of **training for specific groups**, particularly for providers, student employees such as residence hall advisors and peer mentors, and other staff such as Behavior Intervention Teams. Institutions recommend leveraging shared services to pursue **common trainings**.

Means Reduction continues to be a priority strategy for suicide prevention.

Reducing access to lethal means has been a priority for the task force and for MUS institutions. Institutions have undertaken significant effort through **practice, policy, and campus community stakeholder engagement** to reduce access to lethal means, particularly weapons including firearms, substances, and heights. (cont.)

Campus Recommended Trainings

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in College Mental Health Services

Mental Health Treatment with American Indian Students

Suicide Assessment with College Students

Working with Sleep Disorders Substance Abuse in College Students

Short-Term Trauma Treatment Approaches

Cutting Edge Approaches to Treating Anxiety

Train the trainer models for mental health first aid and peer educators

Depression screening best practices training

In the recommendations review, MUS institutions report concern over the impact of **HB102** on access to lethal means. HB102, passed by Montana’s 67th legislature and signed into law by Governor Greg Gianforte on February 18, 2021, would allow **firearms on campus**. Access to firearms are of particular concern because they have high rates of **lethality** compared to other means.

Data collection is also an important part of reducing access to lethal means. MUS campuses report variability in collecting **suicide surveillance data**. Regularizing surveillance data across the system would allow consistency in metrics and data gathering methods, making data more reliable, and would help identify **common forms of lethal means** used in suicide attempts and completions. This could help the task force address and provide supports for **means reduction** efforts.

Next Steps

Survey campus staffing models using the Clinical Load Index to inform decisions about appropriate **staffing levels** given the needs of the student population at individual institutions as well as the services institutions commit to providing students.

Consider models for **enhanced training** in mental health and mental health-adjacent areas such as peer health educators, Behavior Intervention Teams (BIT) or CARE teams, and Mental Health First Aid Trainers.

Survey MUS institution counseling center or student mental health services funding models and review **funding models** at peer institutions nationally.

Continue efforts to gather data on college student mental health and **identify common needs** across campuses.

Develop and implement systemwide protocols to gather and report **suicide surveillance data**.

Collaborate with the MUS Graduate School deans group to explore **collaborative possibilities** for mental health supports for graduate students in the MUS.

i American Council on Education Pulse Points Survey <https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Senior-Leaders/College-and-University-Presidents-Respond-to-COVID-19-2021-Spring-Term.aspx>

ii JED Foundation

iii Center for Collegiate Mental Health <https://ccmh.psu.edu/blog>

iv The Healthy Minds Study Fall 2020 Data Report <https://healthymindsnetwork.org/research/data-for-researchers/>