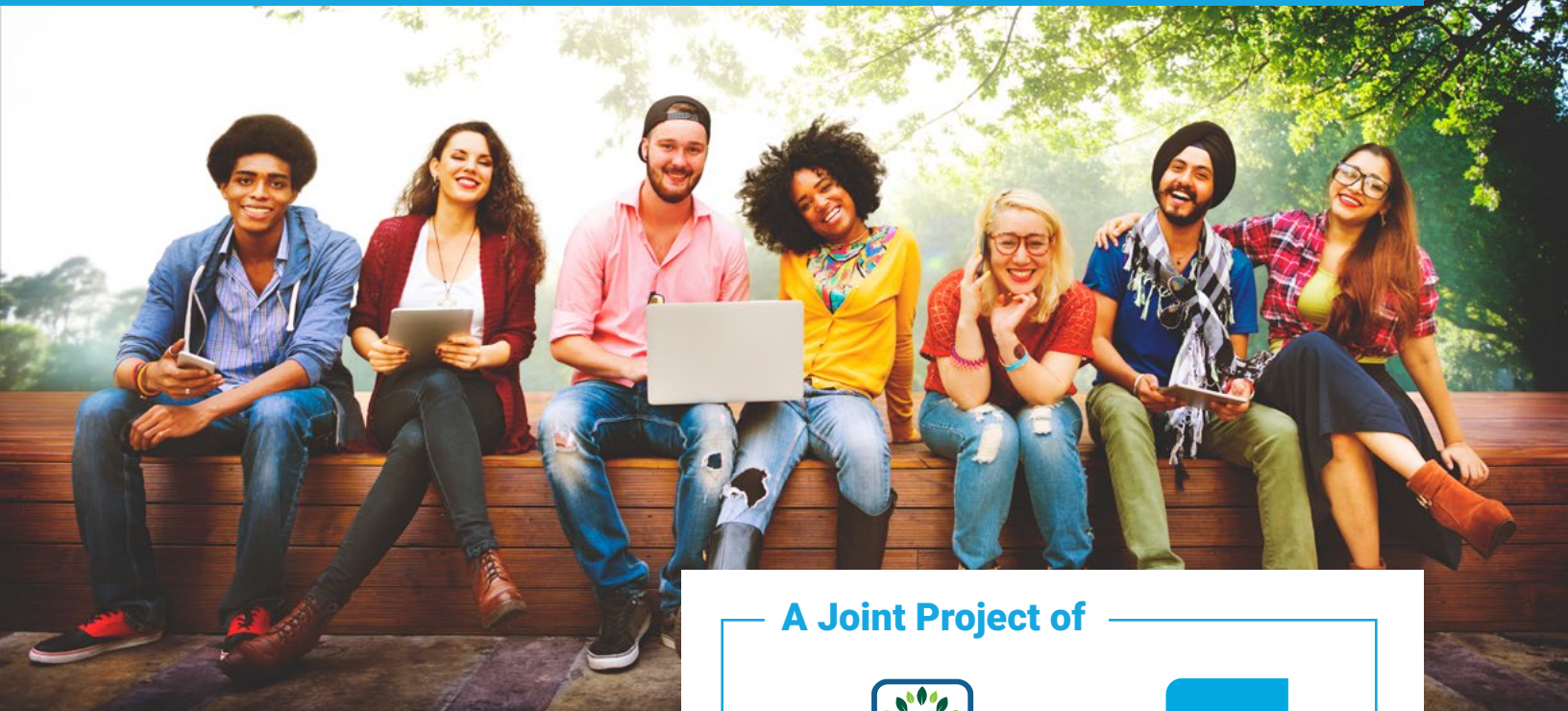




# Equity in Mental Health Framework

Recommendations for Colleges and Universities to Support the Emotional Well-Being and Mental Health of Students of Color



A Joint Project of



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## Acknowledgements

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# INTRODUCTION

Anxiety, depression, and stress are sadly common features of many college students' lives as they confront various challenges of campus life and the transition to adulthood. For students of color, this phenomenon is even more acute as they often face additional stressors and are less likely to access needed services.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, we have developed ten actionable recommendations for colleges and universities to help assess and strengthen support for mental health and emotional well-being of students of color.

The Equity in Mental Health Framework delineates not only recommendations, but also practical implementation strategies for higher education leaders, administrators, and providers of student services. These recommendations incorporate structural changes in policy and practice that can reduce the stigma associated with student mental health challenges, increase proactive responses from colleges and universities, and provide more opportunities for students of color to thrive.

Of the over 20 million students enrolled in American colleges and universities, four out of ten self-identify as a student of color.<sup>2</sup> While all college students face a variety of challenges including social, emotional, financial, and academic pressures, students of color often experience additional sources of psychological distress compared to their white peers. Discrimination, imposterism, stigma, cultural mistrust, and feelings of isolation are among the factors that can adversely impact the mental and emotional well-being of students of color.<sup>3</sup>

We know that campus climate is a significant factor behind these challenges. A recent Gallup poll for the Knight Foundation and Newseum Institute found that black college students are more than twice as likely as white students to say the racial climate on their campus is poor. Compounding these stressors is the reality that college students of color are less likely to seek and to receive mental health treatment even though they have similar rates of diagnosable mental illness compared to white students.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to imagine how such a potent combination of factors would not contribute to lower college completion rates among students of color.

We hope the Equity in Mental Health Framework will stimulate discussion and new research, as it also helps colleges and universities to develop and strengthen effective approaches for promoting and supporting the emotional well-being and mental health of students of color and, ultimately, of all students.



**Evan Rose**  
President of the Board  
The Steve Fund



**John MacPhee**  
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# A COLLEGE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

Recent research confirms what college mental health professionals and administrators have noticed over the past few decades: there is a mental health crisis taking place on college campuses.<sup>5</sup> Growing numbers of students arrive on campus with histories of significant mental health challenges, and higher proportions of college students report taking psychiatric medications than ever before.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the need for mental health support is rapidly outpacing existing infrastructures.

The need to prevent the tragic loss of life among students and to promote their mental health and emotional well-being has spurred large-scale research efforts to better understand student needs and how to meet them more effectively. Annual reports, including one by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health in 2015,<sup>7</sup> indicate rising rates of mental illness symptoms, including self-injury and suicidal thoughts, contributing to an increased demand for mental health services on campuses.<sup>8</sup> Taken together, these research efforts have produced a more sophisticated understanding of the most common symptoms and stressors reported by college students.

## RISKS FACING STUDENTS OF COLOR

While many college students arrive on campus feeling emotionally and academically unprepared, demographic analysis has shown that first-year African American college students are more likely than their white peers to report feeling overwhelmed most or all of the time during their first term (51% vs. 40%). Students of color are also less likely to seek help than their white peers.<sup>9</sup> It is clear that tailored research and intervention efforts are needed to better understand the unique causes and contributors to these elevated risks. Such research can help identify appropriate steps to support the mental health and emotional well-being of students of color and optimize the impact of programs to serve them.



# METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

The Steve Fund and JED developed their recommendations after obtaining snapshots of current programs and exploring how they could be improved and replicated. The goal was to answer a set of key questions regarding best practices for meeting the emotional well-being and mental health needs of students of color. These included:

- a) What is the current state of knowledge regarding mental health in students of color?
- b) What are top-level programs doing to address the mental health needs of students of color?
- c) How effective are these programs?
- d) Where are the knowledge gaps?
- e) What recommendations can be offered to college and university leaders to help them better support the emotional well-being and mental health of students of color?

The aim was to answer these questions by reviewing and analyzing data obtained through multiple channels including:

- **A partnership with the McLean Hospital College Mental Health Program (completed in June 2016)**
  - Conducting a review of the existing scientific literature
  - Conducting a survey of college administrators
- **A national JED study conducted by Harris Poll of 1,502 first-year college students in their second term (fielded online from March 25 and April 27, 2015)**
  - Conducting a sub-analysis based on race and ethnicity in collaboration with the Steve Fund
  - Specifically looking at the transition from high school to college and the associated emotional and mental health challenges
- **A national JED-Steve Fund study conducted by Harris Poll of 1,056 racially diverse college students, including those who identify as Black/African American, Hispanic, Asian, or White (fielded online from January 26 - February 21, 2017)**
  - This survey of racially diverse college students examined their views toward mental health issues
- **A national gathering of 130 senior leaders in higher education (February 2017)**
- **Mental health experts at the Steve Fund and JED (2016 and 2017)**

Through these surveys conducted by Harris Poll in 2015 and 2017, college and university students provided direct insights into their challenges. Key findings include:

- First-year college students of color are significantly less likely than white students to rate their overall college experience as “excellent” or “good” (69% to 80%).
- First-year black students are significantly more likely than white students to say they tend to keep their feelings about the challenges of college to themselves (75% to 61%).
- Black students are more likely than white students to report feeling overwhelmed most or all of the time (51% to 40%).
- Students of color are significantly less likely than white students to rate their campus climate as “excellent” or “good” (61% to 79%).
- Students of color are significantly less likely to describe their campus as inclusive (28% to 45%).
- Students of color are significantly more likely than white students to agree with the statement, “I often feel isolated on my campus” (46% to 30%).
- Students of color are significantly more likely than white students to say their college typically takes a “one-size-fits-all” approach to student engagement (61% to 36%).

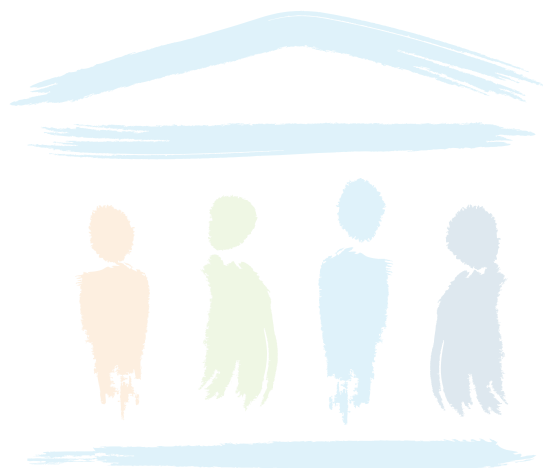
## Programming Designed to Support the Well-Being of Students of Color

Through work with the McLean Hospital College Mental Health Program, the Steve Fund and JED conducted a systematic literature review to identify campus programs focused on the emotional well-being and mental health of students of color along with an inquiry into any evidence-based programs focused on the mental health needs of this population. From this review, the Steve Fund and JED endeavored to identify a set of programs and practices for colleges and universities to address issues of student mental health.

During the literature review, it became apparent that there was a dearth of information regarding programming specifically designed and targeted to meet the needs of students of color. For this reason, an electronic survey was developed to (1) learn about existing campus-based programs, (2) identify best practices from outstanding sample programs, and (3) better understand barriers to development, implementation, evaluation, and dissemination of information regarding these programs. Directors of Counseling and Psychological Services, along with Vice Presidents of Student Affairs, served as two major points of contact. This outreach yielded 79 requests for surveys from individuals with knowledge of the programs of interest. Survey results yielded information on 84 programs at 23 schools. The schools surveyed represent campuses of varied sizes and differing geographical settings.

Out of the 84 programs that were described by respondents, only a single program emerged that included both an empirical evidence base and a specific focus on mental health in college students of color. Whereas the majority of programs had collected some type of data (typically, qualitative feedback or student satisfaction ratings), the lack of systematic program development efforts left the questions of efficacy and effectiveness unanswered in the vast majority of these tailored interventions. The basic implications of the framework research clearly emphasize the need to continue collecting data on these programs in order to provide colleges and universities additional information to guide programmatic efforts. As new programs are developed, consistent and sustained efforts should be made to document, evaluate, and share their details.

Utilizing the results of the literature review, campus-based survey, and student surveys, the framework team developed an initial draft of recommendations. The Steve Fund and JED then convened over 130 higher education leaders for a one-day summit in New York City. During this meeting, these experts reviewed, discussed, and critiqued the draft framework recommendations for applicability and ease of implementation. This approach yielded additional expert advice to finalize the recommendations presented in this document.



# RECOMMENDATIONS AND KEY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

The Equity in Mental Health Framework includes the following recommendations designed to guide colleges and universities in effectively developing, implementing, and refining on-campus programs to support students of color.

The goal is to provide practical and actionable recommendations that can be utilized by colleges and universities at any stage of engagement.



The following recommendations set forth a series of systematic steps to characterize challenges, understand their causes, and set priorities for action. Because students bring a variety of developmentally bound needs and challenges, and function within dynamic systems that impact mental health and emotional well-

being, this framework proposes a multimodal and ongoing approach. It may be helpful for colleges and universities to consider whether their current structures permit systematic collection of data on program effectiveness. If not, schools might consider ways in which such channels might be established.



# RECOMMENDATION #1

## IDENTIFY AND PROMOTE THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF STUDENTS OF COLOR AS A CAMPUS-WIDE PRIORITY

It is important for institutions of higher learning to center the well-being of their students, including students of color, within the mission of the institution in both word and deed. The JED-Steve Fund survey conducted by Harris Poll among more than 1,000 racially diverse students revealed that approximately 26% of the students of color reported having received a mental illness diagnosis. 45% of students of color indicate that they know of someone with a mental illness diagnosis.

### KEY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

- Centralize mental health within a definition of overall student well-being. This would support practical steps toward integrating emotional well-being into the institutional creed and standard order of operations.
- College and university mission, vision statements and goals should reflect an active commitment to student mental health and well-being with special attention to the needs of a racially diverse student body.
- Tie mental health and well-being to student academic success via strategic planning of fiscal and personnel resources.

# RECOMMENDATION #2

## ENGAGE STUDENTS TO PROVIDE GUIDANCE AND FEEDBACK ON MATTERS OF STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Campuses should regularly and systematically conduct surveys and focus groups with students of color to understand their needs and challenges regarding their mental health and emotional well-being, sense of belonging on campus, and academic success.

### KEY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

- Incorporate information gathering into on-campus programs, using input from the students themselves.
- Assess the campus climate in the full student body, faculty, and staff to understand the experiences of students, faculty, and staff of color on campus, and how they may be changing over time.
- Implement systematic and regular tracking of data on retention, academic achievement, and mental health service utilization to identify key areas of risk and resilience.
- Participate in established opportunities to collect data on student perspectives regarding mental health (e.g., the annual Healthy Minds survey) to gauge student views on mental health history, symptoms that may indicate problem areas, and campus-based mental health service utilization.
- Utilize campus-specific and national data on student mental health to gain insights into the general experiences of students of color on campuses nationwide as well as the unique experiences of students of color on individual campuses.
- Annually track demographic changes in the composition of the student body that may have an impact on service needs and utilization.

## RECOMMENDATION #3

### ACTIVELY RECRUIT, TRAIN AND RETAIN A DIVERSE AND CULTURALLY COMPETENT FACULTY AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF

Examine whether the identities represented among the student body are also represented in the faculty and professional staff. An emphasis should be placed on providing education and training in cultural competence for all individuals within the institution, especially those engaged in student support roles.

#### KEY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

- Note areas of disproportionately low representation among faculty and staff. Strategically examine and address barriers to recruitment and retention (particularly tenure). For example, use information from campus climate surveys or other Human Resource sources to strengthen retention and promotion practices.
- Recruit individuals proficient in providing multiculturally competent mental health and support services. Specific strategies could include creating interview questions to gauge interest and sensitivity to multicultural issues, and including diverse perspectives on recruiting teams.
- Build incentives and training to draw and retain young professionals of color into careers in student affairs and campus-based mental health.
- Provide ongoing training for student health, counseling and psychological services, academic advisors, and other student support personnel.

## RECOMMENDATION #4

### CREATE OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE AROUND NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES/EVENTS

Current events (national and international) and cultural movements (for example, Black Lives Matter) may profoundly impact members of the campus community, even when geographically removed from the school itself. In the JED-Steve Fund survey conducted by Harris Poll, 35% of the students of color indicated a desire for more on-campus opportunities to discuss current events that impact them.

#### KEY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

- Create forums and supportive spaces for students, faculty, staff, and community members to discuss and respond to current issues and events.
- Create programs that provide education, engagement, and leadership around issues of social justice and intergroup relations (e.g., The Program on Intergroup Relations at the University of Michigan).
- Actively review current clubs and activities offered to students to ensure that relevant areas of interest are represented. The goal is to ensure that university-sponsored clubs and organizations offer adequate and welcoming opportunities to students of color.

## RECOMMENDATION #5

### CREATE DEDICATED ROLES TO SUPPORT WELL-BEING AND SUCCESS OF STUDENTS OF COLOR

Create top level administrative positions and hire staff to oversee campus-wide diversity, multicultural, and social justice-oriented services, programs, and policies. Administrators should ideally report directly to the President or Provost while staff should report to the designated administrator. Ensure that protected time and resources are allocated to these officers and staff.

#### KEY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

- Ensure that these offices and student support personnel are fully integrated with support service staff and are in direct communication with key leaders such as the Vice President of Campus Life or Dean of Students, and are not marginalized on campus.
- Appoint an ombudsperson from within the institutional community to serve as an impartial point of contact for anyone (student, staff, or faculty) with an issue related to the campus cultural climate.
- Utilize informal meet-and-greet opportunities around campus so students do not need to present to specific offices to meet staff or learn about resources.
- Use print (for example, residence hall newsletters) and electronic communication to help students become familiar with support roles and staff.

## RECOMMENDATION #6

### SUPPORT AND PROMOTE ACCESSIBLE, SAFE COMMUNICATION WITH CAMPUS ADMINISTRATION AND AN EFFECTIVE RESPONSE SYSTEM

Create a well-publicized and accessible process by which any student, faculty, or staff member can inform key administrators about incidents, concerns, or issues related to campus climate.

#### KEY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

- Create policies and procedures protecting the rights and emotional well-being of all students, and publish these along with a corresponding statement of conduct expected of faculty, staff and students.
- Policies for appropriate conduct should include a detailed process for reporting and responding to concerns and violations.
- Facilitate information sharing so that key administrators can remain aware of and responsive to the needs and concerns of students.
- Establish a task force including students, faculty, and staff to develop and refine specific procedures for responding to emerging student needs.
- Consider an online portal to collect information about individual concerns and incidents.

# RECOMMENDATION #7

## OFFER A RANGE OF SUPPORTIVE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES IN VARIED FORMATS

Schools should provide a variety of different structures and culturally relevant program types (e.g., mentor networks, discussion groups, workshops, and transition programs) focused on supporting the mental health and well-being of students of color. See [www.equityinmentalhealth.org](http://www.equityinmentalhealth.org) for more information regarding program types.

### KEY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

- Consider programs that reflect critical developmental transition points such as incoming first-year students, student transfers from two-year institutions, and key retention points in specific majors.
- Consider programs that openly name and provide room for the discussion of issues central to the experiences of students of color such as race-related stress, feelings of imposterism and belonging, on-campus integration and support, feelings of marginalization on campus, stereotype threats, and the emotional challenges facing first-generation college students.
- Consider faculty mentorship programs, and interventions targeting student identity and relationship to adversity experiences, which have been robustly and reliably linked to academic success, retention, and well-being in students of color.
- Consider multiple content areas (for example, mental health hygiene, belonging, connecting with peers and resources on campus, developing a positive student identity, stress and coping).
- Consider programs that address intersecting identities (for example, gender identity, first-generation college students, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation).
- Consider programs that help students prepare to live and work in a diverse world and promote inclusivity.
- Create accessible mental health services for commuting students.
- Identify strategic partnerships between culturally relevant campus and community-based programs and services. Work with identified community liaisons.
- Identify gaps in the types of services available on campus. Identify and publicize community-based, national, or web-based resources students can access readily.

## RECOMMENDATION #8

### HELP STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT PROGRAMS AND SERVICES BY ADVERTISING AND PROMOTING THROUGH MULTIPLE CHANNELS

Schools should actively advertise programs on campus, on the internet, and via social media. Many valuable programs and resources are underutilized simply because students are not aware of their existence. In the Jed-Steve Fund survey conducted by Harris Poll survey of over 1,000 racially diverse students, only 48% reported that they felt their school effectively used social media to promote to students programming run/sponsored by different student groups.

#### KEY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

- Allocate specific funds, personnel (including student personnel), and time to the promotion of programs and events.
- Advertise early with frequent follow-up, using multiple modalities and locations on campus. While traditional means, like flyers in common spaces, alert students to upcoming events, they also communicate the school's commitment to students of color.
- A vibrant web presence is imperative to engaging today's college, graduate, and professional students. Include updated information and centralized, easy-to-locate listings of resources and upcoming programs and events.
- Take programming to students in places they routinely access (e.g., residence halls, athletic facilities, student center, multicultural center).
- Make resources and information readily available so that students are aware of services when they are needed.
- Collaborate with student leaders and campus groups to co-lead the selection, advertising, and implementation of culturally relevant programs.

## RECOMMENDATION #9

### IDENTIFY AND UTILIZE CULTURALLY RELEVANT AND PROMISING PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES, AND COLLECT DATA ON EFFECTIVENESS

There is a lack of scientific evidence regarding to what extent, and in which ways, various programs and services may support well-being in students of color. The Steve Fund/JED national survey of programs identified a number of colleges and universities that are already engaged in feasible, scalable and acceptable programs for students, faculty, and staff of color. The community of higher education institutions can contribute to this knowledge base and help build a set of tested resources to best meet the needs of their racially diverse student bodies.

#### KEY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

- Create an evaluation plan for new programs during their development phase.
- Collect data during on-campus programs to better understand their specific impacts. This data might include student satisfaction and perceived usefulness, pre-post outcomes, a specific topic of interest (for example, minority status stress, or changes in knowledge about mental health after a gatekeeper training).
- Invite student ideas about content or proposed changes to programs.
- When possible, link mental health and well-being data to other important outcomes (for example, academic data, retention, behavioral data, or mental health service utilization).
- Evaluate programs regularly for efficacy of intended impact including both quantitative and qualitative data. Refine programs and strategies as necessary based on data.



# RECOMMENDATION #10

## PARTICIPATE IN RESOURCE AND INFORMATION SHARING (WITHIN AND BETWEEN SCHOOLS)

Decentralized organizational structures on campus can create challenges in collaborating with or remaining aware of efforts across offices or departments. Enhanced communication and the use of centralized, accessible resource-sharing repositories enable collaboration within and among schools nationwide.

### KEY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

- Form formal, interdisciplinary work structures and roles (task forces, work groups) for individual project implementation.
- Partner with student leaders and multiple campus student organizations to co-host programs and events.
- Create opportunities for students to interact with peer leaders on other campuses.
- Encourage institutional leaders to engage their national/professional organizations (e.g., APA, NASPA, ACPA, ACCA, ACA, CAS) to create and support national mechanisms for inter-institutional resource and data sharing regarding the experiences of students of color.
- Support faculty and staff in attending professional conferences with a focus on multicultural issues (e.g., National Multicultural Conference and Summit). Utilize national databases of existing programs in order to learn from programs and infrastructures based at other colleges and universities. Formalize the process by which individuals across relevant offices and disciplines can communicate with one another, collaborate and pool resources (for example, space, staff, financial support, and expertise).
- Collaborate with personnel at other schools in order to discuss lessons learned from existing programs, and best practices for implementation.
- Participate in consortia designed to share information on best and promising practices.

# NOTES REGARDING DISSEMINATION AND EVALUATION

Existing and future programs should consider the importance of dissemination from program inception. The framework recommendations are geared toward facilitating a transactional model (see figure below) that disseminates scientific study findings as well as program information and materials.

The primary goal of dissemination is to facilitate campus-level knowledge of (and more importantly, access to) existing programs to foster campus communities that encourage mental health promotion and destigmatize help-seeking.

Currently, there is no centralized, searchable listing of campus-based programs to help prospective or current students and their families to learn about programs and resources already available at various colleges and universities. As an aspirational goal, the framework proposes a clearinghouse that catalogs campus resources to allow colleges and universities, along with students and families, to gain knowledge about new programs and mechanisms for engaging with their campuses.

The sequence below shows the framework's proposed transactional flow of information between science and practice. This model can facilitate common language, goals, and opportunities for collaboration, with the goal of augmenting the existing literature.

## BASIC SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

- Characterizing unique challenges faced by students of color

## TARGETED ON-CAMPUS PROGRAMS

- Informed by the literature above and campus-specific needs assessments

## DISSEMINATION OF SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES AND NEXT STEPS

- Focus on evidence-based approaches and strategic practices to increase utilization

# CONCLUSION

The Equity in Mental Health Framework can help guide college leaders, professionals, students, and families to improve resources, policies, and practices for the emotional well-being and mental health of college and university students of color. The model provides practical and actionable recommendations for schools to help young people of color thrive at their institutions.

These efforts can assist campuses in building mental health safety nets that will help reduce the shame, secrecy, and prejudice around mental health so that young people of color can thrive in higher education environments and be better equipped to navigate the challenges they may face in their professional lives.

This is a summary document. For more details regarding the scientific approach to generating this information, video statements from university and college presidents, and other pertinent information, please visit [equityinmentalhealth.org](http://equityinmentalhealth.org).

## ABOUT THE STEVE FUND

The Steve Fund is the nation's only organization focused on supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of young people of color. The Steve Fund works with colleges and universities, non-profits, researchers, mental health experts, families, and young people to promote programs and strategies that build understanding and assistance for the mental and emotional health of the nation's young people of color. The Fund holds an annual conference, Young, Gifted & @Risk, offers a Knowledge Center with curated expert information, delivers on-campus and on-site programs and services at colleges and non-profits nationwide, and through tech partnerships provides direct services to young people of color. Learn more about the Fund at [www.stevelfund.org](http://www.stevelfund.org) and about its programs and services at [www.stevelfund.org/programs](http://www.stevelfund.org/programs).

## ABOUT JED

JED is a nonprofit that exists to protect emotional health and prevent suicide for our nation's teens and young adults. JED equips teens and young adults with the skills and knowledge to help themselves and each other; partners with high schools and colleges to strengthen their mental health, substance abuse and suicide prevention programs and systems; and encourages community awareness, understanding and action for young adult mental health. Learn more at [jedfoundation.org](http://jedfoundation.org).

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