

STUDENT LONELINESS IS A MAJOR CHALLENGE FOR COLLEGES

College students are especially vulnerable to loneliness, and unlike academic struggles, loneliness can be tough to spot and hard to combat. Experts say meaningful social connection is a crucial part of wellness, and colleges are well positioned to help students become more socially engaged.

Researchers report increases in loneliness and social anxiety among students.

Rates of loneliness among young adults increased every year between 1976 and 2019. Almost 40% of college students in a [2023 Gallup poll](#) reported experiencing loneliness the previous day. More than half of students (51.5%) in a [recent national assessment](#) reported feeling lonely.

The trend presents significant challenges for colleges and universities. Forty-four percent of at-risk students who consider leaving school do so for reasons involving motivation, life changes, or mental-health challenges. Loneliness, then, is a liability to student success as well as enrollment and retention.

The causes of students' loneliness are complex and intertwined.

The Covid-19 pandemic fueled continuing increases in anxiety, depression, and loneliness. The effects were especially acute for young people transitioning to college.

The toxicity and addictiveness of social media and smartphone use have been well known for years. But today's college students are among the first to have been immersed in that world since childhood. Studies show the profound effects: increases in rates of loneliness, dissatisfaction with self and life, insufficient sleep, pessimism, depression, and self-harm.

While the pandemic may have kept students from sufficiently engaging with others, and social media pulls them away from doing so, anxious parents text-tethered to their kids are another culprit for students' isolation and loneliness. Students can't become independent if they're used to parents pushing aside obstacles in their way.

Colleges and universities can help students build stronger bonds.

Cultivating connection is often a matter of building a campus culture and working out common-sense logistics.

The best way to pull students away from social media is to make recreational programming obviously much more fun than staring at one's phone. Highlighting role models' setbacks and doubts can help students feel less alone in their insecurities.

Structured social-connection programs offer small, formalized steps to help students get to know each other. Peer support groups and service opportunities connect students with each other and their passions.

Rich social connections can also arise from students' intellectual inquiry—studying and learning in a classroom, a lab, or a residence hall.

The burden on counseling centers necessitates a whole-campus approach to wellness.

Even before the pandemic, counseling centers could not nearly meet students' needs. The challenge has only grown since then, raising fears of a mental-health crisis on campuses.

But counseling centers are not the only solution. Students' stress often has to do with academic issues, conundrums in life, or basic needs like food, housing, and textbooks. Those needs are better met through a whole-campus approach, with the help of academic advisers, resident advisers, the financial aid office, and other support systems.

Some experts argue that the crisis narrative of student mental health creates undue panic and makes the situation worse. Colleges need to strike a clear, balanced tone in addressing the problems, especially around delicate topics such as despair and suicide.