



The
Steve
Fund



Student Mental Health

ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

Introduction

The rise in mental health concerns among young people across the U.S. has led to an enhanced awareness about needs which have often been ignored or dismissed.

A common, concerning oversight over the years has been the complex mental health concerns of young people of color in particular. Research about this population has been limited. Most often, data on students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds are presented together, allowing misinformation and gaps in knowledge to contribute to assumptions and judgments.

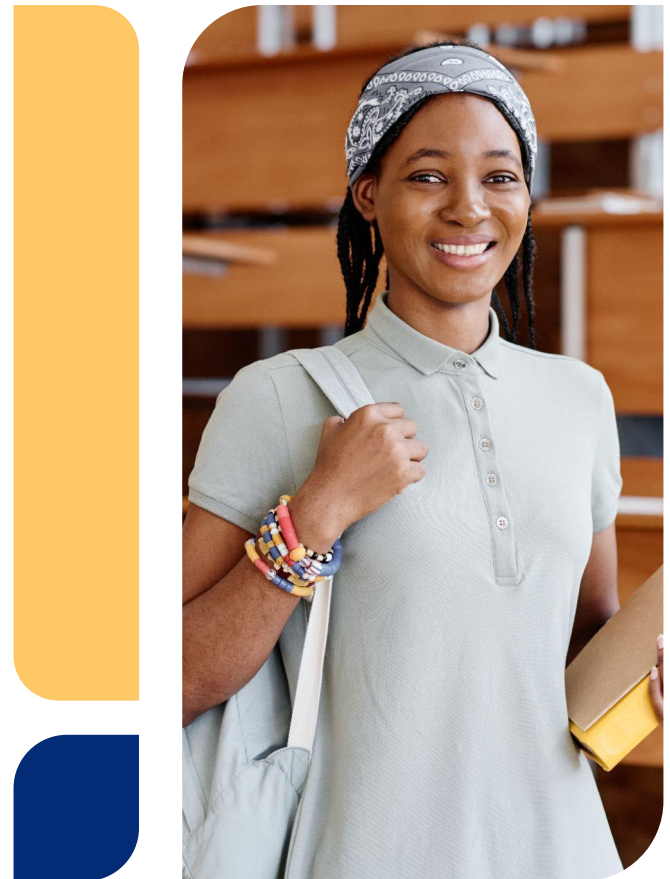
The Steve Fund was created in 2014 - and continues to dedicate its efforts – to transform environments whereby college students are more fully understood within their unique identities, and their mental health needs are served and supported.

Specifically, the Steve Fund leads national conversations, directs programming, and provides meaningful resources for young people and related stakeholders as they transition from home to college, during their college years, and as they transition to the workplace after college.

We deeply explore, investigate, and help shape the field surrounding the mental health of young people of all backgrounds with research-based initiatives and strategies. We share, for example, how many students confront additional challenges such as discrimination, negative stereotypes, impostor phenomenon, and cyberbullying. And we discuss how these factors may put increased strain on their mental health and well-being.

In 2024, the Steve Fund commissioned a national survey research study to better understand the mental health challenges students may encounter as they navigate the school year on their campuses.

The 2024 study is a follow up to a 2017 Harris Poll conducted in collaboration with the Steve Fund and the Jed Foundation. Results from 2017 and 2024 help to highlight trends, prioritize areas of importance, and direct action.



College students today often face a variety of challenges academic pressures, social and family stresses, financial/ economic hardship stresses, a rapidly shifting technological environment, an increasingly polarized political environment, and more.



Together with The Harris Poll, the Steve Fund established the following objectives for the 2024 survey:

- **Gauge students' perceptions** regarding campus climate
- **Uncover challenges/barriers** to students' sense of identity, including feelings of otherness and imposter phenomenon
- **Identify the primary stressors** college students are currently facing during the school year
- **Determine barriers to seeking mental health support**
- **Understand the resources currently available** on campus and the extent to which they are being used by students
- **Identify gaps in current resources** relative to those most desired by college students

Organization of this Report

A description of the 2017 and 2024 surveys explains the methodology, data collection and data analysis for the project. In an effort to explore trends, this report includes comparisons between the 2024 results and results from a similar 2017 national student survey.

Next, the report presents findings from both the 2017 and 2024 surveys in sections on the students'

experiences and perspectives, their mental health and well-being, assessment of campus resources, and suggestions for improvement. It is important to note that in some cases, certain findings appear to contradict others. This is a direct reflection of the complexities of the campus environment and highlights the intricacies of the conditions within which students live and attend classes.

About the Surveys

Since 2017, significant changes occurred within the micro and macro environments of colleges and universities which influenced all students on and off-campus. Our focus is on how these changes affected the mental health and emotional well-being of students.

2024 SURVEY

The research was conducted online in the U.S. by The Harris Poll on behalf of the Steve Fund among 2,050 U.S. residents ages 18-24 years old currently attending a 4-year college or university in the U.S. and taking most classes in person.

The respondents included individuals identifying as African American or Black, Asian, Hispanic, Indigenous, or White. (Black/African American students will be referred to as Black throughout this document.) The survey was conducted Feb. 29 – April 1, 2024.

Data are weighted where necessary by age, gender, race/ethnicity, region, year in school, enrollment status (full or part-time), school type (public or private), and household income to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the U.S. population. Hispanic origin is also included for the Hispanic subgroup. For this study, total data is accurate to within ± 3.6 percentage points using a 95% confidence level. It is important to note that in contrast to the 2017 survey, the 2024 survey includes Indigenous students.

While the number of Indigenous students surveyed is 50, with other racial groups 500 each, the Steve Fund regards the inclusion of Indigenous students as a necessity, even with the small number. Data shared in the Appendix on school characteristics, student characteristics, and demographics of Indigenous students and students of different racial groups provides helpful information on within group diversity which may shed light on student responses.

2017 SURVEY

The 2017 data are from a survey conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of the Steve Fund and the Jed Foundation, online within the U.S. between Jan. 26 and Feb. 21, 2017. A total of 1,056 students 17-27 years old attending a 2-year or 4-year college in the U.S. and taking most classes in person completed the survey.

Students participating in the survey identify as Black/African American, Hispanic, Asian, or White. (Black/African American students will be referred to as Black in this document). Data were weighted where necessary by age within gender, race/ethnicity, income, enrollment status, year in school and region to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the U.S. college student population.



Survey Findings

Expectations and Overall Experience

Even before getting to college, anticipation of mental health concerns weighed on many students, and financial challenges were an important factor in their college decision.

Among Hispanic, Black, Indigenous, and White students, about 2 in 5, and slightly fewer Asian students, expected to be very or extremely stressed about maintaining their mental health and emotional well-being at college. **(See Figure 1)**

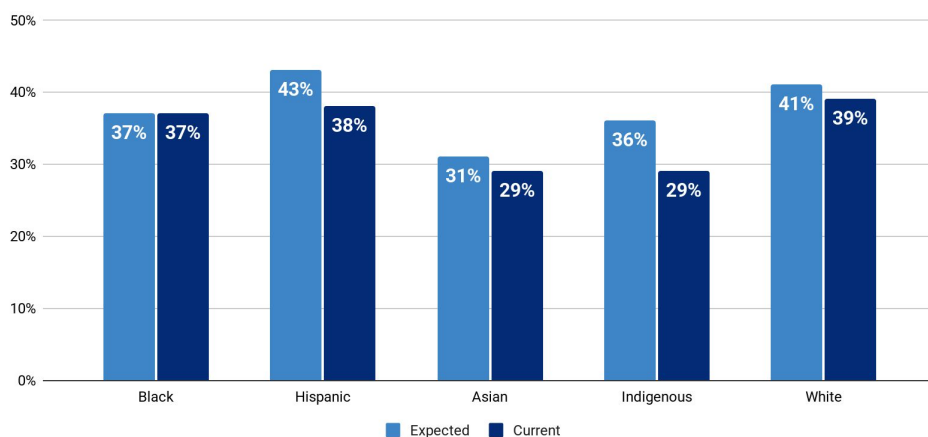
In addition, among all students, only about half said they felt mentally or emotionally prepared for college compared to their peers. Slightly more said they felt academically prepared. For Black, Asian and Hispanic students, cost/financial aid was the top consideration in their choice of college. Other top factors considered among all students included college/university fit, location, and degrees/programs offered.

Looking at their college experience broadly, about 2 in 3 students rated their overall college/university experience so far as excellent or good and would recommend their college/university.

Figure 1.

Expected and Current Level of Stress About Maintaining Mental Health/Emotional Well-being

Percent of Students "Very or Extremely" Stressed



Campus Climate: Perceptions
and Experiences

Students viewed their campus climates generally positively. However, there were some notable differences among various racial ethnic groups, and Black students in particular express greater concerns.

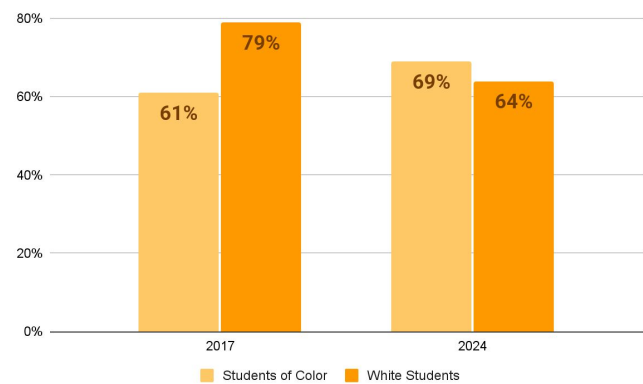
Across races and ethnicities, about two-thirds or more of students rated their college campus climate as good or excellent.

Compared to 2017, students of color were more likely to rate their college campus climate as good/excellent in 2024 (69% vs 61%). White students, however, were less likely to rate their campus climate good/excellent in 2024 compared to 2017 (64% vs 79%). (See Figure 2)

Overall, in both 2017 and 2024, students were much more likely to describe their campus climate with positive terms, such as welcoming, respectful and safe, than negative terms, such as isolating, uncomfortable or hostile. (See Figure 3)

However, students were slightly more likely to use negative words to describe their school in 2024 compared to 2017.

Figure 2.
Rating Campus Climate Good/Excellent,
2017 and 2024

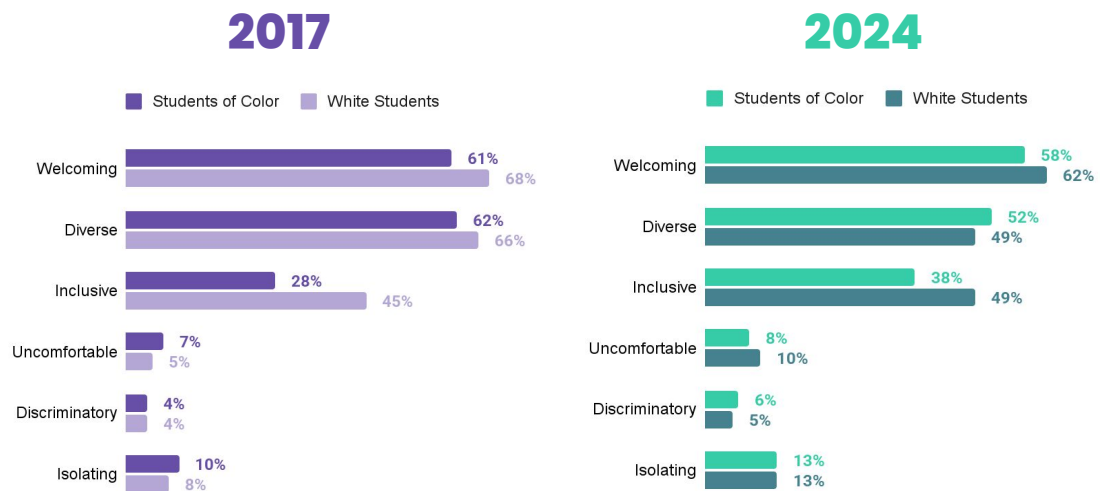


About 1 in 4 use negative terms to describe their campus, including more than 1 in 10 who said that their campus is isolating or indifferent.

Approximately 9% of Black and White students, 6% of Hispanic and Asian students, and 1% of Indigenous students described their campus as hostile. Additionally, in 2024, students were more likely than they were in 2017 to describe their campus climates as inclusive and at the same time less likely to describe it as diverse.

Figure 3.
Words Students Use
to Describe Their
Campus

Students of Color and White
Students, 2017 and 2024



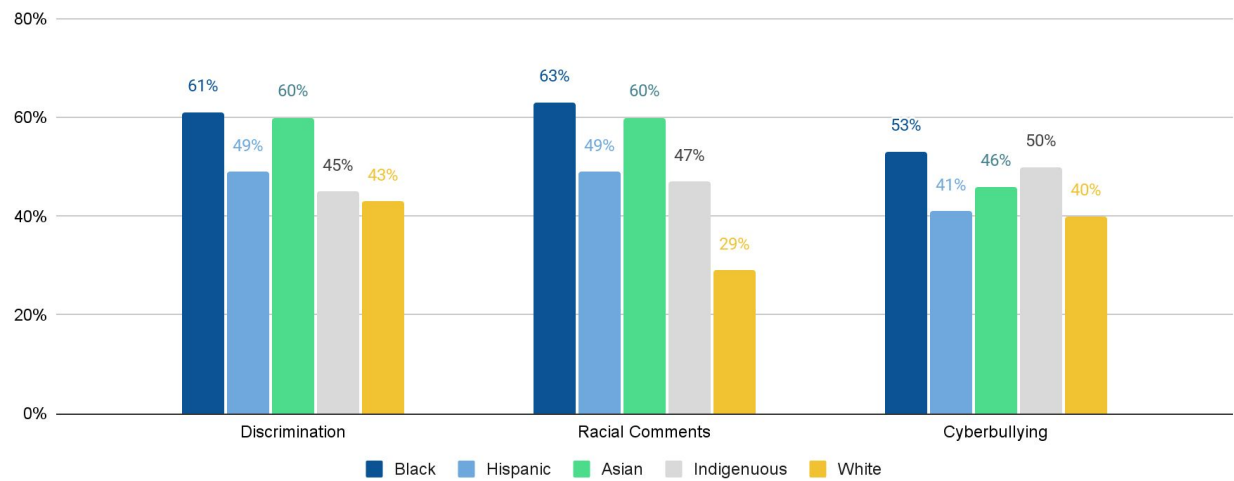
In 2024, more than 4 in 5 students said that their school helps students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds feel welcome and 3 in 4 said that individuals are treated equally.

Some examples of differences among racial/ethnic groups in perceptions and experiences related to campus climate in 2024 include:

- Black, Hispanic, and Asian students were
 - Less likely than their white peers to describe their campus climate as “inclusive” (37%, 38% and 37% respectively vs 49% of White students)
 - More likely to say people of different cultural backgrounds, races, or ethnicities don’t get along well at their school (43%, 36%, 34%, respectively, vs 24% of White students).
- Black students (57%) were more likely than Hispanic (44%), Indigenous (46%), White (40%) and Asian students to say that at times they do not feel welcome in the spaces they occupy on campus.

- Approximately half of Black and Indigenous students found it difficult to be their authentic self at school, which was more than other student groups.
- Compared to White students, students of color were more likely to report negative experiences on campus such as threats of physical violence, cyberbullying, and being stopped by campus police/security. (See Figure 4)
- In addition, more than 4 in 10 students have experienced discrimination related to race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Over half of all students witnessed discrimination in the past year with Black and Asian students having the highest percentages of negative experience.

Figure 4.
Negative
Experiences
on Campus



When students were asked the sources of their negative experiences on campus, two-thirds of the students identified “other students” as the source of their problems. In addition, about 20% of students identified faculty as a source of negative experiences; other sources were mentioned less frequently.

Despite the prevalence of negative experiences, more than 65% of students said their college promptly addresses cases of discrimination/bias. And more than 70% of students feel respected, supported, and valued by faculty/administrators. Across racial/ethnic groups, more than half of students view their college as highly successful in:

- Helping students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds feel welcome/like they belong.
- Helping students understand/appreciate other students with different backgrounds and experiences.
- Being respectful of students’ racial/nationality differences.
- Ensuring students of different races/nationalities feel safe at college.

While these responses reflect positive experiences for many students, it leaves a sizable portion of students of color who do not feel respected, supported, and valued and do not see their campuses as successful in these aspects. Over half or more of all students agree that their college typically takes a one size fits all approach to engaging its students which could be an area of focus for improvement.



Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being

While many students described their college experience as positive and having a positive impact on their mental health, they also describe a range of negative experiences and stresses.

Levels of stress among students were very similar in the 2017 and 2024 surveys. Nearly 1 in 3 Hispanic, Black and White students, and fewer Asian students, said they are currently very or extremely stressed about maintaining their mental health and emotional well-being at college (see Figure 1)..

In 2024, about 1 in 5 students were very or extremely stressed about connecting to/relating to other students and finding their “niche” in school. Nearly half of White students (44%) rated their current mental health as good or excellent, as did 50% of Black, 54% of Asian, 66% of Indigenous, and 60% of Hispanic students. A pattern emerged revealing that students of color attending their respective group-serving institution, more often had better mental health than those attending predominantly white institutions.



The percentage of students who rate their current mental health as fair/poor/terrible was 50%. While more than half of students describe their college experiences as having had an overall positive impact on their mental health, 1 in 4 said it has had a negative impact.

Many students have experienced negative mental, physical, or social impacts associated with being at college.

Negative mental health experiences were identified by about a third or more of students, including excessive worrying or fear, changes in sleeping habits, feeling excessively sad or low, and trouble concentrating or learning.

Further, more than 2 in 5 students said that they sometimes felt that their success was not deserved or legitimate (impostor phenomenon), and had feelings of exclusion because of their racial/ethnic differences.

As a result of negative experiences on campus, about half of students have considered reducing their number of classes, about 40% have considered transferring and 30% have considered dropping out of school.

A quarter or more of all students said increased diversity of the student body could better support students.
(See Figure 5)

Figure 5.
**Mental Health and
Emotional Well-Being**

	White	Indigenous	Asian	Hispanic	Black
Increased diversity of the student body could better support students	26%	32%	27%	23%	35%
At times they do not feel supported by their school	43%	51%	40%	45%	54%
Considered dropping out of school as a result of their negative experiences on campus	31%	39%	34%	39%	49%
Being one of the few people of color in a classroom was a really isolating experience	0%	36%	46%	43%	58%

Awareness of Campus Resources and Challenges Accessing Care

Awareness and access to mental health care were surveyed in 2017 and 2024. Comparisons reveal that students are more aware of mental health services and resources and more likely to seek help in 2024 than in 2017. (See Figure 6)

In 2024, students were:

- More likely than those in 2017 to say their college/university offers any resources to support students’ emotional well-being/mental health (95% vs. 76% among students of color and 93% vs. 84% among White students).
- Less likely than in 2017 to say that they are “Not at all sure” of school mental health offerings (See Figure 7)

Figure 7.

Students’ Awareness of Campus Mental Health Resources

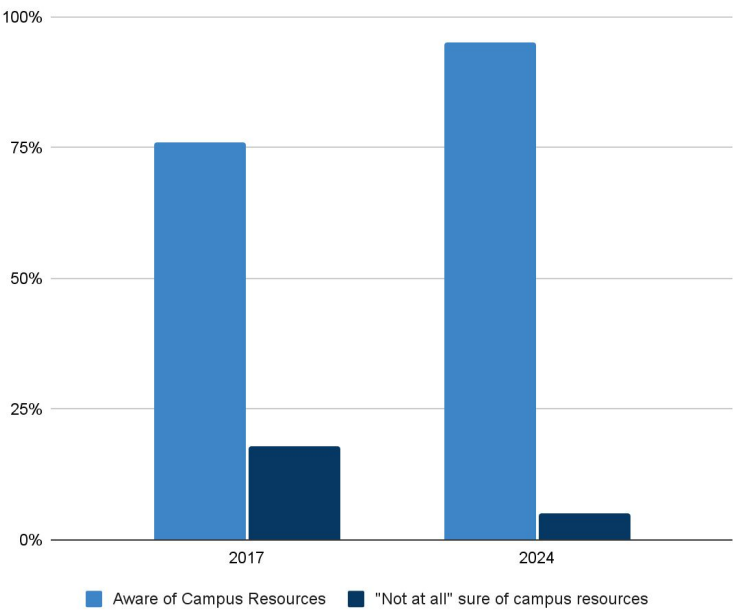
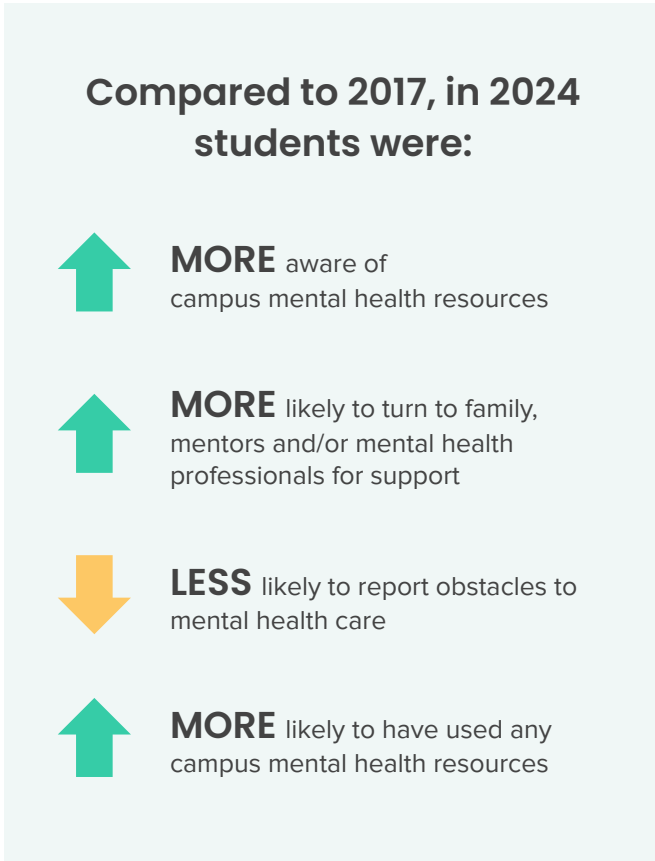


Figure 6.



Over two-thirds of students recognized the substantial commitment and resources their college offered to support mental health.

Between 70%-80% of all students agree that colleges/universities need approaches tailored by ethnicity/nationality to help support the unique mental health needs of each group. Two-thirds or more of students agree that their college is well prepared to handle the mental health concerns of its students and more than two-thirds of all students say their school actively prioritizes student mental health and well-being.

However, more than 3 in 4 students agree that colleges need to direct more resources to helping students manage their mental health.

Across racial/ethnic groups, students identify friends, parents, and siblings as their top three sources of mental health support. Additionally, about 4 in 5 students also describe other students, administrative staff, and faculty as being supportive in helping students who are experiencing mental health concerns.

Students in 2024 were more likely than in 2017 to say they typically turn for emotional well-being/mental health support to:

- Parents/family
- Mentor
- Mental health professional

Among the key concerns preventing students from seeking mental health support were:

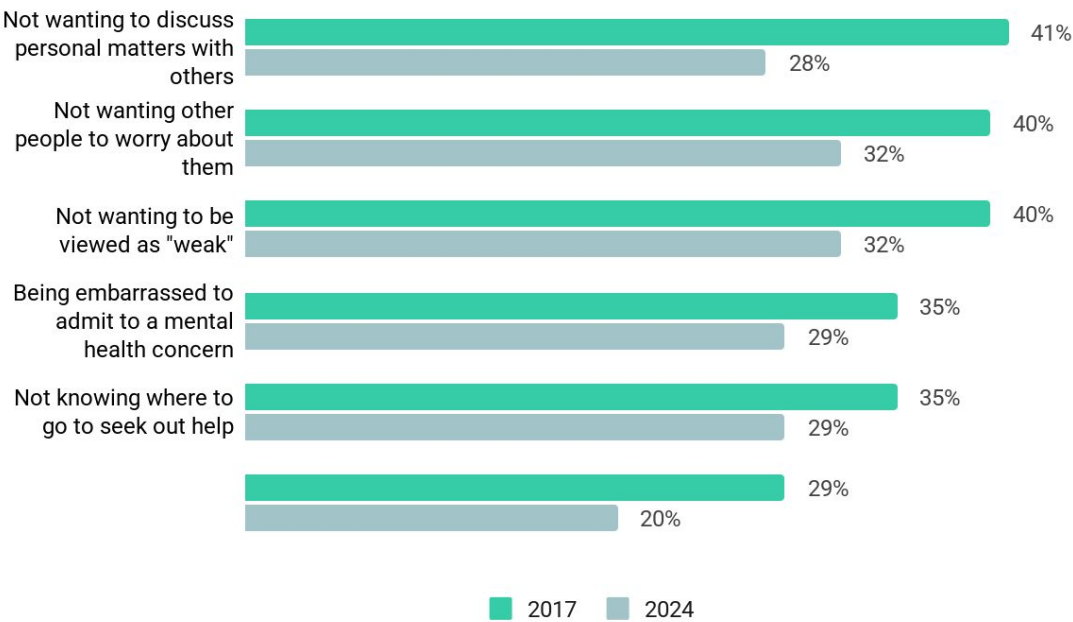
- Concerns over not being a burden to others

- Not wanting to discuss personal matters with others
- Not wanting people to worry about them
(See Figure 8)

Across racial/ethnic groups, more than 4 in 5 students would know where to go for help if they had a mental health crisis. The top three *available* mental health resources mentioned by all students were counseling, campus mental health services, and online resources/information.

The top 3 mental health resources *used by students* were counseling, campus mental health services, and green spaces on campus. Over 60% of all students said they have been able to speak to a mental health professional when needed. However, more than 40% of students found it challenging for students to find mental health services on campus.

Figure 8.
Obstacles to
Accessing Care,
2017 and 2024



Among the top challenges that students have experienced while using mental health resources offered by their school are feelings of shame, financial concerns, not enough 1-on-1 sessions, and insufficient quality of services.

Students in 2024 were more likely than in 2017 to have used any mental health resources.

Specific resources used more often in 2024 include:

- Campus mental health services
- Safe spaces on campus
- Psychoeducational programs
- A task force to develop procedures/guidelines for responding to student needs



The changes between 2017 and 2024 in responses regarding awareness and use of mental health services among students indicate a positive trend toward greater awareness of services that are available to them and increased help-seeking behavior.

70–80%

70%–80% of students agree that colleges need approaches tailored by ethnicity/nationality to help support the unique mental health needs of each group.

In 2024, students across racial/ethnic groups were less likely to identify these obstacles to mental health care compared to 2017:

- Not having the money to pay for it
- Not wanting to discuss personal matters with others
- Not wanting other people to worry about them
- Not wanting to be viewed as weak
- Being embarrassed to admit to others that they are having a mental health concern
- Not knowing where to go to seek out help

These findings suggest that stigma related to mental health concerns has decreased among students over the past seven years.

Student Suggestions for Improvements and New Services

When asked about potential improvements to mental health resources, responses varied across racial/ethnic groups. Suggestions included expanding the number of counseling centers; offering student support groups; creating opportunities for students to discuss concerns, current events; providing increased funding for clubs/events sponsored by different student groups; and offering more academic counseling.

It is notable that in 2024, among the suggestions for improvements to better support students, students of color were more likely than in 2017 to want their college to offer students support groups (31% vs. 24% among students of color; 31% vs. 20% among White students) and expand the number of counseling centers (30% vs. 19% among students of color; 32% vs. 17% among White students).



Students identified a wide range of mental health resources they wished their college would offer but did not currently have. Compared to 2017 survey, students of color in 2024 more frequently identified a desire for more of the following mental health resources:

- Psychoeducational programs
- Green spaces on campus
- Safe spaces on campus
- Urgent crisis services
- On-call support
- A task force to develop procedures/guidelines for responding to student needs



Takeaways & Conclusion

The survey findings offer insight and guidance to help the Steve Fund prioritize specific areas concerning the mental health and well-being of students throughout its initiatives, programs and services.

The Steve Fund uses survey data to help measure the extent to which we are fulfilling our mission, specifically how the findings inform our three strategic imperatives:

- 1. Transforming Environments**
- 2. Delivering Resources and Programs**
- 3. Shaping the Field**

The following section addresses four key takeaway topic areas that are important to better serve the mental health and well-being of students.

While awareness of mental health seems to have increased in recent years, stigma around seeking mental health care remains a major concern. Concerns about being viewed as being weak and being embarrassed to admit to others that they are having a mental health concern decreased by less than 10% between 2017 and 2024. And while there are fewer barriers to care being reported, substantial obstacles persist for many.

Reducing negative campus experiences needs to involve students. Unfortunately, it's common for students to have negative experiences on their college/university campuses. "Other students" are the most often identified source of those experiences. Therefore, efforts to create a more inclusive, positive environment must involve not only faculty and staff, but also the student population.

Students endorsed the need for more resources and targeted approaches to effectively address students' mental health needs.



This could mean offering more services, increasing awareness and understanding of the currently available resources, or improving how students navigate resources.

Campus Climate and Inclusion, Belonging, and Diversity

The majority of all students rated their college campus climates as good or excellent. In addition, the comparison of 2017 to 2024 data reveals changes in descriptions of campus climate as being less diverse and more inclusive.

It is encouraging that the majority of students in 2017 and 2024 felt that their college is successful in building and maintaining a campus climate that is respectful of racial diversity and creates an environment that supports belonging with programs involving campus student groups.

This accomplishment is in line with the Steve Fund's efforts with its Excellence in Mental Health on Campus initiative (EMHC). This initiative involves cohorts of teams from a variety of higher education institutions convening to discuss challenges and improvements related to mental health and well-being of students. They are coached by mental health and higher education experts on how to incorporate effective strategies, policies, and practices to help their campus achieve this goal.

Stress and Mental Health Status

Levels of stress among college students remained steady between 2017 and 2024 with over one-third of students finding it very or extremely stressful to maintain their mental health and emotional well-being. This finding aligns with a consensus of Steve Fund mental health expert advisors who underscored the need to support stress management for students on campus. This represents a call to action for the Steve Fund to collaborate on the development of tools and resources to help students manage and cope with stress.

Among students in the 2024 survey, 50% rated their mental health as fair/poor/terrible. This statistic is a reminder that colleges and universities, in partnership with nonprofits like the Steve Fund, need to continue their efforts to develop resources and initiatives to augment existing mental health supports available on campus to address unmet mental health needs. This is critical due to the connections between unaddressed mental health concerns and mental health crises, poor academic outcomes, and reduced persistence and retention.

Reduced Barriers to Mental Health Care and Increased Help-seeking

One concern that previous studies have revealed is students of color being more likely than their White counterparts to suffer in silence with their mental health concerns being unaddressed. The literature shows racial disparities in access to and use of mental health care among people of color in college and beyond (Lipson et al, 2018; NSDUH, 2022).



The survey responses in 2024 indicate greater awareness of campus mental health resources, reduced personal and perceived stigma, and increased help-seeking which are all promising trends.

The majority of students in 2017 and 2024 identified family as their top source for support for their mental health with mental health professionals and mentors in second and third place, respectively. This underscores the importance of the Steve Fund's emphasis on mental health of young people and the adults who support them. The Steve Fund's Family Corner and other family initiatives center the importance of programs, services, and skill-building for families as key stakeholders in supporting the mental health of college students.

Students have shown a significant increase in use of mental health resources between 2017 and 2024. Many factors may have contributed to this positive change including increased media attention and public discussion of mental health concerns, and increased efforts on the part of colleges/university and local and national organizations, including the Steve Fund, to increase attention and support for the mental health and emotional well-being of young people.

Also, the advent of telehealth services and the proliferation of mental health resources via text and other technological platforms, such as the Steve Fund's collaboration with Crisis Text Line, (available by texting STEVE to 741741) may have also contributed to this trend. Through the use of this texting service, young people can connect with a trained culturally sensitive crisis counselor 24/7. Other online resources have made mental health support much more accessible and user friendly for young people.



Needed Improvements in Campus-related Mental Health Offerings

The survey responses show students are interested in an increase in the variety of resources available including expanded counseling; psychoeducational programs; campus green spaces, safe spaces, quiet spaces; urgent crisis services; technology-based support; and task forces to address student mental health needs.

This last recommendation aligns with the Steve Fund's EMHC initiative which uses an approach similar to a task force to improve college mental health for all students.

Methodology

2024 Data: The research was conducted online in the U.S. by The Harris Poll on behalf of The Steve Fund among 2,050 U.S. residents ages 18-24 years old currently attending a 4-year college or university in the U.S. The survey was conducted February 29 – April 1, 2024.

Data are weighted where necessary by age, gender, race/ethnicity, region, year in school, enrollment status (full or part-time), school type (public or private), and household income to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population. Hispanic origin is also included for the Hispanic subgroup.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, total data is accurate to within ± 3.6 percentage points using a 95% confidence level.

Subgroups are weighted separately, and data is accurate to within ± 5.3 percentage points for the Hispanic subgroup, ± 5.7 percentage points for the Black/African American subgroup, ± 6.1 percentage points for the Asian subgroup, $\pm 5.4\%$ percentage points for the White subgroup, and ± 17.5 percentage points for the Indigenous subgroup using a 95% confidence level.

Student/school characteristics: Across racial/ethnic groups, about three-fourths of students attended a public college/university. The students were close to evenly divided between men and women and the schools/students were from all regions of the country.

2017 Data: The 2017 data is from a survey conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of The Steve Fund and The Jed Foundation, online within the United States between January 26 and February 21, 2017. A total of 1,056 interviews were conducted among students who met the following criteria:

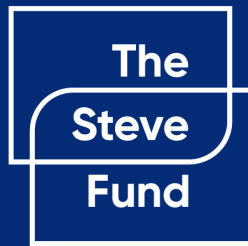
- US Resident
- 17-27 years old
- Identify as Black/African American, Hispanic, Asian, or White
- Currently attends a 2-year or 4-year college in the U.S.
- Currently attending most of their college classes in-person

Data were weighted where necessary by age within gender, race/ethnicity, income, enrollment status, year in school and region to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.

Types of College/University:

(Predominantly White Institution (PWI); Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI); Asian American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI); Historically Black College/University (HBCU); Tribal College/University)

	PWI	HSI	AANAPISI	HBCU	Tribal	Not Sure
Hispanic	29%	30%	5%	4%	2%	27%
Asian	52%	4%	12%	3%	1%	25%
Black	38%	10%	5%	30%	3%	11%
Indigenous	38%	6%	30%	1%	5%	10%
White	59%	2%	2%	1%	1%	30%



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