

Dear _____,

I am writing to you to express my disappointment in the lack of support and resources for individuals living with mental illness within colleges and universities in the State of _____. I am deeply disheartened for every student who was denied the opportunity to obtain a higher education, withdrew, or failed out due to the education system working against their mental illness. I am even more pained by the thought of every individual who lost their life by suicide during their college years, due to a poorly designed education system. Below you will find the three points where I feel our education system is lacking support for individuals living with mental illness.

First, the colleges and universities offering counseling services often have an extended waitlist beyond 2-3 weeks and are commonly available for appointments every couple of weeks with a limit on number of sessions allocated per semester or year that add up to 1 or less per month. While this may be sufficient for students dealing with a normal amount of anxiety over coursework or the unknown, this is severely inadequate for students living with mental illness and/or suicidal ideation. Some colleges and universities recommend students seek outside support for mental health treatment. While this may sound plausible, let us not forget that many students work to afford rent and food while taking out loans to pay for a chance at a degree; many students also lack the financial security for outside treatment; and many students do not have cars to get off campus to a local and affordable therapist with weekly availability.

Second, courses provided by colleges and universities tend to have a zero-tolerance policy for unexcused absences; however, many severe mental illness symptoms are not included as an “excused absence.” For example, an individual with a severe

anxiety disorder may experience debilitating panic attacks, and consequently, are unable to attend class or an exam during that moment. Another example may be an individual with suicidal ideation or bipolar disorder who utilizes self-harm to cope or self-harm occurs as part of a manic episode, and consequently, are unable to attend class or an exam during that moment. As a State, are we truly comfortable denying a student a make-up exam or the ability to graduate due to a symptom outside of their control, especially when we are not offering the resources needed to explore coping mechanisms and tools for management?

Lastly, our education system lacks flexible learning options that provide reasonable accommodations and support for students with mental illness. Many students living with mental illness may struggle with their entire grade dependent on two comprehensive exams and a term project. An example is a student living with ADHD who struggles to concentrate for an extended period of time, such as a 2-hour exam, that encompassing a wide variety of topics. Another example is a student living with an eating disorder who does not obtain enough nutrients or calories for optimum brain function, which reduces energy, memory, and concentration levels. There are hundreds of situations where one's mental health or mental illness may impact their performance in high pressure situations, yet we are refusing to provide ample accommodations to these students.

For all these reasons and more, I feel that our education system is not only discouraging individuals with mental illness from obtaining a higher education but also fueling the stigma associated with mental illness and treatment by denying sufficient access to treatment. To remedy the situation, I recommend the following:

- The State form a partnership with a telehealth system that offers free professional services to enrolled college students without limitation on number on sessions or insurance.
- The State offer either an increase in budget or reallocation of budget toward mental health services for postsecondary institutions with a mandatory percentage of total budget allocated toward mental health services.
- The State require postsecondary institutions to include debilitating mental health symptoms that cause a significant enough impairment that would affect a student's performance to be considered an excused absence for both class and exams, when provided a note from a licensed professional of this re-occurring symptom, attack, or episode.

As a whole, we need to step up and lead the way for other States to follow suit. I am profoundly frustrated for every individual and family who felt discriminated against by the current broken system due to the state of their mental health. Our community deserves better.

Sincerely,
