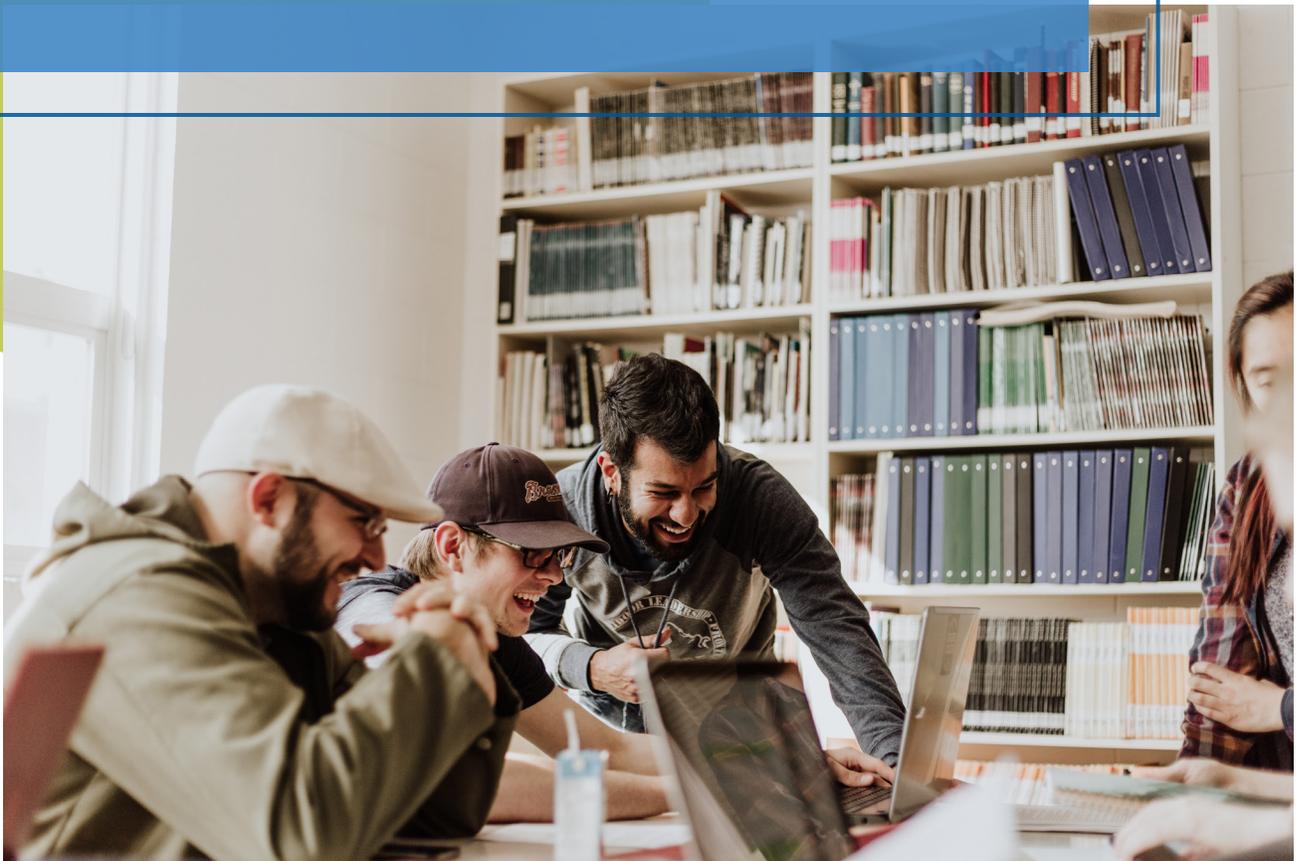


# Recommendations to Shape a Positive Mental Health Climate on College Campuses with and through Peer-to-Peer Networks



# active minds position statement



## about

Active Minds is the nation's leading nonprofit organization supporting mental health awareness and education for young adults. Powered by a network on more than 800 high school and college campuses, in workplaces and communities, and through a vast public audience, Active Minds is creating communities of support and saving lives.

**Join the Active Minds movement to change the conversation about mental health.**

[activeminds.org](http://activeminds.org)

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# Recommendations to Shape a Positive Mental Health Climate on College Campuses with and through Peer-to-Peer Networks



## Introduction

Nearly seven million college and university students nationwide meet criteria for a clinically significant mental health problem (depression, anxiety, eating disorder, or self-injury). Among them, there is a substantial gap between the need for mental health treatment and the use of services. Only about a third of the students who need treatment ever receive it.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most important factors in terms of a student's decision to seek help is campus climate. Students who feel that their campus community would support them in seeking help are more than 20 percent more likely to receive services and 60 percent more likely to do so on campus. Students are uniquely positioned to have direct and immediate effects on their peers' perceptions of mental health issues and their likelihood to access mental health services. Students' peers and social networks play an instrumental role in supporting mental health and facilitating help-seeking.

Through organizations like Active Minds, student mental health advocates seek to improve student attitudes and knowledge about mental health, reduce stigma, and bolster support for students with mental health needs. Through advocacy, programming, and maintaining a long-term consistent presence on campuses, student advocates can enhance the campus climate for students with mental health issues, potentially increasing their use of mental health services.

The Active Minds model for mental health education and suicide prevention was pioneered 15 years ago and now has a presence on more than 700 campuses. Active Minds' public health, peer-to-peer approach focuses on equipping students to change mental health perceptions and behaviors and to help create an overall supportive campus climate. This report explains the impact of Active Minds' peer-to-peer approach, examples of student-led strategies that are improving mental health outcomes on campuses nationwide, and recommendations for faculty, staff, administrators, and students regarding how to replicate this success on their own campuses.

## **The Impact of Active Minds' Model and Peer-to-Peer Approach**

In a landmark study, research conducted by RAND Corporation and published in the Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry<sup>2</sup> found that the presence of Active Minds on college campuses could significantly increase the number of students who receive help for mental health issues that could otherwise have serious, lasting, and sometimes tragic consequences.

The longitudinal study of more than 1,100 students at 12 colleges found that as students become more involved with Active Minds, they are more likely to reach out to a classmate or friend who is struggling with a mental health issue such as depression, anxiety, or suicidal thoughts. Additionally, even basic familiarity with Active Minds among the general student body increases knowledge and positive attitudes about mental health, creating a more supportive campus climate and increasing the potential that students in distress will seek mental health services.

The findings of the RAND study suggest that Active Minds' use of student-led individual, small-group, and large-scale education programs meaningfully influences not only students' knowledge and attitudes, but also their help-promoting behaviors within a single academic year.

It has been long-established that traditional (i.e. short-term or one-time encounter) education or contact-based programs reduce participants' mental health stigma and improve mental health knowledge and skills. The new study findings suggest, however, that in addition to traditional education or contact-based programs that rely on short-term or singular experiences to reduce stigma and improve knowledge of mental health, Active Minds establishes an ongoing presence on campuses and uses a combination of educational, contact-based, large scale programs and small-group activities initiated and led by peers on campuses throughout the year. This unique combination of approaches meaningfully influences not only student knowledge and attitudes but also their behaviors within a single academic year.

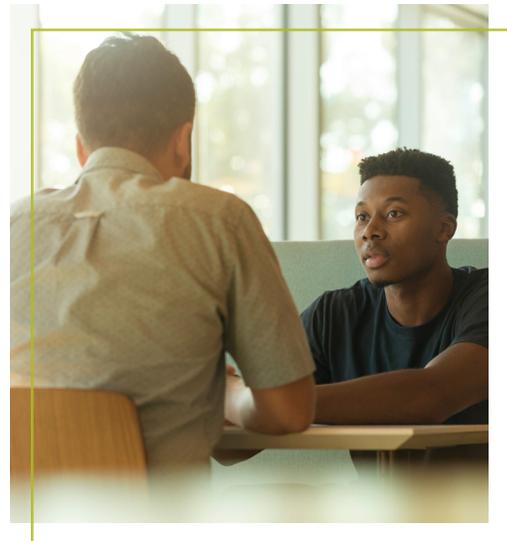
Being familiar with Active Minds, even if not actively involved, is associated with decreased stigma and improved student knowledge about mental health issues. Such changes in how the general student body views and understands mental health, brought about by Active Minds' constant presence and peer-to-peer approach, are instrumental in shaping a more supportive climate toward mental health issues on campus. This has important implications for addressing student mental health needs, as students with mental health problems are more likely to receive services if they feel the climate on their campus is more positive with respect to mental health.<sup>3</sup>

The findings indicate that increased involvement in a student-led, peer-to-peer approach can change students' mental health behaviors, such as helping others with mental health problems. In the current climate, when campus counseling centers are reporting unprecedented demand for mental health support among students, there has never been a greater need for empowering students to help and advocate for their peers who may be struggling. Campus faculty, staff and administrators are in a unique position of power and decision-making to support that work.

## Recommendations for Campus Faculty, Staff and Administrators

Campus faculty, staff, and administrators leading student wellness initiatives often engage students as focus group participants but seldom as partners or co-creators. Institutions may reserve a student seat on their wellness committees, for example, or ask students for feedback on a program once it has been fully conceived or implemented. However, these limited approaches do not often allow for input that is representative of the student body or at a stage in the process in which feedback can significantly alter the direction of a program or policy initiative.

Active Minds' Framework for Student Mobilization helps ensure that efforts to improve student mental health engage students as equal partners in the work. **Active Minds supports campuses to offer SEATS at the table to students in ways that are:**



### Student-Informed

Taking a student-informed approach means that decisions should be informed by data collected from students. National surveys, such as the Healthy Minds Study or the National College Health Assessment, are excellent strategies for collecting student-reported information regarding mental health and well-being. Additionally, as administrators become aware of students' mental health stories, they should assist students in elevating their voices among their peers. Overall, there needs to be an institutionalized process for receiving and responding to student input on a regular basis.



### Equitable

Administrators also need to make sure their efforts to involve students are equitable, addressing gaps in opportunity for health among populations that are historically marginalized. For example, steps should be taken to provide cultural competency and responsiveness training for faculty, staff, and students that is holistic in its approach. Students and administration should also engage with key stakeholders, embracing principles of community-based participatory research from the very beginning stages of planning to ensure that programs and policies are responsive to the diverse needs of students. Student-to-student programming is among the most effective ways to ensure diverse representation and perspectives.



## Actionable

Those who are doing this work around mental health need to view students as equal partners in the process, and not just end users. Ensuring that the campus response to student mental health needs are practical, achievable, and not simply symbolic is critical. Students should be involved at all stages of the process, not just in research or planning. Student organizations and leaders have an important stake in the issue of mental health. Programming efforts are most successful when they involve numerous student leadership bodies across campus (i.e., Active Minds chapters, student government, Greek Life, athletes, and others).



## Transparent

Student involvement is also most effective when communication is transparent. Strategies include allowing for two-way communication with students through town hall meetings, focus groups, and other methods. When possible, use the language and voices of students in communicating information back to the student body about how the campus is addressing mental health concerns. Additionally, administrators should share research findings, plans, and results with the students. Throughout this planning and implementation, administrators should provide an open door for students to university leadership to answer questions and provide support.



## Sustainable

Finally, it is important for the efforts to be sustainable for the long term. Administration and students can consider establishing an Active Minds chapter to ensure student mental health leadership is sustained on campus year-to-year. To ensure success, Active Minds National provides funding, technical assistance, training, leadership development, and mentoring.

Quite often, colleges and universities are tackling student mental health head-on; yet, the student body is not aware of these efforts, because the institutions are failing to communicate their progress effectively. Student leaders, when engaged appropriately, are well-positioned to serve as a bridge between administrators and the larger student body to ensure that student mental health needs are met.

## Case Studies in Championing Student Voices

Students know students. They turn to each other when struggling with health and model their behaviors and attitudes after their peers'. They are experts in the best programming, strategies, messaging, and approaches to engage students and create a campus culture and climate that fosters mental health, physical health, and well-being.

Since 2015, Active Minds has presented select campuses with the Healthy Campus Award to honor those campuses empowering their students as equal partners in the planning, development, and implementation of campus wellness initiatives. Arizona State University, Kent State University, and the University of Oregon, in particular, are putting students front and center through student-led solutions.



### Case Study #1: Arizona State University

Devils 4 Devils is Arizona State University (ASU)'s student-led solution to fostering an emotionally healthy campus where students support students through good times and bad. Through enhanced training, students who are part of Devils 4 Devils use their skills to raise awareness about mental health, be an even more supportive friend, and work to create an emotionally healthy campus community. ASU also empowers a student-led collegiate recovery program; a group of trained peer educators who live and work within the ASU residential colleges; and students who are points of connection for other students with skills for screening and brief intervention and referral to services aimed to assist students struggling with substance abuse, emotional, and/or behavioral challenges.

## Case Study #2: Kent State University

Kent State University engages members of the Undergraduate Student Government in its Kent State of Wellness taskforce and committees; together, students and administrators have worked together to increase the number of mental health professionals and amount of services across the eight campus system. Through the creation of a student ambassador wellness program, students are encouraged to get involved on campus and elevate their voices. Kent State has also granted students Seeds of Wellness grants to design and execute their own projects that align with the university's overall wellness priorities.

## Case Study #3: University of Oregon

In collaboration with student organizations, the Duck Nest Campus Wellness Center provides wellness programming, including meditation and relaxation, aromatherapy, yoga, wellbeing workshops, and wellness presentations offered by student peer wellness advocates. Additionally, two student advisory committees support wellness initiatives and services from the health and counseling centers through advocacy, feedback, and peer education. Student advocates are empowered to speak to incoming students about health and wellness, stress reduction, and access to care, reaching more than 4,000 freshmen annually.



Student leaders attending these universities report feeling that their universities' wellness efforts are "genuine," "timely," "empowering," and "immensely appreciative" of student voices. They express that approaching students as equal partners in the work has improved their campus communities and reframed their own mental health advocacy, empowering them to take action. However, much work still remains to be done to bring student empowerment in campus decision-making to scale nationwide.

## Recommendations for Students

Since 2014, students participating in Active Minds' Transform Your Campus advocacy program on 85 campuses have successfully initiated positive student-administrator partnerships to enact policy change. For example:

- Active Minds at Ithaca College and their University President worked together to ensure the addition of two new mental health counselors and a case manager.
- Student Anthony Sartori used Active Minds' Transform Your Campus campaign to work with university administration at the University of Maryland at College Park to establish a student liaison to the counseling and health centers and to help interview new candidates to fill vacancies in the counseling center.
- Due to a compelling case and campus-wide survey presented by Active Minds student Krystal Murillo at Mount San Jacinto College, the college's board approved the creation of a health center on campus.
- At the online campus American Public University, Active Minds and their university leadership collaborated to survey students on mental health needs, which led to funding for providing tele-therapy services.
- The university leadership at the University of Michigan approved 13 major mental health recommendations proposed by the Active Minds chapter and student government leaders after the students initiated a campus-wide mental health climate survey.

Active Minds supports students in their efforts to STEP up to lead the conversation, because we know that the most powerful changes come from students. Not only are they the experts of their own campus culture, they are the first line of support when their peers are experiencing distress. Active Minds empowers students with resources, program ideas, and expertise to lead effective programming, policy change, and overall progress. **We encourage students to engage in:**



### Student-Led Programming and Policy Change

The most powerful form of mental health awareness and education for students is often created by students themselves, with emphasis on story-sharing and peer connection. Students can also be effective advocates for stronger campus policies and systems to support mental health. Our wide-reaching network of more than 500 student-powered Active Minds chapters on campuses in all 50 states strengthen one another through ongoing communication and idea-sharing. More than 60 campuses have changed mental health policies in direct response to student activism.



## Training and Technical Assistance

Students can take part in the national Active Minds movement to receive training and technical assistance from professional staff and public health experts through programs such as Active Minds Speakers, Active Minds Chapters, Send Silence Packing, Transform Your Campus, and other curated national campaigns. Additionally, consider engaging mental health professionals on campus and in your community as topic experts and on-campus support.



## Engaging Diverse Leadership and Collaborative Relationships

Involving diverse perspectives in every facet of program planning and implementation strengthens the mental health message and promotes inclusivity. Partnerships with key stakeholders on campus who can bring in new ideas and populations is an invaluable asset.



## Progress and Measuring Results

By joining the national movement and staying in communication with Active Minds staff, students can follow current trends in the ever-evolving field of student mental health. Measure your impact on campus, research the campus climate, and respond to what you learn. Remember to pass your wisdom on to the next generation of leaders so that they can learn from your experiences.



When administrators involve students in positive change around issues like mental health, students are more invested, successful, and satisfied with their college experience. They gain leadership experience and critical-thinking skills, self-identity, and motivation that impact many areas of their lives. Particularly, students with disabilities feel more autonomy and better self-esteem when included. Studies also show that stronger academic performance and retention rates result from student involvement.

There is much work still left to be done in empowering student voices in campus decision-making. For technical assistance, more support, and examples of how university leadership are successfully partnering with students, contact Active Minds at [activeminds.org](http://activeminds.org).

## Additional Resources from Active Minds

For more information, see these helpful resources on our website at [activeminds.org](http://activeminds.org):

### Active Minds' Chapter Network:

Join, start, or support an Active Minds chapter: [www.activeminds.org/chapters](http://www.activeminds.org/chapters)

### Active Minds' Frameworks for Student Mobilization:

Learn more about Active Minds' recommendations for supporting a peer-to-peer approach on campuses: [www.activeminds.org/frameworks](http://www.activeminds.org/frameworks)

### Active Minds' Healthy Campus Award:

Learn about how award-winning institutions are supporting a peer-to-peer approach to improve mental health outcomes: [www.activeminds.org/award](http://www.activeminds.org/award)

### Active Minds' Transform Your Campus:

This program includes free guides and technical assistance to help students create policy change on their campuses: [www.activeminds.org/transform](http://www.activeminds.org/transform)

### Additional Programs:

Consider bringing Active Minds' Send Silence Packing exhibit or an Active Minds speaker to your campus to promote suicide prevention and mental health promotion: [www.activeminds.org/programs](http://www.activeminds.org/programs)

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## References

<sup>1</sup> American Council on Education (2019). Investing in Student Mental Health: Opportunities & Benefits for College Leadership. Retrieved August 12, 2019, from <https://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/Investing-in-Student-Mental-Health.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Sontag-Padilla, L et al. (July 2018). Strengthening College Students' Mental Health Knowledge, Awareness, and Helping Behaviors: The Impact of Active Minds, a Peer Mental Health Organization. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, (57)7: 500-507.

<sup>3</sup> Sontag-Padilla L, Woodbridge MW, Mendelsohn J, et al. Factors Affecting Mental Health Service Utilization Among California Public College and University Students. *Psychiatr Serv*. 2016:appips201500307.

**Active Minds**

2001 S Street NW, Suite 630  
Washington, DC 20009

**activeminds.org**

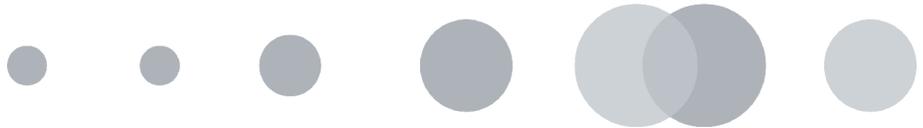
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