

New York University's new mental health initiative cheats students in need of counseling

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29 October 2019

Earlier this month, the *Washington Square News* (WSN) reported that NYU's Wellness Exchange had launched a new program for student counseling. Called "While you wait," the program promises that if a student has more than two weeks until his or her next one-on-one appointment with a counselor, he or she can opt-in to group therapy sessions.

These sessions, called "toolkits," are aimed at specific issues such as sleep problems, academics and anxiety. NYU's assistant vice president for NYU Student Mental Health, Zoe Ragouzeos, said the toolkits are "inspired by the principles of self-management."

This initiative is a direct response to students' continuous complaints about the inability to reserve time with therapists at the university's health center. Despite the university's claim that students' "health and wellbeing is our priority," those seeking mental health treatment often must settle for one-on-one therapist appointments once every three weeks.

According to the WSN, Natalie, an ex-student who attempted suicide during her first year at NYU, described her inability to get regular sessions with a therapist despite the university's knowledge that she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder. The tragic consequences of the scarcity of available therapists were seen in the two undergraduate suicides in the 2018-19 academic year.

In an anonymous online drop-box, an NYU student complained that he or she was forced to wait for hours to exchange messages with someone on the Wellness Exchange Application while feeling suicidal and how on another occasion he or she called the service only to get through to an individual who did not speak English fluently.

Instead of confronting the problem, however, NYU's administration has tried to push it under the rug. Following the second student suicide, earlier this year NYU's administration and student government co-hosted a "Wellness Town Hall" to discuss student mental health at the university.

Neither of the two student suicides that occurred in the preceding six months was mentioned and the university's

president, Andrew Hamilton (whose pay package amounted to nearly \$2 million in 2017), could only suggest that international students suffered disproportionately due to issues of "cultural sensitivity."

Youth nationally are experiencing a mental health crisis. As the WSWS has reported, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the national suicide rate among Americans aged 10 to 24 rose by 56 percent from 2007 to 2017, and suicide now ranks as the second leading cause of death for those aged 10-34. One in 10 of the students surveyed in the study had made plans to take his or her own life.

Last semester, to cite only a few examples in the New York area, two students at the College of New Jersey took their own lives, and in late 2016 and early 2017 seven students committed suicide in a four-month period at New York's Columbia University. This crisis is by no means limited to undergraduate students: an NYU grad student took his own life in 2018.

High school students are also increasingly taking their own lives. The *Wall Street Journal* reported how seven students from the same high school in Harriman, Ohio committed suicide in a two-year period from 2017 to 2019. Every single day in the United States 12 students either in high school or college take their own lives.

This is compounded by a lack of mental healthcare services available to American students. A study by the National Alliance on Mental Illness asked students what prevents them from seeking healthcare support from the institutions they attend.

The top two reasons were a lack of appointments and poorly trained counselors. This forces many students to seek mental healthcare privately, meaning that all but the wealthiest layers of students go without. Another top concern was that students feared they would be prematurely institutionalized if they attempted to seek support.

Decades of applying the corporate model to higher education have starved student health services of much-needed resources and created a hostile and fear-inducing

environment for some of the most vulnerable young people in the United States.

NYU is only the sharpest expression of the university-as-corporation phenomena that has risen across the US in the previous decades.

One does not have to be able to read between the lines to see that the administration's priority is to reduce the use of its one-on-one mental health service, and not to spend a penny more on its much-needed expansion. Speaking to the WSN, one student described the initiative as "a Band-aid solution," while another first-year student simply asked, "Why don't they just get more counselors though?"

Despite the university's endowment having risen by \$100 million to \$4.2 billion last year, there was no discussion of the failure to increase spending on healthcare services. Of this endowment less than 3 percent is spent on "student affairs," a catch-all category that includes the entire budget of the university's student housing service.

Meanwhile, the university seeks to squeeze as much money as possible from its students. A 2015 report by Faculty Against the Sexton Plan at NYU, "The Art of the Gouge," detailed the various fees the university requires from incoming freshman. This includes \$1,212 "registration fees," compulsory enrollment in the university's health insurance program, a compulsory \$3,000 meal plan and various hidden fees.

Aside from Hamilton, the medical school's CEO Robert Grossman earned \$4 million (up \$1 million from the previous year) and Vice President Andrew Brotman was paid \$2 million (up \$800,000). On top of the million-dollar salaries of executives, an elite cadre of administrators are paid hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. These large salaries are only the tip of NYU's financial iceberg, however. Its 990 tax form also reveals that in 2017 it invested \$600 million into Central America. With no international campus in the region or connections of any kind it is unclear what this huge sum is going towards. Some \$134 million was also spent on travel expenses, while \$9 million was set aside for the entertainment of public officials. This is on top of the university's ever-expanding multibillion-dollar real estate portfolio.

The administration's repeated references to a lack of funds for healthcare services should be dismissed as flagrant lies. According to Glassdoor, the average therapist's salary in New York for Educational Therapists is \$48,000 a year.

The university's annual bill for champagne dinners could pay for over 180 healthcare professionals. One NYU student told the WSN that she thinks the "university is apathetic unless it affects their wallets."

Universities nationally, nevertheless, continue to prioritize cost-cutting over student welfare. The University of Florida

(UF) rolled out its virtual Therapist Assisted Online (TAO) for students with anxiety disorders. Universities nationally have either used TAO or developed their own equivalents. NYU, for example, followed suit with its Wellness Exchange Application.

The American Psychological Association has noted that UF developed the service in the interest of reducing waiting times, as opposed to striving for better quality care.

In his book *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education*, Harvard University's former president Derek Bok noted, "What is new about today's commercial practices is not their existence but their unprecedented size and scope." Draconian cost-cutting on student services despite massive increases in budgets is a common expression of this shift.

Bok also writes that students are increasingly seen as customers, and that the universities treat them as cash-cows rather than human beings. It should be noted that Bok is by no means a radical figure. Rather his concern is motivated by fear that the present trajectory is insupportable and is laying the groundwork for a social explosion.

The crisis in student mental health is a product of the wider social crisis capitalism has created in America, as well as internationally. The apathy and inaction by university administrations in regard to the mental health of students are not motivated by the ignorance or malevolence of a few bad apples.

Rather, it is a product of the systematic drive for continuous economic expansion of universities and top administrators' desire for personal enrichment. On the other hand, American students' physical and mental wellbeing is constantly undermined by astronomical tuition bills, high rates of food insecurity, endlessly rising rents and no foreseeable post-college job security.

The only way to stop this criminal distortion of higher education and its tragic consequences is for students and youth to orient to the working class in a struggle for socialism, which defines high-quality higher education as a social right.



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