

# ■ Mental Health and Well-Being in Higher Education Admissions: The New Normal

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## Introduction

Historically, well-being programs have been utilized by organizations and higher education institutions to help increase employee engagement and reduce health insurance claims and absenteeism. These early well-being programs also generally focused on incentivizing physical health initiatives to achieve their programmatic goals. Over the past two decades, however, many higher education institutions have expanded their understanding of well-being and the various dimensions that impact employees and students.

Within academic veterinary medicine, we've expanded to include more aspects of well-being—particularly mental health—and a sense of belonging, and we also strive to support all members of the academic community rather than solely focusing on students. Building a thriving health profession requires continually exploring and evaluating every aspect of how we train and develop our health professionals during their education and beyond. We want all members of the health professions

to be active contributors for as long as they want to be, not for as long as they can endure.

Veterinary medicine is not alone in wanting to improve well-being among our communities. Many of the health professions are navigating the same challenges of a higher prevalence of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation than the general population, and many health professions education associations are working collaboratively to elevate the well-being of the health professions training space. There are evidence-based approaches to improving individual and community well-being collectively that go far beyond what people usually think well-being initiatives are: yoga classes and mindfulness meditation phone apps. Although yoga and mindfulness meditation are good activities for stress management, they tend to only be beneficial on an individual level and do not tend to generate the systemic changes needed to create lasting community-wide benefits. Meeting the diverse needs of individuals and overall colleges requires a multi-systems-level approach.

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At the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC), we offer tools and guidance to help member institutions assess functioning at micro, mezzo, and macro levels, to create environments that optimize well-being. This is achieved through a preventative, community-based approach aimed at supporting all members of the veterinary education community, including students, staff, residents/interns, and faculty. AAVMC works to meet our members where they are in the process and help them achieve success through a design-thinking approach when generating solutions for organizational well-being concerns.

**Applicant Disclosures**

While we still have a long way to go, society has made some progress in addressing mental health stigma. Mental health is more openly discussed in mainstream society now than it ever has been. This is evident by the increasing levels of comfort that students have in sharing their experiences of managing their mental health in their admissions essays. For many college admissions groups, this can be a double-edged sword. While it is wonderful to see the openness and growth that applicants can express in learning more about themselves and how to navigate life with mental health challenges, it can also unfortunately open up an applicant's profile to be viewed through a lens of stigma and bias. This may cause the admission committee, even with the best intentions, to view the applicant as a less favorable candidate. It would also open the admission committee to potentially violating ADA compliance when it assesses the candidate's application.

This dynamic poses a few issues for admissions committees that they may need to consider:

- **How to handle disclosures.** Since an admission committee member can't "unsee" a mental health disclosure given in an admissions essay, how should a committee handle a disclosure in a way that would not negatively impact the applicant's candidacy and open the college up to potential litigation?
- **The quality of their essay questions.** Poor essay questions might inadvertently be encouraging applicant responses that would disclose mental health challenges.
- **Whether they are inadvertently or knowingly "screening for resilience."** "Screening for resilience" is a concerning admissions trend. In an attempt to address the growing demand for access to mental health services on college campuses, many well-intentioned groups have advocated for "screening out applicants who lack resilience" to reduce the burden on the tertiary mental health services that are offered at the college level. But many admissions groups are not well-versed in what resilience actually is, how to assess it, or how it can manifest itself in the educational environment.

The origin of these resilience assessments is the field of clinical psychology; they were created to assess a client's progress within a therapeutic relationship with a licensed mental health professional. They were not created with the intention of them being used to assess academic ability or predict occupational performance. Newer resilience screenings that are being developed for academic admissions may lack cultural humility in their situational assessments, as resilience looks and is assessed differently across racial/ethnic and neurodivergent groups. Encouraging students to build resilience skills is helpful for adult development, but admissions into an academic program should be determined based on whether the applicant has demonstrated the academic competencies for admission.

**Resources Associations Have for Applicants/Students with Mental Challenges**

Because well-being looks different for every community, AAVMC hopes to empower our member institutions by working collaboratively with them to provide guidance and resources to fit their needs while striving to achieve AAVMC's institutional well-being benchmarks. We work with member institution representatives (e.g., deans, associate deans, and academic well-being professionals) to help identify and prioritize institutional well-being needs and goals and provide outreach and education material. We engage in providing talks/workshops at no additional cost to our members and discussing job descriptions with members who are creating new roles that focus on supporting well-being on a systemic level.

Currently, we offer our *Accepted Student Wellbeing* course to all students who have been accepted into a program but have yet to arrive at their veterinary school. This online course is housed with our organization's online learning management system. The goal of this project was to have a universal education tool that would expand the current knowledge of well-being across all student groups, highlight well-being's connection to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and help students create their well-being care plans before veterinary college as opposed to once they arrive on campus.

As an association, AAVMC also has dedicated positions for well-being and DEI, recognizing that mental health challenges can vary across demographics and populations and that a sense of belonging is crucial to a healthy academic environment. Along with the creation of these dedicated roles, AAVMC has made it a strategic priority to enhance mental health and well-being not only in the application process but also for matriculated students, post-graduate trainees, faculty, and college leadership with structured

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efforts. This requires our association to look at teams, communities, and systems-level interventions that can have a broader impact. We encourage our colleges to look beyond their student body and consider the well-being of all members of their academic community. The well-being of interns, residents, staff, and faculty is incredibly impactful on the student experience and on retaining talent that positively contributes to a culture of well-being and belonging.

**Advice for Health Professions Advisors**

Preparing and applying to a health profession school can be daunting for anyone. As health professions advisors, you are in a unique position to support applicants through a time that can be filled with strains on mental health. So, what can you do to support the well-being of students in your role? Consider the following strategies.

- **Establish an open, welcoming environment for students.** First and foremost, students should want to come to your office to meet and discuss their aspirations to pursue a career in a health profession. Assess if there are any barriers for students to meet with you. For example, do you offer various times for students to meet with you (in-person and virtual)? How do you tailor your advising to different audiences (underrepresented, first-generation, or non-traditional students)?
- **Understand your role in conversations about disclosures.** There are many online communities that encourage applicants to disclose their mental health challenges in an application essay as a demonstration of fully embracing their lived experiences. While we want all applicants to be themselves, an application essay is not a memoir or a personal diary but is intended to be a persuasive essay demonstrating skills and competencies not readily seen in other areas of an application. Provide factual information about the difficulties admissions committees face when an applicant discloses a mental health challenge. Understand that the student has the ultimate choice whether to disclose but helping them be aware of the numerous ways that information may be received (for better or worse) is within your scope as an advisor.
- **Be aware.** Be aware of the challenges, obstacles, and opportunities for underrepresented students, including first-generation and non-traditional students, and how they may differ from those of other students. This can pose additional stressors for these students when they are navigating the preparation and application process on their own.
- **Help students consider other factors when selecting programs.** Encourage students to consider the non-academic aspects of a program, including what supports are offered for mental health and well-being. The distance from support systems like family and friends and the established services for well-being and mental health at veterinary medical colleges are examples of things students should consider when looking for the right program for them.
- **Work with your students to establish a realistic timeline with deadlines.** Setting a timeline with realistic deadlines will help students map out how they will meet requirements and how much time they will spend on completing the application. Additionally, normalizing gap/growth years as part of a successful application may lessen the pressure on students to go directly to health professions school and minimize adverse effects on their well-being.
- **Set regular meetings with your students.** Students have many competing activities, so setting regular meetings will ensure you have an opportunity to offer support throughout the academic year.
- **Help students create a Plan A, B, and C.** An established plan of action if a student is not accepted on the first try can help lessen the shock and disappointment. It also provides the student with something to focus on right away.
- **Utilize your network.** You have access to a network of professional support, including fellow advisors, AAVMC staff, colleagues at veterinary medical colleges, and countless others. They can help you think through sticky situations, develop creative, thoughtful solutions, and ensure an important detail is not overlooked while also ensuring that student/applicant confidentiality is maintained.

**Conclusion**

Addressing well-being, mental health, and belonging in health professions require a systems-based approach that spans the preparation process through education and beyond. As outlined, our work is far from over and requires continued work at all levels within our colleges and across health professions. Health professions advisors also play a critical role in this work.

