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Nichole Kang, Wellness Center Director for Montgomery County Community College, sits in the facility's sensory room.

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Technology Initiatives Support Student Mental Health in a Modern Higher Ed Environment

Colleges and universities are creating original virtual and physical offerings to help bolster students' well-being.



by **Erin Brereton** ✕

Erin Brereton has written about technology, business and other topics for more than 50 magazines, newspapers and online publications.

Mental health has become an increased focus recently for both students and the schools they attend.

According to a 2024 U.S. News-Generation Lab report, 70% of students [have experienced mental health challenges](#) since starting college. However, only 37% sought mental health resources at their school — in some cases, because they were uncertain about how to utilize them.

The effect can be devastating: Research from [Gallup-Lumina](#) found nearly two-thirds (64%) of currently enrolled college students who recently considered stopping their studies said emotional stress or mental health concerns were a significant reason.

To help students complete their educational journey, several colleges and universities have introduced technology initiatives that offer support for mental health and well-being, says Ryan S. Patel, [American College Health Association](#) board member and chair of its Mental Health Section.

[Click the banner below](#) for the tools you need to give every student a seat at the table.

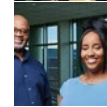
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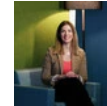
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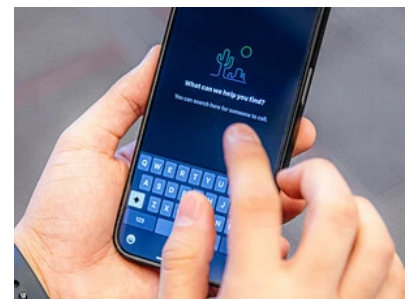
Universities Consolidate Multiple Productivity Suites



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Technology Initiatives Support Student Mental Health In A Modern Higher Ed Environment



DIGITAL WORKSPACE

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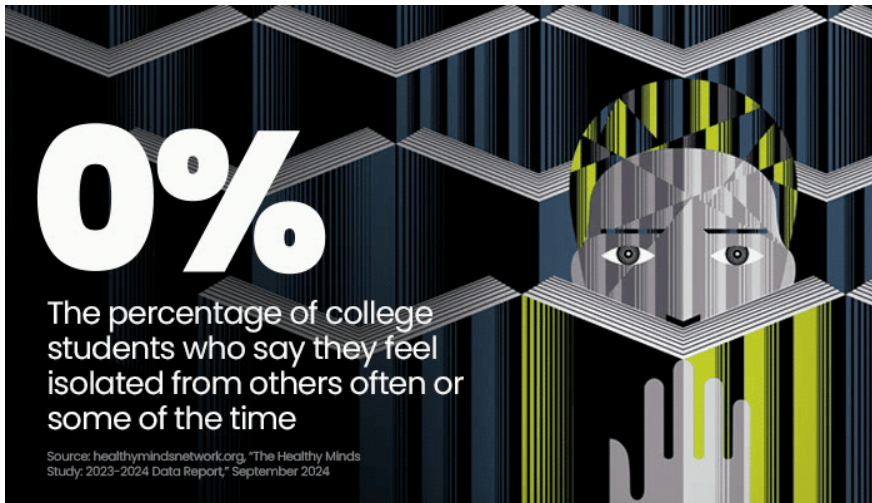
“For each student, it may be a different combination of factors,” says Patel, who is also a senior staff psychiatrist at [Ohio State](#). “Schools are trying to provide a variety of solutions in the area of health promotion or counseling to provide self-care resources for student mental health.”

Technology Elements Can Be Used to Decompress and Receive Care

Research has shown an increase in college students’ [mental health needs](#), which, if unmet, could prevent them from succeeding at school. That prompted [Montgomery County Community College](#) in Pennsylvania to establish a Wellness Center facility at its Pottstown campus, according to Wellness Center Director Nichole Kang.

Tech elements are woven throughout the [Pottstown Wellness Center](#). MCCC Students can unwind in a sensory room equipped with soothing lights and sounds, massage and bean bag chairs, and semi-isolated seating areas.

When a student planning to participate in a [virtual therapy session](#) enters one of the counseling room’s glass enclosures, automated lights click on and a fan supplies enough background noise to prevent conversations from being heard outside.



In a separate room with comfortable chairs and cushions hanging on the wall that students can remove to sit on, an 86-inch InFocus touch enabled display, a wide-angle camera and ceiling-mounted microphone is available for [teleconferencing](#).

“We have a peer support program. Students who run that can use [Zoom](#) and either talk to somebody sitting in their home or at the Blue Bell campus, which is 50 minutes away by car,” Kang says. That setup saves remote students or those on other campuses from having to come to Pottstown to do an in-person session.

Students’ reaction to the MCCC Wellness Center resources has been notable, Kang says.

“They’re just in awe of the space,” she says. “They come there and feel really comfortable. This semester it’s been used a lot — it’s always busy.”

A Multidisciplinary Approach Can Produce a Nuanced Tech Offering



In January 2021, the [University of Alabama at Birmingham](#) introduced a bespoke health and wellness app — a collective effort by students, the university’s IT division, the student affairs department and



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Students had come forward asking for an app that gave them 24/7 access to peer-to-peer support,”

Stowe says. “But the more we talked about it, we realized they were actually looking for a mental health hub on campus where they could just go to one place and connect with all kinds of resources.”

***DISCOVER:** [San Diego State University's esports lab supports students' mental wellness.](#)*

Following focus group discussions, the app development effort gained momentum with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, students can use it to create a [customizable self-care plan](#) that involves elements, such as nutrition and stress management, based on preset or personalized prompts. They can also check off items they complete each day and record their wellness goals and progress in a daily journal.

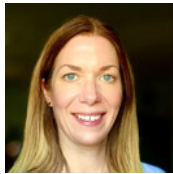
Through the [UABwell app](#), students can access information about available mental health services and be connected to emergency service responders. They can also view upcoming mental health-related campus events on a live calendar feed and watch UAB-produced videos on topics such as yoga and mindfulness.

[Data privacy and security](#) were a central consideration when developing the app, says Stowe. The team was aware students might be concerned about who'd be able to see information about them.

“We designed our app so that people do not have to sign into it,” she says. “We have no idea who downloads the app. The only activity we can view involves our videos because they are directly linked to a YouTube playlist, so we can see how many plays they've had.”

A committee meets roughly three times a year to decide on app updates — some of which are based on feedback from a survey distributed to students through the school's learning management system.

“We'll do beta versions, test drive those and give feedback,” Stowe says. “The IT team will work out glitches and then release an update when we're ready. We've been able to do that a couple of times a year, just to freshen it up.”



“They're just in awe of the space. They come there and feel really comfortable.”

Nichole Kang, Wellness Center Director, Montgomery County Community College

Addressing Students' Interpersonal Intentions with Technology

The previous director of the [University of North Carolina at Charlotte's](#) Center for Wellness Promotion proposed creating a similar resource-based app after hearing about UABwell in a webinar during the pandemic, according to Sophia Jordan-Marshall, the center's current director.

Students using either an iOS or Android operating system can use UNC's [Healthy 49ers](#) app to set, log and track health and well-being goals. To [maintain privacy](#), students don't need to log in, and information is stored locally on users' devices, Jordan-Marshall says.

In addition to mental health topics, the app's content touches on physical wellness, offering prompts for sleep, exercise, stress management and coping skills.

***LEARN MORE:** [How to support your cybersecurity staff members' mental health.](#)*

The app's resources also center on social wellness and achieving a [sense of belonging](#) — important to include, Jordan-Marshall says, because students mentioned it often.

“Students aren't finding community as easily as maybe we did when we were in college a long time ago,” she says. “The pandemic really made students feel more isolated. It's harder for them to make friends, so one part of the app is social.”



Students can choose from different goals, such as making one new friend or joining a student organization, and view guidance about how to do that.

In today's college environment, where anxiety, depression and other mental health struggles remain a concern, apps and other types of technology can offer schools an effective way to [connect with students](#), according to MCCC's Kang.

"We're working with a lot of young folks who were very impacted by having to isolate at home during their high school years and missing all these things they should have been doing with friends and socializing," she says. "It's been hard for them to adjust to being in-person and having a lot of things to do. Having this type of resource is a way to engage with them around their mental health."

A TANGIBLE TAKE ON WELLNESS

Schools with a considerable number of students who [attend remotely most or part of the time](#) may be well acquainted with using technology to communicate and address concerns. Some, however, might also find that [physical resources](#) can specifically help support students' mental health.

With no on-campus housing and fully virtual students representing roughly a third of the student body, establishing a dedicated space they and other students can use to support their well-being made sense for Montgomery County Community College.

The school opened the Wellness Center facility, located on its Pottstown campus, in 2022. The center offers MCCC students a place to study, attend virtual medical appointments and otherwise relax during the day.

"There's a lot of research that shows commuter students often have more needs than students who are living on campus. Commuter students' needs should be met if they're on campus," says its Director Nichole Kang. "We have plenty of students who are homeless, living in their cars. They spend a lot of time at campus. They could just be trying to avoid what's going on at home, so they come and hang out in the Wellness Center."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY COLIN LENTON



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