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April 2, 2019

The Honorable Miguel Cardona  
Secretary of Education  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona:

As members of the Higher Education Mental Health Alliance (HEMHA), the undersigned organizations would like to express our congratulations on your confirmation as Secretary of Education at this critical time for our nation's college students. We celebrate your commitment to student mental health and would like to be a resource to the Department of Education as you work to address the mental health and well-being of college students.

By affirming that college student mental health is central to student success, HEMHA provides leadership through an interdisciplinary partnership of organizations to advance mental health on college campuses. With a focus on advocacy, policy development and review, practice dissemination, and the promotion of research—across the mental health continuum, including prevention, intervention and postvention—HEMHA is committed to advancing mental health in higher education and improving student recruitment, retention and learning outcomes. Our nine partner organizations are comprised of practitioners, educators, administrators, and researchers.

COVID-19 has adversely impacted the mental health of individuals across the United States, exacerbating the population's already growing list of mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, substance use disorder, suicide, and post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>[ii]</sup> This includes college students,<sup>[iii]</sup> who faced increasing mental health concerns even before the pandemic.<sup>[iv]</sup> Of the nearly 17.5 million college students in the fall 2020 semester,<sup>[iv]</sup> about half of all college students nationally screened positive for depression, anxiety, or both.<sup>[v]</sup> Many are experiencing loneliness and social isolation, while others have lost family members, their only safe living environments, and support networks. The highest rates of negative mental health impacts are being seen most among vulnerable students, including BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students.<sup>[vi]</sup>

Furthermore, considerable numbers of college students and their families have experienced significant financial distress. Prospective graduates are facing a weakened economy and a depleted job market, while also carrying large levels of student loan debt. At the same time, many other college students, including those who are low-income, are dropping out altogether.<sup>[vii]</sup> Recent data show that future economic insecurity resulting from the pandemic is among the top concerns of college students,<sup>[viii]</sup> further contributing to stress, anxiety, and depression.<sup>[ix]</sup> These levels of uncertainty are more prevalent among younger, college-aged adults, which is particularly concerning as three-fourths of all lifetime mental illnesses develop by age 24.<sup>[x]</sup>

Prior to COVID-19, campus counseling centers were the only access point to mental health care for many college students. As institutions of higher education across the country work to address the impacts of COVID-19 on their students, counseling centers are playing an increasingly pivotal role in that response.<sup>[xi]</sup> Many are seeing significant increases in demand, without a corresponding increase in

resources, whether through funding, training, or staff.<sup>[xii]</sup> They are providing services directly, and through telehealth, to the most at-risk students—for whom any lapse in care could be acutely harmful—and to growing numbers of students who did not previously demonstrate signs of a mental or behavioral health disorders.

Accessible, effective college mental health services are an integral part of the overall health care of many students and essential to their ability to earn their degrees, pursue a healthy lifestyle, and enter the workforce. Currently, the services that campus counseling centers provide are perhaps more critical than ever, as higher education looks to respond to the impacts of the pandemic. HEMHA is heartened by the administration’s recognition that access to mental health care is an issue of equity, not only for health, but for educational outcomes. We want to congratulate you once again on your confirmation and stand ready to work with you and your staff on issues related to the mental health and wellness of college students.

Sincerely,

Christopher Corbett, PsyD, LP  
Chair, Higher Education Mental Health Alliance

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry  
American College Counseling Association  
American College Health Association  
American College Personnel Association  
American Psychiatric Association  
American Psychological Association  
Association for University and College Counseling Directors  
The Jed Foundation  
NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education

<sup>[xi]</sup> Panchal, N., Kamal, R., Cox, C., and Garfield, R. The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use. Kaiser Family Foundation. (February 2021). Retrieved from: <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>.

<sup>[xii]</sup> The Generation Lab and Axios. (2020). Students and COVID: The college experience in the midst of a pandemic. Retrieved from: <https://www.generationlab.org/post/hidden-struggles-sink-fall-semester-for-students>.

<sup>[xiii]</sup> American College Health Association. American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Reference Group Executive Summary Spring 2019. Silver Spring, MD: American College Health Association; 2019. Retrieved from: [https://www.acha.org/NCHA/ACHA-NCHA\\_Data/Publications\\_and\\_Reports/](https://www.acha.org/NCHA/ACHA-NCHA_Data/Publications_and_Reports/).

<sup>[xiv]</sup> National Student Clearing House. Fall 2020 Current Term Enrollment Estimates. (December 17, 2020). Retrieved from: [https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE\\_Report\\_Fall\\_2020.pdf](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE_Report_Fall_2020.pdf).

<sup>[xv]</sup> The Healthy Minds Study. Fall 2020 Data Report. Retrieved from: <https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/HMS-Fall-2020-National-Data-Report.pdf>.

<sup>[xvi]</sup> Center for Collegiate Mental Health. Pennsylvania State University. Part 3 of 5: Mental Health Impact of COVID-19 on Various Demographic Groups. February 16, 2020. Retrieved from: [https://ccmh.psu.edu/index.php?option=com\\_dailyplanetblog&view=entry&year=2021&month=02&day=15&id=11:part-3-of-5-mental-health-impact-of-covid-19-on-various-demographic-groups](https://ccmh.psu.edu/index.php?option=com_dailyplanetblog&view=entry&year=2021&month=02&day=15&id=11:part-3-of-5-mental-health-impact-of-covid-19-on-various-demographic-groups).

<sup>[xvii]</sup> Long, H., and Douglas-Gabriel, D. “The latest crisis: Low-income students are dropping out of college this fall in alarming numbers.” The Washington Post. September 16, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/09/16/college-enrollment-down/>.

<sup>[xviii]</sup> Chegg.org. (February 2021). Global Student Survey. Retrieved from: <https://www.chegg.com/about/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Chegg.org-global-student-survey-2021.pdf>.

<sup>[xix]</sup> Walsermann, K., C. Gee, G.C, and Gentile, D. (2015). Sick of Our Loans: Student Borrowing and Mental Health of Young Adults in the United States. Social Science and Medicine. 124: 85-93; Marshall, G.L., Kahana, E., Gallo, W.T., Stansbury, K. L., and Thielke, S. (2020). The price of mental well-being in later life: the role of financial hardship and debt. Aging & Mental Health, DOI: 10.1080/13607863.2020.1758902.

<sup>[xx]</sup> National Alliance on Mental Illness. Mental Health by the Numbers. Retrieved from: <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>.

<sup>[xxi]</sup> Anderson, G. “Students in great need of mental health support during pandemic.” Inside Higher Ed. September 11, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/09/11/students-great-need-mental-health-support-during-pandemic>.

<sup>[xxii]</sup> Center for Collegiate Mental Health. Pennsylvania State University. Part 1 of 5: COVID-19’s Impact on College Student Mental Health. February 16, 2020.

Retrieved from: [https://ccmh.psu.edu/index.php?option=com\\_dailyplanetblog&view=entry&year=2021&month=02&day=01&id=9:part-1-of-5-covid-19-s-impact-on-college-student-mental-health](https://ccmh.psu.edu/index.php?option=com_dailyplanetblog&view=entry&year=2021&month=02&day=01&id=9:part-1-of-5-covid-19-s-impact-on-college-student-mental-health).