

The 2023 Presidents' Convening on College Student Mental Health and Wellbeing March 20th and 21st, 2023

On March 20th and 21st, 2023, presidents and system heads at 20 US institutions attended a convening on college student mental health and wellbeing, hosted by the Mary Christie Institute (MCI) and Georgetown University, and sponsored by the Ruderman Family Foundation. The Convening, which included another two dozen experts and special guests, brought higher education thought leaders together to examine new ideas, particularly preventative strategies, that address the high levels of emotional and behavioral distress reported by our students. What follows is a report on the activities of the two days with some key takeaways for progress.

March 20th, 2023

Reception at the Georgetown Center prior to the dinner and awards ceremony.



Pictured from left to right: Mark D. Gearan, President of Hobart William Smith Colleges; Dr. Domenico Grasso, Chancellor of University of Michigan-Dearborn; Dr. Martin T. Meehan, President of University of Massachusetts System.



Pictured from left to right: Dr. Wayne A.I. Frederick, President of Howard University; Dr. Zainab Okolo, of The Jed Foundation, formerly of Lumina Foundation; Stephanie Bell-Rose, Co-Founder and Board Co-President of The Steve Fund; Dr. Maurice L. Hall, Provost at Bennington College.

March 20th, 2023 Dinner and Presentation of Leadership Awards

US Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, MD, MBA

Georgetown President John J. DeGioia, PhD

Carson Domey

The Convening began with a reception and dinner featuring a “fireside chat” style interview by Georgetown President, Dr. John J. DeGioia, with US Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek H. Murthy. The conversation underscored the importance of all sectors of society acknowledging and confronting the mental health problems of American young people. Dr. Murthy emphasized the addressment of the “epidemic of loneliness” that has set in due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Dr. Murthy was then given the MCI Leadership Award by MCI Board Chair, Gloria Larson, for his national service on behalf of the mental health of young people, including his 2022 public health advisory warning of the cumulative effects of the events of the last several years. Larson then awarded the MCI Young Leaders Award to Carson Domey, a first-year college student at the University of Texas-Austin, who has been a mental health advocate since middle school, most recently helping to pass legislation in Massachusetts requiring all high schools to include a suicide helpline on student identification cards.



Guests conversing before the dinner presentation.



Dr. John J. DeGioia, President of Georgetown University, introduces keynote speaker, US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy.



Pictured from left to right: US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy; Sylvia Matthews Burwell, President of American University; Mark D. Gearan.



A fireside chat between Dr. John J. DeGioia and US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy.



A group photo during the March 20th dinner program.



MCI presents Young Leaders Award to Carson Domey (center) & Leadership in Mental Health Award to US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy (right). Awardees posing with Peter Twichell (left) from Ruderman Family Foundation.

Carson Domey (far left) and US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy (far right) shake hands. Also pictured is Marjorie Malpiede (middle right), Executive Director of MCI, and Peter Twichell (middle left).



March 21st, 2023 Convening Program

The program on March 21st included panel presentations of presidents and experts that were led by presidents and facilitators. Following the presentations, the facilitators asked the participants in the room to consider a series of questions or offer comments on the material that was discussed.



Gloria Larson (left), President Emeritus of Bentley University and MCI Board Chair, and Martin T. Meehan (right).

Dr. Melissa Shivers (left), Senior Vice President for Student Life at The Ohio State University, and Dr. Jan Collins-Eaglin (right) of The Steve Fund.



Stephanie Bell-Rose (left) and Dr. Paula A. Johnson (right), President of Wellesley College.

Part 1. Broadening Higher Education’s Value Proposition to Include Student Wellbeing

The first discussion of the day was focused on preventative strategies that address student mental health by embedding wellbeing into the college experience, including the curriculum. Presentations by Bennington College and the Engelhard Program at Georgetown University served as examples.

Bennington College is well known for its faculty-supported, self-directed curriculum, which now includes a major mental health and wellbeing component. The Bennington College Mental Health and Wellness Model, a fully integrated, multi-service, community approach to mental health and wellness began in the fall of 2022. The student wellness plan, like the Bennington Academic Plan, is designed to encourage students to take responsibility for their own growth and development. Working one-on-one with a professional counseling staff member, students assess their own wellness needs (both as individuals and as a community member); set goals; identify the available services and resources and monitor their progress in achieving their wellness and mental health goals over time.

Speakers for the Bennington presentation included: Laura Walker, MBA, President of Bennington College; Michael Cohen, PhD, Director of Student Counseling, Disability Services Coordinator, and Thesis Advisor at Glasgow Caledonian New York College (GCNYC) and President of the Michael Cohen Group, LLC (MCG); and Maurice L. Hall, PhD, Provost at Bennington College.

The Engelhard Project for Connecting Life and Learning at Georgetown University represents an innovative approach to integrating student wellbeing issues into academic contexts. It builds on the principles of the whole person education by supporting faculty and campus resource professionals as partners in incorporating health and wellbeing issues into the classroom. This curricular approach enhances academic learning, encourages students to reflect on their attitudes and behaviors, and fosters faculty, staff, and student connections both in and out of the classroom that support students’ engagement in their learning.

Speakers for the Engelhard presentation included: Joselyn Schultz Lewis, MA, Senior Associate Director for Inclusive Teaching and Learning Initiatives at Georgetown University; and Jennifer Woolard, PhD, Chair of the Psychology Department at Georgetown University. The first session discussion was facilitated by Paula A. Johnson, MD, MPH, President of Wellesley College.

Dr. Johnson encouraged participants to consider the following questions: Given what we know about the onset of mental health issues during the college years, and what the data show about how the college experience influences our lifelong wellbeing, can we infuse student wellbeing into pedagogy? What long-held beliefs and policies need to be reconsidered? And how do we move mental health from an ancillary function to a primary goal of higher education?



Pictured from left to right: Laura Walker; Dr. Maurice L. Hall; Dr. Michael Cohen; Joselyn Schultz Lewis; Dr. Jennifer Woolard; and Dr. Paula A. Johnson.



Dr. Maurice L. Hall



Sylvia Matthews Burwell



Dr. Jennifer Woolard



Clayton Spencer, President of Bates College



A group photo of the panel on Broadening Higher Education's Value Proposition to Include Student Wellbeing.

Part 2. Behavioral Health, Engagement and Retention

The second session of the program focused on the integration of two key goals of higher education today: student mental health and student success. National dialogues around retention in higher education and student mental health have been largely separate, siloed conversations. Given the value of higher education degrees to overall success and equity, participants were asked to consider how to bring mental health into focus as part of our retention and completion strategies. What policies need to be examined to retain and re-engage vulnerable students? Can community colleges and four-year schools unite around this issue? What are the barriers to doing so?

Presenters on these subjects included: Russell Lowery-Hart, PhD, President of Amarillo Community College; and Sarah Ketchen Lipson, PhD, EdM, Assistant Professor in the Department of Health Law Policy and Management at the Boston University School of Public Health and Co-Principal Investigator of the Healthy Minds Study. The session was facilitated by Ashley Finley, PhD, Vice President of Research and Senior Advisor to the President of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U).



Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart



Dr. Sarah Ketchen Lipson



Dr. Ashley Finley moderates a panel with Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart and Sarah Ketchen Lipson.



Dr. Wayne Frederick



Pictured from left to right: Dr. Felix Matos Rodriguez, Chancellor of the City University of New York (CUNY); Gloria Larson; Marion Ross Fedrick, President of Albany State University.

Lunch Presentation: In February of 2023, The Mary Christie Institute, the AAC&U and the Healthy Minds Network released survey findings on the experiences and expectations of recent graduates/young employees on mental health in college and the workplace. Overall, the survey showed high rates of stress and “burnout” among young workers as well as a willingness to embrace mental health supports at their places of employment. To understand industry’s reaction, MCI Board Chair Gloria Larson, JD, engaged in an on-stage conversation with Corey Thomas, MBA, CEO of Rapid7, a cybersecurity company in Boston, Massachusetts, that employs a large percentage of young professionals. Thomas’ candid remarks included the need for generational employees to understand the mental health profile of the GenZ workforce while reminding our young workers that healthy employment environments are a “two-way street.”



Gloria Larson interviews Corey Thomas, Chairman and CEO of Rapid7.



Corey Thomas

Part 3: Reframing the Campus Mental Health Crisis

The last session of the day was focused on addressing student mental health issues in a new light. Much is reported about the campus mental health crisis, but the narrative itself is largely reactive, focused on demand for limited resources, dissatisfied students, and counseling staff at risk of burnout. The presentations and discussion focused on how we can examine the service delivery challenge from a different lens by engaging students in their wellbeing, setting realistic expectations for families, and expanding the definition of what constitutes wellbeing for today's students.

Presenters on this subject included: Sylvia Matthews Burwell, President of American University; Zoe Ragouzeos, PhD, LCSW, Executive Director, Counseling and Wellness Services at New York University and Chief Clinical Officer at the Mary Christie Institute; and Eric Wood, PhD, LPC, Director of Counseling and Mental Health at Texas Christian University. The session was facilitated by Elizabeth Bradley, MBA, PhD, President of Vassar College.

Dr. Bradley asked the panel and participants to consider the question: Can we move the narrative from what can't be done with limited capacity to what can be accomplished with innovation and campus-wide partnerships?



Dr. Elizabeth H. Bradley, President of Vassar College



Dr. Zoe Ragouzeos



Dr. Eric Wood and Dr. Zoe Ragouzeos

The sessions held at Georgetown provoked frank discussions and fresh ideas as well as the identification of critical gaps that higher education needs to fill in order to adequately address the mental health of wellbeing of our young people. These include: finding ways to more holistically embrace overall wellbeing on campus, which can address the myriad of sub-clinical issues like sadness and isolation so many of our students are reporting; considering mental health and wellbeing's role in keeping students in school and supporting them through to completion; applying innovative practices, some of them outside of higher education, to fulfill our promise to take care of all of our young people; setting the right expectations for students and parents and bringing them into the journey; and finally, using the basic tenets of public health – including prevention, detection, and response – to improve our campus ecosystems.

It was a privilege and an honor to host these discussions and MCI is grateful to the Ruderman Family Foundation for recognizing the urgency of these topics by sponsoring this important Presidents' Convening on College Student Mental Health and Wellbeing.