

Unions press lawmakers for more higher ed mental health supports



By Matthew Hamilton

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At a recent United University Professions visit to Brockport, student Daniel Dale outlined a pretty simple math problem. Some 600 students are registered to utilize the Brockport Student Accessibility Services Center, which helps students with anxiety, depression and ADHD by offering, among other programs, accommodation for extra test time for students working through mental health struggles. But how do you fit them into just 11 seats and eight desks with computers available on site?

“Most disturbing, (Dale) was talking about students who want to succeed,” UUP President Fred Kowal said. “And yet the resources aren’t there. Not even close.”

That story is just one of many that bring into focus the breadth of the ongoing mental health crisis in higher education, a crisis exacerbated by poverty, food and housing insecurity, and other social issues students and staff alike grapple with. It was the subject of a late-November state Assembly hearing at which representatives from UUP, Professional Staff Congress and NYSUT detailed proposals for how to tackle the needs that pre-date, but have only grown since, the pandemic.

Among the common refrains from union representatives was the need to bring down mental health counselor-to-student ratios statewide. UUP President Fred Kowal said SUNY needs to hire 50 counselors systemwide to approach the International Accreditation of Counseling Services-recommended counselor ratio of one to roughly 1,000 students. PSC's James Davis said while CUNY has made progress, they too need to hire more counselors, with current ratios standing at one to roughly 2,000.

Of course, disparities exist across campuses. Kowal noted that at smaller campuses, the ratios are lower. His home campus, Cobleskill, is in the relatively enviable position of having one counselor for every 347 students. But university centers are in a tougher spot, with the University at Buffalo dealing with a 1-to-1,406 ratio, for example. Yet in an ironic twist, Kowal said for faculty and staff, there is far less access to mental health services in smaller towns like Cobleskill, where "mental health care deserts" exist.

Swollen student-to-counselor ratios can result in unacceptable wait times for on-campus services, with some CUNY students waiting weeks, if not months, for an appointment, according to Davis.

Alternatives that the university systems have advanced, such as telehealth visits, may have merit. But Davis, Kowal and NYSUT Legislative Director Alithia Rodriguez-Rolon, speaking on behalf of community college locals, all said that availability of in-person, on-campus services is unequivocally necessary.

"It's worth underscoring how much of a refuge campuses can be for so many of our students, where they're able to focus, they're able to center themselves and understand themselves first and foremost as learners," Davis said. "That's harder to do in many students' cases when they leave the campus."

All three unions will be advocating for additional funding in the upcoming state budget for mental health services for higher education institutions — which include SUNY hospitals that Kowal said face a serious staff mental health crisis of their own. And while funding new positions is one thing, state assistance to provide additional hiring and retention incentives to lure counselors into public service will be equally as critical.

"We're thinking that people are going to want to work in these settings, but what are we doing to incentivize it in addition to scholarships or loan forgiveness?" Rodriguez-Rolon said. "What else can we do to make this viable?"

Gov. Kathy Hochul will present her State of the State agenda in early January, and her executive budget proposal will be due later in the month. The state budget deadline is April 1.