CHAPTER TEN

Exploring the Relationship Between Mindset, Mental Health, and Academic Performance Among College Students

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In recent years students' mental health has been one of the most discussed topics at colleges and universities throughout the United States. Brad Wolverton (2019) notes in *The New York Times* that students are facing anxiety and depression at alarming rates. More than 60% are suffering from "overwhelming anxiety" and over 40% feel "so depressed they [have] difficulty functioning" (Wolverton, 2019). In this chapter, we explore how mental health impacts one's academic performance and mindset, and vice versa. It is important to acknowledge that the first drafts of this chapter were written prior to 2020, and therefore it does not address, nor focus

on, the extensive mental health implications of COVID-19 and the contemporary discourse surrounding systemic racism. Alyssa M. Lederer et al. (2021) address these particular issues and how they have led to an increase in student's experiencing and reporting mental health problems, which disproportionately impact communities of color. Philip L. Frana (2023) also points out that the Black Lives Matter movement revealed how "honors shares the sins of American society, with its systematic racial inequalities," and continues to privilege "the upper classes, cosmopolitan backgrounds, and socially connected families" (p. 19). As such, it is imperative that honors programs and colleges consider these issues and injustices when evaluating and developing their organizational policies and practices.

Research conducted by Alan M. Schwitzer et al. (2018) on the relationship between the mental health, well-being, and academic performance of college students demonstrates the ways in which early intervention can make a difference in student success. College staff and faculty ought to be aware of the challenges that students face, especially as the percentage of college students suffering from mental health problems continues to increase. While some of the available literature on this topic analyzes the relative impact of mental health problems on distinct populations such as men, women, different ethnic groups, and first-year students (Tammy J. Wyatt et al., 2017), there is a lack of studies that focus on high-achieving students specifically. The demanding and stressful environment that high-achieving students encounter in the college setting may put this demographic at a higher risk of experiencing mental health problems.

As higher education professionals within an urban public institution, we have extensive experience working with high-achieving students and assisting them in effectively addressing a wide range of crises. All students have their own specific set of needs and characteristics. As a result, administrators who develop close-knit relationships with their students can successfully create individualized plans of action and provide appropriate referrals. Academic advisors, in collaboration with faculty, play an important role in the lives of high-achieving students. They are frequently the first to

become aware of student issues and concerns because of their institutional role. Advisors are in a unique position to build trusting relationships with students through one-on-one advising encounters, first-year seminar course interactions, and assigned caseloads.

Advisors who employ a relational and inquisitive approach are promoting an advisement relationship that aims to help students develop strategies to establish and strengthen their agency by encouraging self-efficacy and self-reliance within a broader institutional framework of support. As Frana (2023) explains, "It is proactive in the sense that it identifies key areas for growth or other unique factors in each learner, discerns when and how to make critical interventions, monitors and documents improvements, conducts outreach and follow-ups, and provides direct support or referrals" (p. 11). One particularly effective institutional program is the internationally renowned Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training. It is an evidence-based training program designed to provide participants with the necessary skills to identify, understand, and respond to the signs and symptoms of mental illnesses and substance use disorders. This eight-hour course, which is now also being offered in a virtual/hybrid modality, certifies individuals to help others who may be experiencing a mental health crisis. The training includes hands-on activities and exercises designed to help participants remember and execute the ALGEE five-step action plan:

- **A**ssess for risk of suicide or harm;
- **L**isten nonjudgmentally;
- **G**ive reassurance and information;
- **E**ncourage appropriate professional help;
- **E**ncourage self-help and other support strategies. (MHFA, 2013)

We apply this action plan whenever necessary during student meetings and interactions. ALGEE is an indispensable tool that has given us the confidence to assist and support students who are in crisis or who may be in the throes of developing a mental health

problem. One of the authors, has conducted numerous MHFA trainings at Baruch College and throughout the City University of New York (CUNY) for students, staff, and faculty to deepen the discussion around mental health and to ensure that more members of our community are aware of the services that are available to them.

In this chapter, we explore the relationship between students' mental health, their mindset, resilience, and academic performance while participating as members of the Baruch Honors Program and Macaulay Honors College. Based on our experiences, which include three case studies presented below, we recommend that faculty and staff utilize a collaborative, holistic, and inquiry-based approach when working with students who are struggling. We suggest that effective advisement interventions should include a relational and intrusive/inquiry-based approach to support students as they develop coping strategies as well as broader, institutional programming to support their developmental and mental health needs. At the forefront of our discussion are students who are at-risk and on academic probation. We place collaboration among staff, faculty and students as well as student social connectedness to their peers and advisors at the center of these interventions to help them succeed in every facet of their college-going experience: emotional, personal, social, academic/intellectual, and professional.

FRAME OF REFERENCE

Our point of reference in this chapter is Baruch College, one of the institutions within the City University of New York (CUNY). The college has an enrollment of over 19,000 students of whom approximately 15,000 are undergraduates (Baruch College, 2021). Almost 40% of students identify as first-generation college students, and the average GPA of admitted students is 3.3 on a 4.0-point scale. The Baruch College Honors Program manages four different scholar groups: Baruch Scholars, Macaulay Scholars, Provost Scholars, and Inquiry Scholars. Here, we focus on Macaulay Scholars and Baruch Scholars. Each year, approximately 20 Baruch Scholars and 100 Macaulay Scholars are admitted as entering first-year students. In addition to the benefits and resources provided by the college,

Baruch Scholars generally receive the following: a dedicated advisor, tuition waiver, priority housing, designated study space, and financial support for study abroad.

Macaulay students are part of an extensive honors community comprised of eight participating senior colleges. Macaulay students have a dual identity as both Macaulay and Baruch students. In addition to their campus resources, these scholars can also utilize all services at CUNY's Macaulay Honors College, which has a central building located about 25 minutes from the Baruch campus. Macaulay students are granted many benefits; they include a tuition waiver, a cultural passport that grants access to various cultural centers in New York City, Opportunities Funding to support activities such as study abroad and internships, and a dedicated advisor. Every Macaulay advisor at Baruch has a caseload of roughly 135 students. Macaulay students also have dual access to a myriad of resources provided by their home campuses. These include career advisors, student clubs, and counseling services.

The Baruch College Honors Program (BCHP) provides a range of enrichment opportunities for its students including touring the on-campus Mishkin Gallery as well as hosting faculty-led forays where students can have in-depth conversations with professors about their latest research in relation to current events. All honors students are able to gain leadership experience by serving as a Peer Mentor, Orientation Leader, Honors Ambassador, or on the Honors Student Council. Students in good standing within the program receive priority registration and have access to an extensive list of honors classes. The department provides scholars with a holistic college experience that incorporates the Honors Puzzle. This model promotes five key components: arts and cultural exploration, academic excellence, leadership and service, global experience, and research and creative inquiry. Scholars are expected to seek out challenges, to take risks, to embrace community, and to experience personal growth (Vaisman, 2019). Students are encouraged to complete a thesis or independent study. To increase participation in these areas, our office co-sponsors an annual Research & Creative Inquiry Expo where students showcase their research.

MINDSET, RESILIENCE, MENTAL HEALTH, AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

To serve honors students effectively, we find it useful to develop an understanding of their common characteristics. Noting that local, institutional, and perhaps even regional variety exists is important in how honors students are defined and in how they self-identify as part of high-achieving communities. Through interacting with students in two different honors programs on our campus, however, we have recognized that the following attributes are common to many of our students:

- *Inquisitive:* Interested in intellectual and enriching activities; eager to obtain knowledge;
- *Active:* Involved on and/or off campus through volunteer work, internships, clubs, etc.;
- *Competitive:* Wants to excel; has high expectations and a fear of failure; compares self to others;
- *Agentic:* Advocates for self and others; is agentive; takes initiative; is resourceful to an extent;
- *Determined:* Has strong work ethic (even to a fault); is persistent; "cannot" and "no" are unacceptable;
- *Individualistic:* Attempts to handle things on their own; avoids asking for help; is private.

A large percentage of the honors students we have encountered at Baruch are curious and self-sufficient, which explains why they tend to be self-directed, involved in campus activities, and seek out admission to graduate programs (Frana, 2023). As a result, they often avoid asking for help. Thomas P. Hébert and Matthew T. McBee (2007) note that compared to the general student population, honors students place more value on studying. They also report "less need for deference, more need for achievement, more persistence, more facilitating anxiety, more orientation toward grades, more demandingness, more competitiveness, and more need for approval" (Hébert & McBee, 2007, p. 137). Many

students within this population likely participated in gifted and talented programs throughout their secondary schooling and took advantage of Advanced Placement (AP) exams and college courses while in high school. For honors students, academic performance and success are directly tied to their identity and self-esteem. Performing well above the average is a standard that high-achieving students have come to expect of themselves. Therefore, they will put in countless hours studying and writing papers to ensure they attain the highest grades possible. For some, a grade of A– or B+ is unacceptable and can potentially result in the student experiencing emotional dysregulation or feeling like they are in a crisis.

According to research conducted by M. Leonor Conejeros-Solar and Marìa P. Gómez-Arízaga (2015), the amount of studying that even gifted students may need to do at the college level can still be overwhelming, and it may affect how they experience this part of their identity within the broader college and honors community. As students transition from high school to college, they are met with new challenges that many adolescents are understandably unprepared to handle. They may have difficulty making friends, dealing with an increased academic workload, and maintaining a healthy emotional state. High-achieving college students often come from being at the top of their class in high school and are therefore accepted into a college honors program where the expectation is that they will continue to achieve top grades and serve as a role model for their peers. From a young age, many of these students displayed a proclivity toward intellectual activities and, as a result, have a tendency to hold themselves to increasingly high standards. Because of the demands that honors programs place on their scholars, in addition to the expectations the students place on themselves, they are at an increased risk of experiencing a variety of mental health issues that can negatively impact their academic performance and overall well-being.

Mindset of Honors Students

A frequently discussed topic relating to honors students is perfectionism. Because of their high standards and keen ability to focus

on a task at hand, many honors students develop a perfectionist mindset at some point in their life. Perfectionism can be defined as striving to be perfect/without flaws and to accomplish one's goals at all times. According to Mary J. Dickinson and David A. G. Dickinson (2015), perfectionism can have both positive as well as negative effects on honors students. Perfectionism can positively influence students by causing them to be more focused, productive, detail-oriented, resourceful, and driven. A perfectionist mindset may lead honors students to have a strong work ethic; however, it can also lead to anxiety, self-harm, depression, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, obsessive tendencies, indecisiveness, academic burnout, social isolation, and unwillingness to put aside peripheral interests (Frana, 2023). Students may never finish a project because they want it to be absolutely perfect, or their best work to date. As a result, they may obsess over every detail and continually make changes; they may begin to doubt themselves and to make even more changes; they may then become anxious, which inevitably makes them incapable of committing to or finishing their work. Although the intention was positive, their drive for greatness may create many obstacles. This pattern can be extremely frustrating and disappointing for a student who wants—or needs—to succeed.

Consistent access to counseling services can help students to tackle feelings of inadequacy and anxiety while exploding the myth of effortless perfection. Caralena Peterson (2019) notes that the idea behind this myth is that perfection is something that is not only attainable but also gives the appearance of being easy to attain. Peterson also acknowledges that more college students are developing eating disorders and experiencing symptoms of depression while masking the endless amount of effort that comes with meeting incredibly high expectations. This phenomenon can be correlated to tendencies of maladjustment like constantly comparing oneself to one's peers with no room to show any sign of struggle. Students, however, need to be able to show their vulnerability in order to connect to one another; Peterson calls this inability to demonstrate vulnerability "self-imposed isolation" (2019). This stark contrast between the desire for effortless perfection and

debilitating depression and anxiety highlights the need to understand the mindset of our high-achieving student population.

Students buried in unhealthy mindsets, including perfectionism and poor perceptions of self, may find these conditions to be a hindrance to their capacity to form connections with peers, administrators, and/or faculty members. In order for students to thrive, they must be able to build healthy social connections and relationships while in college. As Amanda Cuevas et al. (2017) explained, "[t]hriving is comprised of five factors: engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connectedness" (p. 83). While high academic performance plays an important role in student success, building healthy relationships can foster positive self-perceptions. A constructive perception of self is imperative in order for students to thrive academically, professionally, and personally while in college (Cuevas et al., 2017, pp. 94–96).

Students may not automatically seek out opportunities to create social connections, particularly during their first year of college. Honors students have been singled out from the crowd for their accomplishments for so long that they may have difficulty connecting with others. In some cases, they may intentionally isolate themselves in order to avoid showing any sign of weakness. Richard Badenhausen (2010), after encountering numerous honors students in need, began to wonder "why these students didn't ask for help or only sought assistance when it was essentially too late to dig out of what had become very deep holes" (p. 27). One reasonable explanation, he says, is that "[t]hey have always been told they are the best and brightest, able to leap tall (academic) buildings in a single bound, but such messages may well be part of the problem" (Badenhausen, 2010, p. 27).

To support students in the process of adjusting their mindset, advisors must first be mindful of the way they interact with them during advisement sessions and beyond. Although pushing these students to reach what we view as their full potential may have positive outcomes, it can also result in negative behaviors that may lead to or worsen existing mental health symptoms. There must be

a balance between supporting students in their journey toward success while also reminding them that failure is a normal and healthy part of life. Often, students are aware that they are struggling but do not disclose the complications that they are facing, which usually makes the situation even worse. Honors students may feel a strong sense of shame in asking for help. In asking for assistance, they begin to question their capabilities and perhaps lose or dislodge the only identity they have ever known. They rarely perceive seeking guidance and clarification as a sign of maturity or strength. This mentality may lead honors students to struggle on their own while putting on an act publicly to ensure that others continue viewing them as strong students who naturally succeed in achieving all of their goals. While leading first-year honors seminars, instructors often discover their advisees are struggling when they write about their hopes and goals as college students. Instructors can foster self-reflection, which then enables the instructors to become aware of the students' actual state of mind.

Advisors can contribute to students' mental and emotional resilience by helping them to take responsibility for the choices they make and how they define and process moments of success and failure. States of mind and emotions such as disappointment and sadness may be inevitable when one does not accomplish a goal. The reaction and reflection that come after this result can be immensely transformative. A student's reaction to failure can be a source of empowerment. Alternatively, a student may retreat into an emotionally isolated space. Advisors can encourage students to adapt and be prepared for alternative outcomes instead of expecting that they will always reach their desired result as long as they work hard, or simply because they are intelligent. This common mindset among the honors population may result in unrealistic expectations and distort their sense of identity. As mentioned previously, honors students are accustomed to receiving public praise and the thought of not receiving the usual recognition from their teachers and peers can take a significant toll on them because their self-esteem is often connected to the external responses they receive. Bonnie D. Irwin (2010) helps us to understand that educators working with this

unique population must acknowledge that the journey to excellence includes "both risk and reward, and the discovery of new knowledge may lead to internal and external conflict as students struggle to develop into the productive scholars, socially responsible citizens, and lifelong learners our mission statements promise they will become" (p. 43).

Honors program staff, according to Frana (2023), "are on the front lines engaging, challenging, and inspiring extraordinary students" (pp. 4–5). Therefore, they should work toward incorporating activities and dialogue that prepare students for setbacks and to successfully react to these types of situations. Through a guided reflection process, according to Irwin (2010), one of the useful insights that students can learn and benefit from is that "[s]uccess is valuable precisely because it is not guaranteed" (p. 43). She continues: "just as there are degrees of accomplishment, there are degrees of reward; failure teaches students that intrinsic rewards are more important than public recognition. Recognizing intrinsic rewards requires perspective and maturity; failure helps us acquire those values" (Irwin, 2010, p. 44).

The honors identity can be quite complex, and one's college years can have a significant impact on both personality and self-efficacy. The ways in which people process and interpret information inevitably guides their decisions and actions. Exploring the thought processes of honors students as well as what motivates them is valuable. People have specific motivators influenced by their background, racial/ethnic identity, upbringing, education, family dynamic, and socioeconomic status, among other factors. Students who come from a low-income, single-parent family, for example, may be motivated to go to college and succeed because of their need to obtain economic stability and to provide for their family. When students have a tuition scholarship through an honors program, they may be motivated to maintain the required GPA because they fear losing this financial support, which may be the only way for them to attend college. Anxiety over losing the scholarship may put immense pressure on students, possibly resulting in depression, obsession with grades, and inability to focus on anything else. This

pressure can significantly impact their mental and emotional state and result in symptoms that they may not understand or know how to handle. As college and university professionals, advisors should establish trust and open communication with honors students, which will enable them to learn about their advisees' goals and to better understand their decision-making process. Understanding that identity and motivators may alter over time is also important. Therefore, the interests and actions of students may change from their first year to their senior year if their life circumstances are no longer the same.

According to Kou Murayama (2018), people study information to achieve mastery and performance goals, and the eventual decisions they make are influenced by their motivational state at that time. This theory can be applied to honors scholars who are motivated by the need to outperform others (performance goal) and to obtain extensive knowledge in particular disciplines (mastery goal). By succeeding at their tasks, they validate their identity and therefore receive an internal benefit from their academic accomplishments. At the same time, they seek to continue receiving external recognition and therefore are motivated to make themselves visible and easily identifiable within a group. In a way they are constantly, but nonverbally saying "look at me" in order to ensure that their achievements are recognized. Upon meeting one benchmark, they are commonly encouraged to begin working on their next goal because they are rarely content with the status quo or with being average. Because of this ongoing drive for success, they may be constantly on the move: planning, working, and learning something new without ever relaxing or taking a break.

Maintaining such a busy and focused lifestyle can be mentally and physically draining. We have encountered scholars who have "forgotten" to eat, who are sleep deprived, and who appear physically drained throughout the year, especially during midterms and finals. We have worked with students who simply do not know how to take a break and who fail to recognize that it is okay to put everything to the side in order to focus on their well-being. They are so driven that they perceive taking time to relax and do nothing as

being lazy or unmotivated rather than a respite that can be helpful and beneficial for the mind and body. Taking time for one's self and listening to the signs that one's body is providing are valuable. Honors students often commit themselves to several projects simultaneously, and juggling these inevitably can take a toll, especially when slow periods or breaks do not coincide with each other.

Advisors can work with students to encourage them to make the distinction between their wants and their needs. This reflection process may help them to recognize that they should perhaps scale back on some of their activities and dedicate time to only a few that they have determined are priorities. The ALGEE action-plan, as referenced above, is the default approach we use in this process, particularly when assisting students in crisis. For example, listening nonjudgmentally and validating their concerns can be an effective way to build a trusting relationship with the student.

As noted, honors students are motivated to succeed for a multitude of reasons. Conejeros-Solar and Gómez-Arízaga (2015) report that that the quality of students' high school education was shown to have a greater impact than standardized scores on their success and persistence in college. They may be motivated by various external factors, including social, political, religious, and economic movements in addition to the identities that influence them on a daily basis such as their race, ethnicity, immigration status, sexuality, and ability. Their drive may be affected by their interest in attending graduate school or their commitment to their major. Honors students may also remain persistent because they want to impress and maintain relationships with particular staff, faculty, and/or mentors. Although they may at times feel inadequate or procrastinate, they generally maintain a strong work ethic and are resilient when faced with challenges. Honors students commonly have a strong desire for self-actualization and growth, and they may mask the amount of effort it takes for them to succeed in order to maintain their identity as scholars. They are motivated for the sake of learning (Hébert & McBee, 2007, p. 137) and tend to be flexible thinkers who are independent and willing to take risks (Capretta et al., 1963, p. 269). In addition, they receive numerous benefits through their

honors program, and, as a result, "they typically strive to deserve them by doing well in their classes, being an example for others on campus, and making the university proud" (Cundall, 2013, p. 33). Although these are some general traits of this population, each honors student should be viewed as a unique individual who deals with different circumstances and challenges. All honors programs include students who are extremely involved and successful as well as others who struggle to attain the expected GPA of their program.

Honors Students in Distress

Honors programs and colleges, observe Lynne Goodstein and Patricia Szarek (2013), are often merit based and set high GPA expectations for their students. A majority of our students are in good standing for the duration of their academic career, but approximately 20–25 students are placed on academic probation each term out of the 480 total Macaulay and Baruch Scholars. Students are rarely dismissed from these programs; however, those who are dismissed have not met GPA and/or co-curricular requirements over multiple semesters. When scholars are placed on academic probation within the Macaulay and Baruch honors programs, they are given specific recommendations and requirements; examples include a limit on the number of credit hours the student can register for and mandatory biweekly meetings with an academic advisor who provides guidance and tracks their progress throughout the semester. These students are also encouraged to utilize campus resources such as tutoring and writing assistance and to limit their job commitment and non-academic involvement in extracurricular activities and clubs. Students on honors probation are also given a target GPA for the next term and, depending on their grades in the subsequent semester, they may be placed on continuing probation or final probation, or be dismissed from the program.

For any student, being placed on academic probation can be devastating. This status comes with the realization of not meeting the expectations of the honors program, which can result in feelings of failure and disappointment. In a majority of the situations we have encountered where students were struggling academically,

we discovered the students were facing personal challenges that affected their academic performance. Frequently the failing grade or lack of class attendance was a symptom of struggles that the students were experiencing. As Eric W. Owens and Michael Giazzoni (2010) point out:

> behaviors are the mental health equivalent of symptoms in medical practice. Behaviors manifest and present themselves to us. The student who enters an office to discuss a research fellowship and suddenly, seemingly without warning, begins to speak about his suicidal ideations is *behaving*.
>
> Behavior, though, is the result of a great deal of thought and feeling. . . . Academics find it all too easy to ask "What do you *think* about all of this?" but are often uncomfortable in asking "How do you *feel* about all of this?" (p. 38)

Advisors can help students in crisis to identify both controllable and uncontrollable factors of their education. Brian A. Vander Schee (2007) suggests that by using an insight-oriented, high-involvement advising approach, advisors can enhance their understanding of a student's experience not only academically, but also personally and professionally. This form of advising embraces empathetic listening and an inquisitive approach during advising encounters. Advisors facilitate a sense of agency throughout this process, which helps students take responsibility for their own education. An inquisitive approach to advising, where open-ended, probing questions are asked, can help students to understand the ways in which they attribute their successes and failures to internal factors like motivation and intelligence versus external, uncontrollable circumstances such as financial instability, homelessness, homesickness, struggling with a mental disorder, or dealing with family problems (Demetriou, 2011). In addition to addressing study skills and time management strategies, advisors can focus on students' perception of self to facilitate a better relationship between advisors and students. The relationship that develops from this holistic advising forms an essential connection for students who find themselves in crisis. Other students will, of course, become more academically

successful through this process by forming a healthier perception of self within the context of an academic environment (Demetriou, 2011).

CASE STUDIES

By using insight-oriented, high-involvement advising, advisors work with students to create academic success strategies, plans, and goals. According to Vander Schee (2007), this method of advising embraces discussions that include non-academic components that influence student success in order to better understand the challenges and barriers that students are facing. Frana (2023) states that advisors "help students to develop personal connections, find their support systems, trust one another, and build intentional communities" (p. 9). To elaborate on this method of advising, we demonstrate the internal and external factors that affect our students by offering the following anonymous case studies that connect them to mental health, mindset, and resilience.

Case Study—Jacky

In the spring semester of Jacky's sophomore year, she met with her advisor to discuss her goals and academic plan. The meeting went well: Jacky expressed that she was motivated and doing well in her classes. The next day, Jacky came back to her advisor's office to request a medical leave of absence for the following academic year. Jacky had recently discovered that she was pregnant. Wanting to keep the baby, she decided that taking some time away from college made the most sense. Jacky and her advisor met regularly throughout the semester and over the summer in order to prepare for a medical leave for the academic year. After many conversations, Jacky decided to return from her medical leave a semester early because she wanted to graduate on time with her peers. She also made a plan to take winter classes and summer classes in order to make up for lost time.

Jacky, however, started to struggle academically when she returned to school. With Jacky's grades slipping, she was no longer

in good standing with the honors program. As a result, she was required to meet with her advisor on a biweekly basis. These conversations clearly revealed that tensions at home were growing; her family was no longer supporting her financially, emotionally, or academically. Jacky faced houselessness, hunger, and legal battles for custody of her child. She was quickly connected to emergency funding provided by the college to address some of her immediate needs. She was also connected to the counseling center and Macaulay's student support team.

Despite support from the college, Jacky suffered from the ongoing emotional drain of her circumstances. She was referred to outside counseling in order to support her long-term needs with the understanding that graduation was just a few semesters away. In advising conversations, Jacky often questioned her self-worth and whether she belonged in the honors program. Working through these intrusive thoughts with her counselor, psychiatrist, and advisor, Jacky was able to maintain some form of stability throughout her time within the program. While Jacky's challenging circumstances persisted throughout her remaining time in college, she was able to graduate with honors and obtain a full-time job offer upon graduation.

In Jacky's case, many internal factors were affecting her ability to thrive. External factors, including complicated family dynamics and peers who seemed to embody the effortless perfection myth (hence the lack of feeling that she belonged in the honors community), worsened her circumstances. Despite setbacks, the student's resilience along with institutional aid were vital in connecting Jacky to a long-term network of support.

Although acknowledging that higher education institutions are limited in their ability to provide care for students is important, the availability of mental health resources and the multiple points of contact for undergraduate students make a difference in student outcomes. Breaks in attendance, dismissal from honors programs, or even graduation can leave the mental health needs of students unfulfilled. As advisors consider the internal factors that influence student success, they cannot disregard the many factors that are

beyond the student's control. In fact, helping to develop students' ability to recognize what is and what is not in their control is a key factor in successful academic advisement (Demetriou, 2011). As students attribute their successes and failures to internal and external factors, academic advisors can facilitate a conversation around healthy coping mechanisms. Students can develop a healthy mindset and resiliency if they are situated within a larger society that supports their well-being. As we consider effective advising practices, administrators in the Baruch College Honors Program and the Macaulay Honors College should also aim to contextualize their program's mission and goals as they exist within a public higher education institution. Advocating public access to higher education and public access to health care that includes mental health coverage must be part of an effective intervention strategy to promote the overall well-being of our students.

Case Study—Jordan

Jordan is an Asian American student who lives with two diagnosed mental health disorders. During his time in college, he also dealt with an unstable living situation and strained relationships with his family. Jordan was receiving counseling from an external mental health center and had been prescribed medication. He would often, however, stop taking his medicine because it made him "feel like a robot" and caused other unfavorable side effects such as weight gain. When his mental illness worsened, he decided to take a few semesters off from school. During that period, he was hospitalized on more than one occasion because he was acting paranoid and displaying other behaviors that were concerning.

Jordan eventually reenrolled in school after providing a letter of support from his care team. He was required to have ongoing meetings with his advisor and only allowed to attend part-time as a condition of his reenrollment in the honors program. After registering for courses, Jordan would not follow instructions from his advisor and failed to complete his required to-do list. He would also miss his scheduled meetings and instead make unexpected visits to the office. When speaking with his advisor, he stated that he

saw people or things that were not there and made remarks regarding voices in his head that instructed him to hurt people. Jordan also informed his advisor that he had been banned from a local organization for carrying a weapon. Getting Jordan to focus during meetings was extremely difficult. His thoughts were jumbled, and he jumped from one subject to another mid-sentence. Jordan's professors also informed his advisor that Jordan stopped attending classes. As a result, Jordan was placed on probation for falling below the GPA requirement. During advisement meetings, Jordan would not take any responsibility for his actions and diverted the conversation whenever the advisor inquired about the reasons for his ongoing absences. Other students on campus also expressed feelings of discomfort around Jordan, reporting that his behavior was a concern to them.

Eventually Jordan was dismissed from the honors program. He would still come to campus, however, and visit the honors office despite having been given a specific point of contact in another department who needed to approve his requests beforehand to be on campus. School officials from different offices met to discuss the student and to figure out how to better collaborate since they recognized that they each had information that was unknown to the other departments. Shortly thereafter, the student unexpectedly showed up again to see the advisor, and college staff followed the protocol they had recently put in place, which involved having the student escorted off campus by public safety. The student attempted to contact his former advisor on several other occasions because of the relationship they had previously formed. As instructed, the advisor did not respond and instead forwarded the messages to the assigned point of contact for the student. At this time, Jordan has not reenrolled in school. After his most recent hospitalization, he decided to see a different psychiatrist and was also given a court order to attend counseling.

When advisors work with students who, like Jordan, do not follow instructions, they can easily become frustrated or impatient. It is not uncommon to have students on probation who do not show up for mandatory scheduled meetings or who do not complete a

detailed checklist provided by an advisor. Educators must remember not to take these actions personally. They are not directed at us, but rather, they are responses to the challenges and difficulties that students face. They may be ashamed to attend a probation meeting because they have to face their advisor and be reminded of their poor grades, which is difficult for an honors student. Although we often tell students that they are now adults, in reality, they are still developing and maturing. Through the transition from high school to college, they go from being adolescents to adults who must suddenly learn to do things on their own, to make their own decisions, to solve problems, to complete financial forms, and to adjust to a new environment both academically and socially. Obviously, some students do not handle this adjustment as well as others do, and, as a result, their grades suffer. The resources that honors programs and colleges have in place for these students should be organized in such a way that they support the students' growth and guide them back into good academic standing.

In addition, Jordan's case displays the importance of identifying honors liaisons and collaborating across departments (Frana, 2023). Numerous offices and administrators had interacted with this student. Not everyone, however, had communicated that they had been in contact with the student. Student affairs administrators should be conscious of what information is confidential, as outlined in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and what details may be shared with colleagues in order to best serve students and to ensure the safety of the entire college community. Departments should prioritize working collaboratively instead of working independently in order to have a clearer picture of each student's situation; without that cooperation, making an informed decision regarding the student's status is difficult. When various departments at the college became aware of the severity of Jordan's situation, they met and discussed the implementation of a protocol that should be followed in case of an emergency. This plan ensured that staff in various departments knew the appropriate actions to take if the student contacted them or came back to campus. It is important that institutions work toward becoming more interactive

and proactive so they can be prepared for various scenarios instead of simply reacting when a crisis arises.

Case Study—Natalia

Natalia, a self-identified African American student, was initially motivated to do well academically and personally. All first-year students are required to enroll in an honors first-year seminar held once per week and taught by their advisor. Within the first month of class, Natalia's instructor noticed two things that were out of the ordinary and that appeared to be red flags. The first was that she started to miss class, and the second was that she would sit at the back of the room and nod off during class—even falling asleep at her desk on a few occasions.

Upon meeting with her advisor the first time, Natalia expressed concern over having to work during the week while taking classes in order to provide financial support to her family. She explained that one of her parents is disabled, a circumstance that had placed financial strain on the entire family. Clearly, she was under severe stress to fulfill a number of different roles, and these responsibilities were affecting her emotional well-being. The advisor strongly suggested that she seek psychological counseling, which is offered free of charge through the college. Natalia said that she would think about it.

Natalia met the overall GPA requirement for good standing in the program after completing her first year. In her sophomore year, however, her grades declined, and she received failing grades in a few courses. At that point, she also had an accident for which she had to be hospitalized, exacerbating her attendance issues and culminating in her request for a medical leave. She was granted the leave, but she never fully recuperated her academic standing in the honors program. In addition to her accident, she was also diagnosed with a condition that affected her eating habits, causing her to lose weight.

Natalia was eventually dismissed from the college after being provided with an opportunity to improve her academic performance. She was clearly bright and capable of achieving A-level work in her courses. Nevertheless, the combination of the financial

and emotional demands placed on her along with her own medical conditions affected her overall mental health, leading to the decline in her academic performance.

Natalia's situation highlights the need to provide students with resources both within and outside of the college setting. As honors advisors, our role includes helping students in distress succeed. For some students, success may entail taking a leave of absence or attending school on a part-time basis. Although the focus is usually on retention and on getting the student to graduate in four years, this strategy may not be the best option for all students because of their circumstances. Our interactions with students may also involve discussion of alternative majors, seeking support through emergency funding, counseling, and/or tutoring or writing assistance. The reflection process for honors students should also include dispelling misconceptions about academic performance, clarifying goals, evaluating their perceptions of failure and success, and examining their resilience and self-esteem (Demetriou, 2011, p. 17). Each honors student who is placed on probation will react in a different way. Some may become more motivated to succeed and utilize every resource available in order to improve their GPA. Others may fail to take responsibility for their actions and exaggerate the external factors that affected their grades (e.g., "the professor doesn't like me"). Although the process and the experience of academic probation are difficult, with the proper support, guidance, and space for reflection, students can learn to identify the factors they can control to feel empowered.

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AMONG HONORS STUDENTS

The connection between mental health, a student's mindset, and academic performance is a multi-layered relationship in which each factor directly impacts the other (Harper & Peterson, 2005; Wyatt et al., 2017). For example, we find that depression will affect a student's mental state, as well as their academic, social, and personal life. They may show physical signs of fatigue, stop attending class, and distance themselves from family and friends.

At the same time, students' lifestyle, habits, academic and social settings, and specific experiences can affect their emotional well-being and intensify or lessen the impact of their mental health problems. For example, if an honors student accustomed to receiving high grades fails an exam, that failure can have a significant impact on that student's self-esteem. Some honors students are resilient when faced with challenges while others simply do not know how to pull themselves out of the darkness. Advisors can play a pivotal role by helping students to understand that they are not alone and that help is available. Resiliency is not always innate; it may have to be taught. Through our work with honors students, we have seen them struggle with various problems and challenges, but when they have received appropriate support, we have witnessed their making progress toward a personal transformation at their own pace. Fundamental in our approach is encouraging students to seek support, resources, connections, and relationships with others. Esteban Ortiz-Ospina (2019) notes that individuals who maintain social connections throughout their lives tend to live happier and healthier lives.

One reason why honors students may not have acquired effective coping strategies for dealing with academic and social challenges in college is that their prior schooling experiences may not have been challenging. The shock of not being able to do what had previously come easy to them can cause honors students to lose their sense of self. We have found that this sense of loss, as well as other stressors, leads some students to suffer from imposter syndrome. They may begin to think that they were a fraud their entire life and that they are not as smart as others believed them to be, triggering doubts about their abilities and skills. Students experiencing imposter syndrome may feel as though they had been putting on an act for others and become afraid that the public will recognize that they are not who they presented themselves to be. This fear can lead to an identity crisis and cause students to feel they are not worthy of the title of honors student. Often, these emotions may lead to other problems like deep feelings of guilt and shame. As a result, students begin to exercise negative coping mechanisms such as isolating

themselves or even using drugs to cope with the emotional, psychological, and physical pain they experience. This approach can cause them to distance themselves from their friends and family, which only intensifies their negative thoughts and actions.

In contrast to isolation as a coping mechanism, some studies suggest that honors students value social connectedness (Young et al., 2016). In fact, some models suggest that creating courses in the liberal arts coupled with an internship and collaborative institutional support can contribute to students' knowledge of depression and substance use disorders and to developing their ability to engage with these topics to help their peers (Eisen et al., 2009). We believe that healthy relationships and a positive support network can significantly impact whether or not students are able to move past a troubling time in their life. Seeking support, however, requires students to disclose their concerns and struggles, which can be even more difficult for honors students who fear being judged and who are not accustomed to being vulnerable.

As advisors and teaching faculty, we are often the first point of contact for students dealing with mental health issues. We have recognized the importance of being adaptable and creating a calming atmosphere in our office space because students can appear at any time with a range of concerns. We are also aware that students learn, grow, struggle, and interact in a broad social context that extends beyond the academic community (Kelleher, 2017). While honors students often visit the office to ask about their coursework, conversations may easily slide into a discussion about their personal life, which might include being homeless, dealing with substance abuse, or recently breaking up with a partner. We try our best to listen to the student and to provide appropriate referrals, such as visiting the counseling center, meeting with disability services staff, or speaking with the dean's office to discuss support services. In some instances, we have had to contact public safety and the counseling director, perhaps even reaching out to the student's family members. In some cases, we have contacted NYC Well—New York City's main resource and support for individuals seeking help related to mental health problems—and the police department to do at-home

wellness checks on students who were unresponsive for long periods of time.

In addition, we have also reached out to professors to inquire about how particular students were doing in their course or to inform faculty members in advance if we were aware that a student would be absent. This close relationship with professors, especially honors faculty, has allowed us to be more informed about how our students are performing academically while providing additional information or context about their classroom behavior. Once we become aware of a problematic situation, we make contacting the appropriate personnel on campus a priority. Our standard practice is for honors advisors to follow up with students and to check-in with them in the days immediately following an initial conversation. Maintaining the relationship is important. This ongoing communication with students allows advisors to provide support if circumstances dictate or immediate action becomes necessary.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As educators, it is imperative that we aid our high-achieving students in developing the skills that will enable them to deal with the various crises they may encounter during their academic careers. College staff and faculty, of course, have varying experience with and knowledge of student crises and how to address them. In order to best support students, advisors must first educate ourselves. As mentioned previously, advisors and faculty within our university participate in Mental Health First Aid trainings, At-Risk training to connect students to support services, and UndocuAlly training to better support undocumented students.

A collaborative approach in supporting students should be at the core of any institutional intervention that aims to support students (Diaz & Medina, 2018). Doing so entails maintaining open communication and working with faculty as well as with colleagues in departments such as financial aid, counseling, the registrar, and the dean's office. Too often, units work independently. Students interact with various officials on a college campus and may disclose varying levels of information depending on their relationship

with each one. By working collaboratively and sharing information with appropriate colleagues, advisors can better recognize any warning signs and provide the necessary support to students before a situation escalates. For this reason, we recommend that honors programs and colleges evaluate their processes for reporting concerns regarding students. Baruch College has addressed this imperative by creating a Campus Intervention Team (CIT) comprised of professionals from several departments across the college. Anyone in the college community can submit a confidential report on any student they believe is in crisis. Upon receipt of the report, a member of CIT will follow-up and address the situation, which often involves reaching out to the student's advisor or other professionals who should be aware of the situation and then contacting the student to provide support services. Macaulay also has a similar system called the Student Support Team (SST), which accepts reports that are then addressed by a team member who works to ensure the safety and well-being of the student. Members of SST meet frequently to review student cases and to determine whether students are receiving the support they need. Both SST and CIT have been successful in providing students in crisis with appropriate resources while they are also building their relationships with staff, faculty, and other students. Students who have multiple points of contact—peers, advisors, and professors—are more likely to receive and benefit from help. In other words, having a support staff in place that is capable of paying attention to what may seem like minor details is crucial in effectively assisting students in crisis.

We recommend that honors programs and colleges consider the following questions: Does your campus have a crisis intervention team? Does your department have an emergency plan and protocol? How does your campus normalize seeking help? What early interventions targeting students in crisis exist on campus? Knowing the institution's policies regarding mental health resources as well as the resources that may be available to students outside of the university is also valuable. Although higher education institutions can be limited in the services that they are able to provide, there may be ways in which educators can support students even when they exit a particular program. Referrals to free mental health

services, for example, may provide students with the privacy they seek from their families.

In addition to taking a holistic approach to assisting students, advisors should recognize the importance of (re)evaluating the procedures and resources that are currently in place for assisting students in need. One way for advisors to stay current is for them to investigate and embrace a wide range of tools and theories in order to better understand the various challenges students may be facing. "As student success and retention become increasingly relevant as topics of discussion in the ethos of American higher education," observe James H. Young III et al. (2016), "so does the need for effective program assessment and evaluation" (p. 179). The needs of honors students and the demographics of honors programs can change over the years. Honors students are becoming increasingly anxious, and their sense of belonging has been negatively affected by both systemic injustice and the era of COVID-19 (Frana, 2023). Therefore, maintaining open dialogue with students to determine how to best serve their needs and to determine whether the policies and procedures in place are still effective and beneficial is important. For example, after speaking with staff and students and reviewing GPA policies at other colleges, Macaulay decided to change its probation language beginning in the fall 2019 term. Now, students who fall below the required GPA are placed on "academic support" instead of probation. This language feels less punitive and focuses on showing the students that they will be receiving additional support and resources in order to return to good standing. Student feedback on this change was instrumental in adjusting this policy. Including students in such discussions demonstrates to them that their opinions are valuable and that the administration wants them to be part of changes to the way honors operates. The change has been received positively since its implementation. It shifts from use of negative and deficit-based language to terminology that highlights advisors as a resource committed to helping students attain their academic goals.

Effectively supporting the mental health needs of honors students requires a variety of approaches and interventions. Intervention teams, training for faculty and staff, and working

collaboratively across campus are but a few examples. In addition to investing in mental health services on campus, higher education institutions must understand the value in creating systems of support throughout their university ("NASPA Policy and Practice Series," 2019). Our professional experience has reaffirmed our belief that educators and higher education professionals have the capacity to create a transformative environment for students by fostering not only academic development but also personal growth and support for students' overall well-being.

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