

Adapting and Innovating to Promote Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being of Young People of Color: COVID-19 and Beyond

A Report from The Steve Fund Crisis Response Task Force

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THE STEVE FUND







Table of Contents

Introduction 1
The Steve Fund Crisis Response Task Force 2
Background 2
Higher Education Recommendations 4
Workplace Recommendations 10
Conclusion 17
Next Steps 18
Citations 22
Appendix A: Members of the Task Force 25
Appendix B: Equity in Mental Health Framework 26

"It is imperative that student voices are heard because we are going through these tough transitions that will affect our generation."

- Ryan Houston-Dial, Undergraduate student of color, Task Force member



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has cast deeply-ingrained inequities in American society into stark view. Just as pre-existing health conditions have made individuals more vulnerable to COVID-19, structural racism has made certain communities more vulnerable to the disease. For example, Black, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and Latino populations are at least three times as likely to die from COVID-19 as their white neighbors.[1] COVID-19 is disproportionately impacting people of color economically and psychologically as well.[2] In the second quarter of 2020, the unemployment rate among Black and Latino people was more than 16%, compared to 12% for whites. With regard to psychological impacts, more than 30% of Asian-American adults say they have experienced interpersonal racism since the pandemic began,[3] and Blacks and Latinos report higher rates of depression, anxiety, and trauma-related symptoms as a result of the pandemic than do whites.[4] The multiple and intersecting marginalized identities carried by many students of color — such as socioeconomic, immigration and ability status; sexual orientation; gender identity; and cultural background — can amplify these disparities and trauma-related symptoms. Further exacerbating an already extremely difficult situation, George Floyd's death and the nationwide protests and conversations about systemic bias and racism it sparked have rapidly escalated the stressors already burdening communities of color.

"I could not focus after George Floyd's death. I have to deal with things that my peers who are not Black don't have to think or worry about."

- Graduate student of color

The pandemic, the economic crisis, and the nation's racial reckoning also have created new challenges for students in higher education and those entering the workforce. In spring 2020, campuses shut down abruptly due to public health concerns, and in fall 2020, students face continuing uncertainty about their ongoing learning and living conditions. With the sudden shift to distance learning, students are losing not only in-person contact with faculty, staff, and peers, but also on-campus housing, food, support services, and social communities. Furthermore, internships and jobs are disappearing. On top of all of this turmoil, students are now having to process what today's racial awakening means for them. Many of these students are directly or indirectly involved in demonstrations, adding a layer of mental and emotional stress. Despite the universal nature of these disruptions to students' lives, students of color, who comprise approximately 45% of college undergraduates,[5] are bearing the weight of these challenges most acutely.

The Steve Fund Crisis Response Task Force

The Steve Fund, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the mental and emotional well-being of students of color, created a Crisis Response Task Force to develop recommendations for mitigating the mental health risks for these students caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic and social upheaval that has followed. Its 21 members include students; diverse mental health experts; senior executives from corporations, colleges and universities; and representatives from the philanthropic, nonprofit, and policy sectors (see Appendix A). The Task Force conducted an extensive literature review, engaged in expert consultations, and after careful deliberations, arrived at consensus on the recommendations put forth herein. The Task Force's work represents the first time leaders from across sectors have come together to consider the mental health status and needs of young Americans of color, a population that is the driving force of our nation's future economic and social well-being.

Background

Students of color face significant obstacles on their path from adolescence to adulthood — in their transition to higher education, in their college experience, and in their transition into the workforce. Many bear significant intergenerational trauma and may be first generation college students who come from low-income communities, immigrant backgrounds, and/or families facing myriad difficulties. These commonly include food and housing insecurity, racial and ethnic discrimination, and inadequate access to both culturally competent healthcare and the technology needed (i.e., computers and internet access) for academic success.

Such systemic burdens can present risks to the mental health of students of color in greater proportions than to their white peers. In combination, these disparate burdens and mental health issues pose formidable hurdles to college and workforce success.

"It was invigorating to be a part of The Steve Fund's Crisis Response Task Force. The group's charge was unique in bringing together leaders from across sectors to study and recommend actions needed to support mental health of the nation's young people of color. I hope that the suggestions prompt serious consideration by leaders to invest in the emotional well-being of this fast-growing population."

- Joan Steinberg, President, Morgan Stanley Foundation, Task Force Member

"Our focus on intersectionality and systemic discrimination were important elements of the deliberations of the Task Force. We embrace the notion that a deep understanding of these are essential to mental health."

- David Rivera, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Queens College, CUNY, Task Force Member

The Task Force highlights the following points to illustrate the scope of the challenges for young people of color:

Transition to higher education. Students' plans have been upended by the pandemic, adding elements of insecurity and disruption to their lives, with a disparate impact on nonwhites.

- A May 2020 Gates Foundation analysis found that 61% of Latino and 59% of Black parents of high school seniors reported that their child's postsecondary plans had been disrupted due to COVID-19, compared to 43% of white parents.[6]
- An April 2020 SimpsonScarborough report found that 33% of minority high school seniors said that their top college choice had changed due to COVID-19, compared to 15% of white high school seniors.[7]

The college experience. Educational attainment is negatively impacted by anxiety, depression, and other mental health symptoms, all felt more acutely by students of color.

- Even before the pandemic began, students of color were more likely to report feeling overwhelmed at college and keeping their concerns to themselves. In one study, 23% of Asian-American students, 26% of Black students, and 33% of Latino students with mental health problems sought treatment vs. 46% of white students.[8]
- Since the pandemic began, undergraduate and graduate students who reported they did not adapt well to remote instruction had rates of depression and anxiety twice as high as students who reported adapting well to remote instruction.[9]
- At the onset of the pandemic, colleges grappled with technological and state licensure issues making it more difficult for many students to access their colleges' mental health services remotely.[10] A forthcoming analysis by The Steve Fund and Healthy Minds Network reveals that among students of color using mental health services, 70% found those services more difficult to access since the pandemic.[11]
- Thirty-four percent of students of color said they are "very worried" about contracting COVID-19 on campus, compared to 21% of white students.[12]
- Day-to-day experiences of interpersonal racism are associated with increased anxiety symptoms, depressive symptoms, and loneliness among college students.[13]
- In the current environment, college students of color experience "heightened emotions and stress" from being at the forefront of movements for racial justice.[14]

Academic progress and transition to employment. Current crises may intensify pre-existing disparities in graduation rates, mental health, and entry to the workforce.

- Even before the pandemic began, there was a substantial gap in graduation rates between students of color and whites: while 62% of white students graduate with a degree or certificate within six years, only 38% of Blacks and 46% of Latinos do.[15]
- Students of color are at least twice as likely as whites to report planning a lighter course load this fall, which increases the likelihood of graduating later or not at all.[16]
- Mental health disparities are a poorly understood part of the student success equation: students with mental health challenges are twice as likely to drop out of college than students without them.[17] Since the arrival of the pandemic, students of color, including Black, Latino, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and multiracial students, are experiencing higher rates of depression and anxiety than white students.[18]
- Students of color face more challenges than others accessing paid internships and other career opportunities. Of the 42,000 paid internships offered by the top 200 companies, only 6% are held by African-Americans and 4% by Latinos.[19]
- Among graduate and professional students, the prevalence of a major depressive disorder is two times higher in 2020 than in 2019, and the prevalence of generalized anxiety disorder is 1.5 times higher than in 2019. Rates of depression and anxiety are higher among Latino, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and multiracial graduate and professional students, compared to white students.[20]

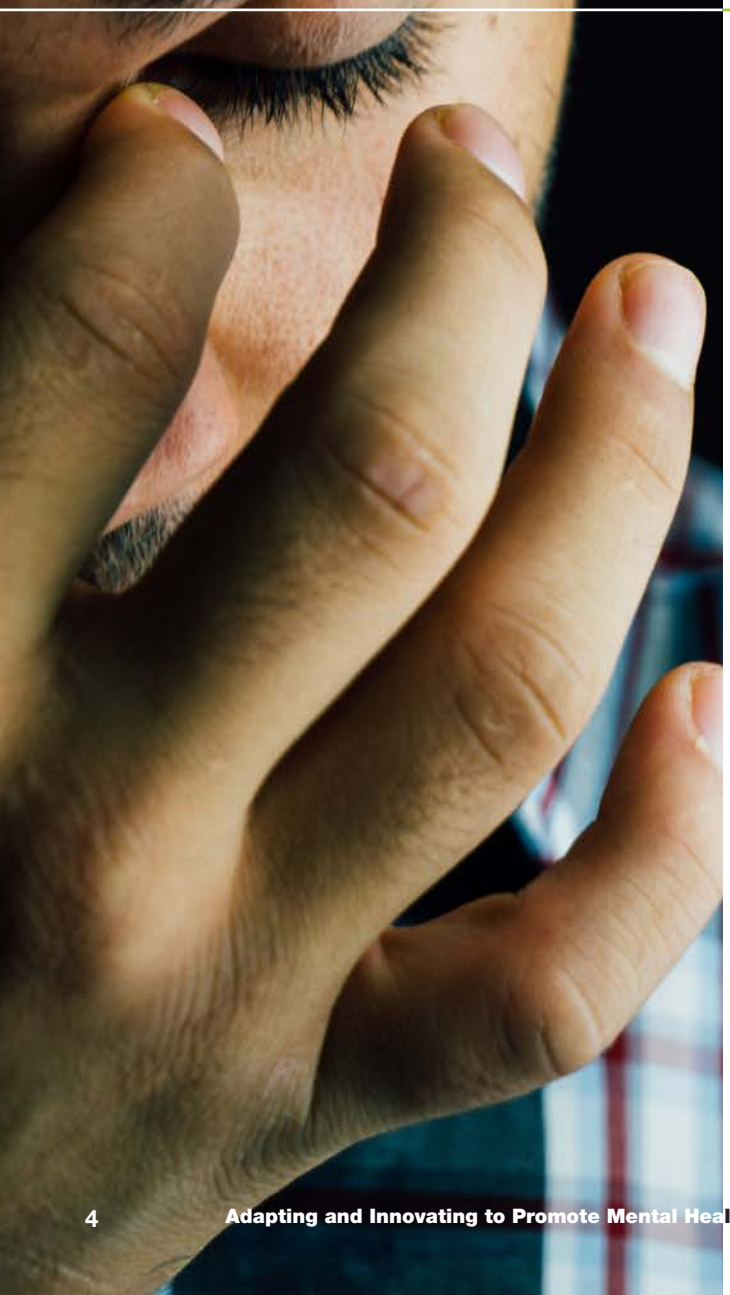


"The mental health experts in our group represented diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, enabling us to contribute culturally-salient guiding principles for the Task Force."

- Farha Abbasi, MD, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, Michigan State University, Task Force Member

Core Principles

The Task Force developed recommendations in response to this backdrop of needs, and the perils of failing to address them, to inform and prompt effective actions, investments, and innovations promoting the well-being of young people of color in higher education and the workforce. Our recommendations adhere to three core principles that experts on the Task Force advise are essential to promote mental health: **1) create trust and engage all stakeholders, including young people of color, 2) establish and maintain a genuinely welcoming and culturally inclusive environment, and 3) acknowledge the effect of racial trauma associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and social injustice.** These principles form the basis of sound approaches to promoting the mental health and emotional well-being for young people of color.



Higher Education Recommendations

American higher education faces unparalleled challenges. The severity of recent events and uncertainties of even the near-term future are unnerving for the most seasoned leaders. While all energies were focused on responding to the pandemic, the death of George Floyd ignited a powerful racial justice movement in which college and university students have become deeply involved. Most students had spent the spring at home attempting to complete their classes online, and they now suddenly faced another potent, destabilizing disruption to their lives — and another threat to their mental health and emotional well-being.

Times of crisis and unrest in society and on campuses can drastically influence the mental health and emotional well-being of students of color, and ultimately derail their academic and career success. The recommendations of the Task Force aim to mitigate these risks. Tackling such challenges in a partially or fully virtual learning environment will require an extra level of adaptation and innovation, taking into consideration the differing circumstances of two- and four-year institutions, as well as the unique needs of graduate students.

Institutions of Higher Education should:

1. Build Trust Through Racial Trauma-Informed Leadership

Fostering trust is essential to supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of students of color. Leaders can build students' trust by acknowledging their trauma and its orgins, ranging from intergenerational sources to the pandemic. A further step in building trust is following through to take students' concerns into account in institutional decision-making. Racial trauma-informed leadership prioritizes listening, demonstrates empathy towards injustices and inequalities experienced by students of color, and creates and adapts resources that respond to their mental health needs.

Implementation Strategies

▸ ***Encourage and listen to student voices to better understand their lives.*** Acknowledge and affirm students' stories. Consider intersectionality and cross-cutting identities, such as socioeconomic status, immigration status, ability status, sexual orientation, gender identity, cultural background, religion, and family role. Understand that racial/ethnic groups are not monolithic.

▸ ***Adopt a communications strategy that demonstrates empathy towards the injustices and inequalities that students of color are experiencing.*** This could involve partnering with students of color on crafting communications and/or training communications staff to engage students, their families, faculty, and staff. It may also involve developing new ways to connect and communicate virtually.

▸ ***Evaluate and tap into the growing number of mental health digital applications, teletherapy resources, and other technologies to meet the mental health needs of students of color.*** It is important to create a system for assessing the fit and utility of the many new tools emerging today. The American Psychiatric Association's App Advisor is a useful resource.[21]

▸ ***Know that there is not a single best approach to providing student services and supports, and that adaptability is at a premium.*** Evolving circumstances require periodic reviews of needs and options.

▸ ***Expand campus-wide training on implicit bias, systemic racism, racial trauma, allyship, and wellness.*** Taking these steps will help ensure staff, faculty, and student leaders have the knowledge and capacity to support both the mental health and academic success of students of color.



"Believe students when they are brave enough to share their experiences with you."

- Graduate student of color

2.Take a Collaborative Approach to Promote Mental Health for Students of Color

Mental health has been identified as a top priority for college presidents,[22,23] and students' increasing mental health needs[24] call for new strategic approaches. Counseling centers alone do not have the capacity to provide customized outreach for students of color and handle elevated demand. Offices such as Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) and Student Affairs are natural partners. Working collaboratively, they have the potential to promote mental health among students of color, while bolstering equity, inclusion and belonging. For instance, specific attention can be directed towards aligning efforts to diversify staff and faculty, and adopting anti-racist policies and practices across institutions with the goal of promoting mental health.



Implementation Strategies

- ***Partner with enrollment management, faculty, and staff to maintain contact with remote learners.*** Connecting with students and linking students to each other and to campus resources is critical, especially for first-year students. Regular contact via calls, texts, or digital platforms can help support the well-being of students of color and their academic success.

- ***Ensure that student life, academic affairs, and other staff coordinate efforts to support the mental health and well-being of students of color.*** Existing models and resources, such as the Equity in Mental Health Framework (EMHF), developed by The Steve Fund and Jed Foundation (see Appendix B), offer guidance on building cross-campus collaborations to identify and address signs of distress among students of color, enhancing counseling and wellness programs, and training staff across units.

- ***Form mental health task forces and DEI committees to collaborate using tools such as the EMHF to identify current campus resources and areas of growth in order to promote a campus culture of wellness.*** This is a time to spotlight and draw from campus programs which have been formally and informally supporting the well-being of students, and a time to assess efforts that have the potential to engage students of color in innovative ways.

- ***Tap into culturally aligned student groups and clubs on campus and foster their ties to mental health supports to help students simultaneously maintain a cultural connection and reap mental health benefits.*** Both in-person and virtually, create a welcoming environment for students of color and their families.

- ***Engage campus security in collaboration and training so that all interactions with students, including those in crisis, reflect empathy and respect.*** Partnership with campus security personnel is a critical ingredient in building trust so that students do not feel that they are being racially profiled, mistaken as strangers on campus, or treated in a violent manner.

3. Engage Faculty and Staff to Support Mental Health of Students of Color

Academic pressure can exacerbate mental health concerns.[25] While learning environments can be stressful for all students, students of color experience the academic climate in distinct ways in part because of the lack of diverse faculty representation and instructor bias, which can negatively affect student experiences in the classroom.[26] While the virtual or in-person class setting is where students can develop a sense of belonging and gain confidence, it can also be a place of negative encounters. In the virtual context, pedagogy can be intentionally designed to include all.

Implementation Strategies

- ***Adopt course design, classroom policies, and academic advising policies and resources that promote an inclusive culture.*** These undertakings should promote inclusive practices and trauma-informed approaches, and incorporate strategies to reduce stress and foster a sense of belonging. Such policies and resources should be reflected in all course syllabi. Develop virtual classrooms with structure and rules that create a safe learning space, engage students equally, articulate how to participate, and model how to listen and respond to issues and topics.[27]

- ***Equip faculty and staff with the knowledge and skills to identify signs of mental health distress or crisis in diverse student populations.*** Faculty and staff should receive training from mental health experts and develop skills for offering support and directing students to help when needed. The Steve Fund website offers webinars, online training, and resources.

- ***Develop a system for faculty and staff to support student mental health crises through a team that is knowledgeable about working with racially diverse students.*** Inform faculty and staff about related resources available to promote the mental health of students of color. EMHF recommendations provide support for campuses wishing to adopt a collaborative model to support students in crisis through a team of academic and student affairs professionals working together.



"Higher education leaders need to put their genuine concern for vulnerable students into action. College and university leaders should act urgently to protect the mental health and well-being of students of color."

- Marvin Krislov, President, Pace University, Task Force Member



4. Treat Student Mental Health as a Priority Area for Investment

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, many colleges and universities are experiencing severe financial strain. But it is more important than ever to provide adequate funding to make high-quality mental health services easily accessible to students, whether in virtual or in-person settings.

Implementation Strategies

▸ ***Prioritize mental health funding when making budgetary decisions.*** These are critical supports that are particularly important to students of color in times of crisis.

▸ ***Identify and make available the best telehealth resources and incorporate them into your college or university's health strategy.*** Telehealth likely will continue to be a part of health service delivery and can be particularly helpful throughout the course of the pandemic.

▸ ***Provide access to diverse, culturally competent mental health practitioners to serve student populations.*** It is crucial that students are comfortable interacting with mental health practitioners, and that they feel recognized and understood.



5. Leverage Community and External Stakeholders to Promote Emotional Well-Being of Students of Color

Colleges and universities can engage with the local community, nonprofits, employers, and faith-based entities to adopt creative strategies and partnerships to augment resources and spur innovation promoting the mental health and success of young people of color.

Implementation Strategies

- ***Partner with nonprofits to offer entering students ongoing professional and peer support.*** These supports will help students cope more effectively with the unique challenges of navigating higher education as students of color. Alumni associations can provide access to graduates to serve as role models and mentors.

- ***Invest in partnerships with local faith and cultural organizations, government agencies, K-12 schools, and grassroots organizations.*** These efforts will build community-institutional trust and offer opportunities for students of color to engage with people and organizations off campus.

- ***Partner with prospective employers to build comprehensive strategies for workforce preparation.*** These measures can include internships, externships, job shadowing, and fellowships, as well as training, emotional supports, and experiences affording exposure to workplace cultures, written and unwritten rules, and career planning. They can promote self-efficacy, confidence, and achievement that contribute to emotional well-being and successful transitions to the workforce for students of color.



"The pressure is on me to do really well on exams and get a job. I try to balance comforting my parents and my own needs."

- Recent college graduate of color



Workforce Recommendations

Today's combination of crises has produced additional risk factors for young people of color that can jeopardize their smooth entry into the workforce. Given this compounding of the usual challenges associated with separation from health, peer group, and faculty/staff supports at college or university, bolder responses from employers are called for. Psychologist Angela Neal-Barnett urges leaders to "set aside the standard Diversity, Equity and Inclusion or Human Resources playbook in this unprecedented time,"[28] suggesting that racism is no less than a "trauma trigger" requiring expert skills and training to address the needs of a racially traumatized workforce.

Further, the imperative to elevate responses to employees' mental health needs is gaining traction as young workforce entrants emphasize its importance. According to a 2019 poll by the American Psychiatric Association, 62% of people ages 20 to 37 feel comfortable discussing their mental health at work, compared with only half as many people ages 54 to 72. [29] In addition, at the end of July 2020, feelings of depressed mood were 79% higher in workers ages 20-39 years than those ages 40-59.[30]

Employers of all sizes and in all sectors should adopt workplace cultures that emphasize mental health and be guided by mental health and emotional well-being considerations when designing talent acquisition, onboarding, training, work assignment, and retention initiatives. Making mental health and emotional well-being of diverse employees an organization-wide priority can help promote the success of this population.

While the fundamental principles of our recommendations are applicable across different types of employers (i.e., businesses, nonprofits, public sector), factors such as size and organization type may need to inform implementation.

Employers should:

1. Focus on Students' Transitions from Higher Education to the Workplace

In the best of circumstances, the transition from college to the workplace is fraught. Experts delineate a range of factors comprising an emotional tax for diverse new entrants ranging from "code switching" to "identity cover."[31] Today, given the additional stressors imposed on young people of color by the pandemic, economic disruption, and social injustice, they may face even greater risks to mental health and emotional well-being as they navigate entry into the workforce.

As a result of COVID-19, scores of young people have lost internships and other career opportunities. According to Glassdoor, internship openings in May 2020 were 49% lower than in May 2019.[32] The effect has been particularly severe on students of color, who more often lack some of the intangibles for getting a job and moving up the ranks, such as having mentors and networks of similarly-situated peers. The loss of internship opportunities can negatively affect these students by reducing opportunities to explore career options and learn unwritten rules of succeeding in the workplace.

To more fully assist recent graduates entering the workforce, new forms of collaboration are needed between higher education and employers on mental health concerns.

Implementation Strategies

▸ ***Convene virtual conversations between higher education and workforce leaders to ideate programming and solutions across sectors.*** The goal should be to connect seasoned professionals from both sectors to form an ongoing learning community whose aim is to identify and pilot best practices to assist graduates of color in moving into the workplace.

▸ ***Develop strategies to smooth the transfer of mental health supports, knowledge, and resources from colleges to work settings, especially in the context of disruptions wrought by COVID-19. The goal is to facilitate:***

- Development of new peer networks and support systems
- Helping new workers apply in the workplace the knowledge and skills they acquired in college
- Communication about the availability of culturally competent and trauma-informed assistance
- Identification of stressors and techniques for young employees to manage stress and anxiety



"Employers must recognize that students of color may not have the same resources as white students, and they must make accommodations accordingly."

- Asian-American undergraduate student of color

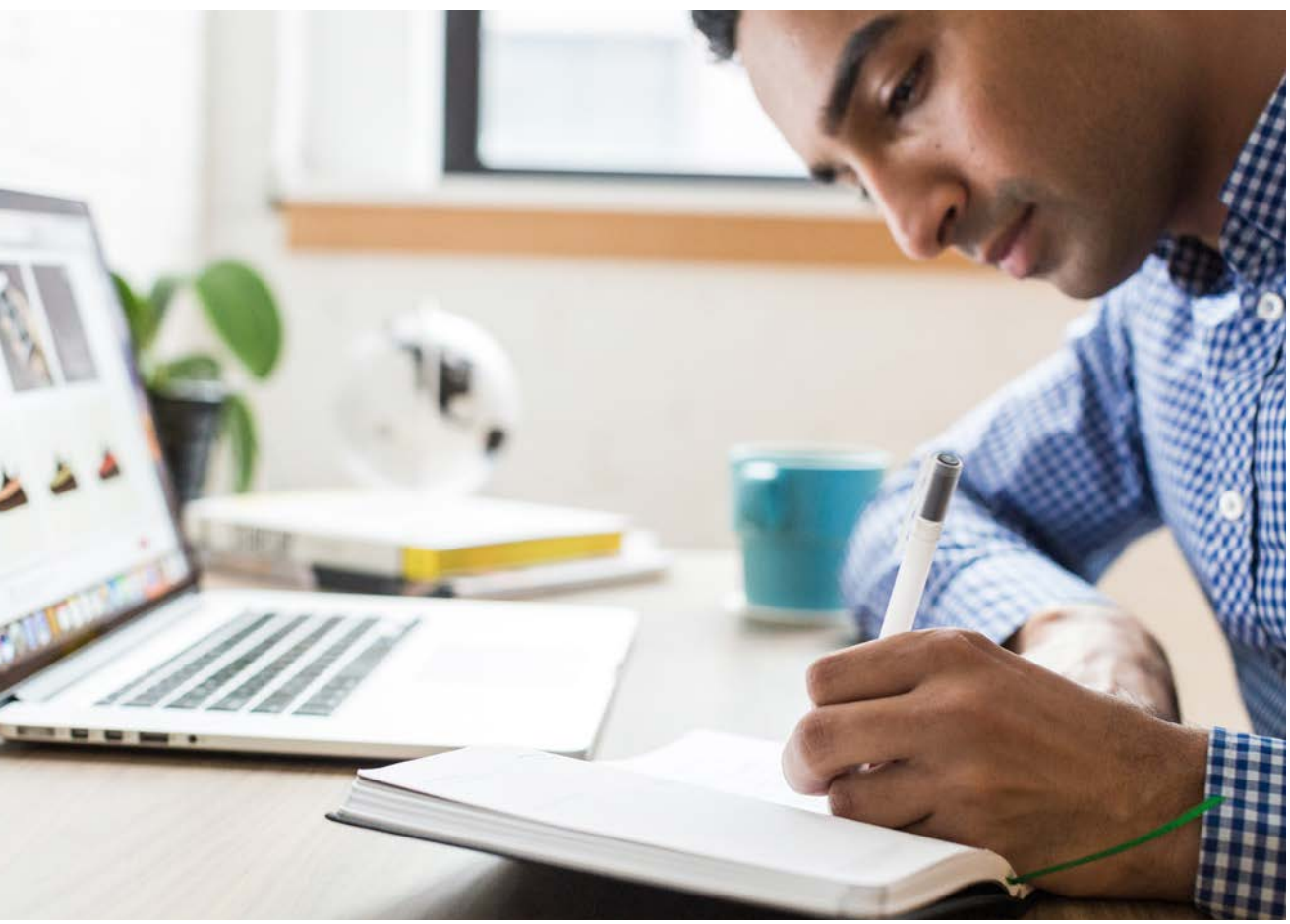
"The loss of internships by underrepresented students increases anxiety about the ensuing loss of job opportunities and uncertainty about returning to college, while reducing income they often need to pay tuition."

- Forest T. Harper Jr., President and Chief Executive Officer, INROADS, Task Force Member

- Increasing managers' skills in spotting emotional distress and speaking to young employees about mental health concerns (i.e. those associated with the pandemic or transition to the workplace)

- Offering expert help for managers to mitigate disturbing experiences for employees of color such as microaggressions, imposter phenomenon, and isolation

▸ ***Invest in employees' development of social capital through internships and mentorships — virtual or in-person.*** These resources are important elements of a meaningful employment experience. Today's financial constraints and health considerations can catalyze the reimagination of such programs for online delivery — enabling employers to provide even more support and engage larger numbers of young people of color in their employment pipeline. A commitment to high-quality learning, growth, and relationship-building can both aid the mental health and emotional well-being of participants and augment career preparation and success.



2. Help Young Employees of Color Navigate the Workplace

Young employees of color may face challenges others do not in navigating a company's culture, including expectations to assimilate, lack of sponsorship, and in the absence of a culturally competent workplace, disconnects from organizational values, leadership, and performance expectations. These were significant challenges even before the pandemic began, and the shift to remote work has magnified them in some settings. However, it is encouraging that some employers are seizing the moment to increase focus on inclusion and belonging, creating opportunities for open discussion and shared learning about social inequities, examining company mission and values, and highlighting employee mental health – leading to improved prospects for successful navigation of the workplace.

Implementation Strategies

▸ ***Integrate emotional well-being into all aspects of operations.*** Employers should include mental health in their definition of employee well-being and success, make active commitments to the mental health and well-being of employees of color, and ensure that employee mental health is included in their company mission, vision statement, and goals.

▸ ***Retain diverse, culturally competent mental health experts to provide training, practical tools, and guidance to equip leaders and managers as mentors and allies – both in the workplace and through professional networking.*** Employers should provide mid-level employees and managers training to engage in supportive discussions about diversity, mental health, and well-being, and to identify signs of mental and emotional distress among people of color in the workplace (especially stemming from trauma and loss associated with the pandemic). The content should address how multiple identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation, religion/spirituality, social class, ability, nativity, and family role) impact the work experience and mental well-being of employees of color.

▸ ***Provide high-quality information and tools that support the mental health of employees of color.*** A robust toolkit could include, for example, access to a confidential employee assistance program, paid opportunities during work hours for learning practical resiliency techniques, and peer resource groups. This is particularly critical now given work-related challenges stemming from COVID-19 (e.g., isolation and loneliness; elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and fear; working remotely while caring for family; feeling overwhelmed).

▸ ***Encourage and model a culture that allows for safely identifying behaviors and environmental challenges commonly impacting employees of color.*** These include microaggressions, peer pressure, imposter phenomenon, non-belonging, isolation, discrimination, and racially disparate outcomes associated with the effects of COVID-19.



3. Conduct a Workplace Culture and Practices Assessment With a 2020 Lens

Recently added stressors require a review of company policies and practices through the 2020 lens of COVID-19, social injustice, and work-from-home. Worries are arising amongst experts about the exacerbation of risks to well-being and success in the current context. For instance, "with fewer connections and less extensive networks than white colleagues to begin with, Black and Hispanic workers can find themselves more isolated than ever in a world of Zoom calls and virtual forums."[33] Employers should carefully evaluate whether the values they espouse are the values experienced by all employees and, particularly, new employees of color. Traditional renditions of workplace culture may fail to account for underlying systemic inequities that have consequences for the work experience. These can be intensified by today's virtual context.



Implementation Strategies

- ***Assess mental health and emotional ramifications of recruitment processes and the burdens carried by young applicants of color.*** Mitigating burdensome stressors is especially important in today's environment and lowers barriers for applicants of color to enter the workforce. Employers should assess whether the organization's campus recruitment practices underscore and advance the company's embrace of mental health and emotional well-being of young people of color.

- ***Conduct assessments of employee mental health and emotional well-being.*** This assessment will help employers understand the depth of needs and adequacy of available resources. The assessment should ask employees to provide feedback on how employer practices and procedures may contribute to, or detract from, employees' mental health and emotional well-being. This assessment should be anonymous and should request employee racial and ethnic identity in order to identify disparities.

- ***Modify leaders' performance management processes to emphasize supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of supervisees, particularly young people of color transitioning into the workplace.*** Employers who seek to prioritize mental health can incentivize supportive behaviors through leader evaluation and promotion processes.

- ***Review policies and procedures to ensure that they do not negatively affect employees of color.*** These include telework policies; modified work schedules; expense reimbursement policies for home office enhancement; transportation and travel policies; and a comprehensive benefits analysis. Guidance may be needed from employees of color to increase confidence that all policies and procedures with racially-disparate impacts have been identified.

- ***Develop Corporate Social Responsibility programs that include and recognize the importance of serving communities in need.*** In addition to supporting such communities, these efforts send a strong message to employees about the company's values and ethos.

4. Promote Understanding of Racial Trauma, Mental Health, and Well-Being in the Workplace

For young people of color, it is traumatic to see or experience violence against Black and Brown communities. Employers should recognize the impact of trauma on employees of color.

Implementation Strategies

- ***Provide learning opportunities to address how employees and leaders may unconsciously contribute to a biased environment.*** Training to inform employee and leader behaviors and identify blindspots in workplace culture can be helpful in some settings.

- ***Draw upon mental health experts to illuminate racial trauma and provide appropriate supports to employees.*** Tools such as the Racial Trauma Toolkit can serve as resources to help do so (#racialtraumaisreal).[34]

- ***Have company leaders acknowledge social injustice and potential implications for the workplace.*** Employers should help to create a foundation of trust, which is critical to establishing a climate where equity is valued.

- ***Create employee assistance programs that include multicultural counselors and therapists, including those providing telehealth services.*** Recruit and maintain a diverse panel of mental health practitioners and counseling professionals to ensure that employees have choices to fit their cultural preferences.



"Racial trauma is a major factor impacting the transition to the workforce for young people of color. Any strong initiative to support them must take into account the disparate effects of the pandemic and trauma."

- Damien Hooper-Campbell, Chief Diversity Officer, Zoom, Task Force Member

5. Develop Allies, Advocacy and Mobility

Companies can better support employees of color at early career stages by leveraging mental health experts and insights. This approach can empower employees to serve as more effective sponsors, allies, and mental health champions.



Implementation Strategies

▸ ***Conduct expert-facilitated roundtables for senior leaders from all backgrounds in the company to share their personal stories with young talent of color.*** Programs of this type can help build confidence, social capital, and leadership trajectories of young talent by underscoring the importance of coping and self-care practices, help-seeking, peer support, and relationship-nurturing strategies in advancing one's career.

▸ ***Initiate a "speaker series" and other learning opportunities probing global, national, and local events impacting employees' mental health and emotional well-being.*** Partnering speakers with mental health experts can create an inclusive dialogue to support employees who may feel vulnerable or marginalized. Doing so exposes important issues for discussion, which, when left unspoken, can contribute to a negatively-charged environment. Topics might include:

- Racial Trauma and the Workplace
- Cumulative Impact and Racial Trauma
- The Mental Health and Well-Being Impact of Coronavirus on Communities of Color
- Black Lives Matter...at Work
- Understanding Structural Racism and Inequity

"The Task Force's recommendations can provide a framework to actively support the mental health of students of color throughout their careers."

- Graduate student of color

Conclusion

Disparate health impacts of the pandemic and today's mounting social, economic, and racial inequities require strategic action to protect the mental health and emotional well-being of young people of color. Effectively championing this cause should be a critical priority for higher education and workforce leaders. While clearly a social and moral imperative, it is also an economic one, given our nation's rapidly changing demographics and increasing dependence on contributions from people of color.

The recommendations in this report are designed to stimulate both thoughtful discussion and appropriate measures in response to the concerns and opportunities described herein. The Task Force hopes that our cross-sector collaboration model will help spur the creation of a broader "community of action,"[35] engaging all stakeholders to meet the mental health needs magnified by our current crises. Inadequately addressed, they have the potential to fuel a mental health crisis with long-lasting and debilitating ramifications for individuals, families, communities, and society-at-large.



We believe that effective organizational and cross-sectoral strategies to promote the mental health of young people of color should be guided by the insights of diverse mental health experts, whose intimate knowledge of the cultures, strengths, and risks of communities of color has been vital to the work of the Task Force.

Time is truly of the essence. The recommendations offered in this report provide opportune pathways forward, and we urge you to join us.

"Being a Black student in spaces where our voices are not heard, the Task Force was a safe place to express concerns."

- Chevaughn Wellington, Medical student and Task Force Member



Next Steps

Remit of the Task Force

The Task Force acknowledges that our remit did not allow a focus on all young people of color. The particular plights of important subgroups — such as those engaged in criminal justice or foster care systems, and those outside of the education pipeline or workforce — must be given special attention. We hope that our work encourages others to actively pursue further study.

Our time horizon and scope permitted in-depth examination on two fronts: we chose to focus on the higher education experience and transition to the workforce because both are highly sensitive inflection points for the mental health of young people of color. However, Task Force discussions also touched upon possible considerations for philanthropy, nonprofits, and public policy makers. Below, we offer thoughts for decision-makers in these sectors.

Philanthropy

Philanthropic organizations have been called to action in novel ways by the COVID-19 public health crisis and pressing calls for racial justice in American society. In their piece, "The Problem with 'Color-Blind' Philanthropy," Cheryl Dorsey, Jeff Braddach, and Peter Kim assert: "For too long, philanthropists have taken a 'color-blind' approach to grantmaking. Even when grounded in a well-meaning attempt at equity, ignoring the implications of race on the work they fund has only served to disadvantage people of color."[36] They conclude that philanthropic efforts that don't consider race run the risk of exacerbating existing racial disparities, or even creating new ones, and call for funders to pay more attention to race-conscious solutions.

While we are heartened by the recent upsurge in racial equity and justice philanthropic initiatives, we must note that the mental health of young people of color remains relatively overlooked. For this reason, *we urge prioritization of mental health of young people of color as a strategic target of opportunity for philanthropy.* We advocate incorporating the mental health of young people of color into philanthropy's growing equity and justice agenda, as well as funding programs focused on education access and attainment, school to career pathways, workforce development, and mental health, among other areas.

Nonprofit Organizations

Nonprofit organizations are indispensable partners to the Task Force and The Steve Fund. They play an essential role in improving the lives of young Americans of color by promoting their health, academic achievement, career preparation/success, and in so many other ways. Some nonprofit and higher education pipeline organizations have outstanding track records in college preparation and connecting young people to workforce opportunities. We expect that nonprofit organizations in these and other areas of public service will continue to play vital roles in the "community of action" we envisage.

Additionally, we encourage both philanthropic organizations and nonprofits to consider the Task Force recommendations for employers.

Public Policy

Public policy has an enormous part to play in all dimensions of the mental health of young people of color. We highlight a few avenues that are especially salient in the current context:

- Federal and state governments are uniquely positioned to establish special bodies to study and direct action towards areas of grave concern to society. We believe the mental health of young people of color is one such area. The Congressional Black Caucus Emergency Task Force on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health (for which The Steve Fund's Senior Medical Director served on its workgroup) is an excellent model.

- Government investment in education and social services is vital to the mental health and emotional well-being of young people of color and their families.

- As college students contend with displacement from their campuses, public policies regulating telehealth can act either as barriers to or promoters of access and utilization of mental health services.

- Disparities in mental health risks and needs among young Americans are alarming. Government-funded research on mental health of young people should be expanded and funded studies should routinely disaggregate data

by race and ethnicity to improve understanding of disparities and potential solutions.

- Policymakers should consider fully integrating mental health into workforce development programs and funding streams.

- Law enforcement should be afforded training on intersectionality of mental health, trauma, socioeconomic, and cultural considerations.

- Access policies for wifi, broadband, etc. overseen by government agencies should be informed by mental health implications.

Medical and Mental Health Professionals

A variety of health professionals are involved in supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of young people in their transition from adolescence into young adulthood. The primary care and mental health professional communities are well aware of the additional burdens and mental health challenges facing young people of color as a result of adverse childhood experiences, systemic discrimination, and the disparate impact of the coronavirus pandemic on them and their families. In light of these extraordinary challenges wrought by the current public health and economic crises — as well as the nation's ongoing racial reckoning — it is essential that healthcare practitioners of all types are alert to heightened levels of trauma and symptoms of stress, depression, and anxiety among young people of color in colleges, universities, and workplaces. Health professionals should be prepared to link young people of color to appropriate mental health services. In addition, the following action steps are provided for consideration:

- Practicing mental health professionals of color and those with expertise in serving diverse populations should make availability of their in-person and telehealth services known to young people of color enrolled in higher education institutions and employed by local companies. This can be accomplished through social media, publications frequented by this demographic, and collaboration with colleges/universities and employers.

- Provide training and consultation to higher education institutions and workplaces on mental health and emotional well-being of young people of color.

- Consider partnering with The Steve Fund in sharing information regarding the mental health and emotional well-being of young people of color customized for racially and ethnically diverse populations and intersecting identities including, but not limited to: gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, nativity, ability, socioeconomic status, and immigration status.

Supporting Implementation of Task Force Recommendations

We encourage a deliberate and collaborative approach for organizations interested in implementing the recommendations and ideas put forth in this report, and offer the following approach:

- Designate an individual, team, or office to review the report and its recommendations
- Create opportunities for key stakeholders — including young people of color — to come together and discuss the recommendations (virtually, if needed)
- Select a "champion" in a central leadership role
- Identify allies in the community who can support the recommendations, such as faith-based and K-12 leaders, community agencies, and others
- Map a critical path for undertaking action steps with clear objectives, roles, responsibilities, and deliverables
    - Select ways to measure concrete progress (e.g., starting a mental health group on campus, strengthening ties with mental health resources; executing discussions/convenings, and assessing mental health and well-being)
    - Evaluate and report to the community on progress
    - Plan for sustainability

The Task Force has encouraged creation of "communities of action," and believes the concept can be applied within individual institutions, across several institutions, and across sectors to generate ideas and select goals and strategies for meeting the mental health needs of young people of color. The key elements of this approach are engagement of all key stakeholders in thoughtful collaborative action, sustained engagement, and careful review of results.

Additional Resources

The Steve Fund is eager to assist with your consideration of the Task Force's recommendations, as well as hear your ideas or approaches in response to them. Several opportunities for discussion with Steve Fund mental health experts are being scheduled, including three convenings planned for fall and winter 2020-21. We invite interested parties to participate in these opportunities to build knowledge, engage in discussion, and join our community of action.

For further information on these and other resources please see https://www.stevefund.org/covid19-taskforce/

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Appendices

Appendix A



Steve Fund Crisis Response Task Force Membership Roster

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Appendix B

Equity in Mental Health Framework

BACKGROUND

The Equity in Mental Health Framework was developed over a 2-year period with input from senior leaders at The Steve Fund and JED Foundation as well as leading national mental health experts. With support from Morgan Stanley, we have fully developed this framework to include input from higher education experts from colleges and universities nationwide.

STATEMENT OF NEED

With over 20 million students enrolled in American colleges and universities, 42% of whom self-identify as students of color, academic institutions face unique challenges in working to serve a variety of student needs. College students on today's campuses face a number of concerns in the social, emotional, financial, and academic spheres. For students of color, their needs are often more acute given that issues like racism, sexism and general discrimination compound these other psychosocial stressors. In fact, students of color report greater feelings of isolation and a significantly reduced likelihood of seeking professional care for mental health and emotional well-being concerns when compared with their white peers (Harris Poll, Steve Fund, and JED Foundation, 2017).

OUR GOAL

Our goal is to support and enhance the academic experience of our students of color by recognizing the unique aspects of their emotional wellbeing and mental health needs and supporting creative mechanisms to enhance their academic environments and improve academic outcomes. To support this aim, we present the 10 recommendations of the Equity in Mental Health Framework below.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Identify and Promote the Mental Health and Well-Being of Students of Color as a Campus- Wide Priority

We encourage institutions of higher learning to center student well-being (and student of color well-being) within the mission of the institution.

2. Engage Students to Provide Guidance and Feedback on Matters of Student Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being

The Steve Fund and Jed Foundation encourage institutions to regularly and systematically survey and conduct focus groups with students of color to understand their needs and wishes regarding emotional wellbeing, sense of belonging on campus, and academic success.

3. Actively Recruit, Train, and Retain a Diverse and Culturally Competent Faculty and Professional Staff

Schools are encouraged to examine whether the identities represented among the student body are also represented in the faculty and professional staff. We also encourage schools to provide education and training in cultural competencies to all individuals engaged in student support roles.

4. Create Opportunities to Engage Around National and International Issues/Events

Current events and cultural movements (e.g. International Travel Ban) profoundly impact members of the campus community even when geographically removed from colleges and universities.

5. Create Dedicated Roles to Support Well-Being and Success of Students of Color

Schools should support staff positions (e.g. multicultural student affairs coordinator; academic diversity officer) with protected time and resources allocated to the development and implementation of culturally relevant student support programming. When these positions do not exist on campuses, it may be useful to create and staff such positions.

6. Support and Promote Accessible, Safe Communication with Campus Administration and an Effective Response System

Create a well-publicized and accessible process by which any student, faculty, or staff member can alert key administrators about incidents, concerns, or issues related to campus climate.

7. Offer A Range of Supportive Programs and Services in Varied Formats

Schools should provide a variety of culturally relevant programs (e.g. mentor networks, discussion groups, workshops, and transition programs) focused on supporting the mental health and well- being of students of color.

8. Help Students Learn about Programs and Services by Advertising and Promoting Through Multiple Channels

Schools should actively and regularly advertise programs on campus, on the web and via social media. Many wonderful national programs and resources are underutilized simply because students are not aware.

9. Identify and Utilize Culturally Relevant and Promising Programs and Practices and Collect Data on Effectiveness

It is important for colleges and universities to build and maintain centralized, accessible resource- sharing repositories to enable effective collaboration.

10. Participate in Resource and Information Sharing (Within and Between Schools)

The Steve Fund/JED Foundation national survey of programs identified a number of college and universities already engaged in feasible, scalable and acceptable programs for students, faculty and staff of color. The community of higher educational institutions can contribute to this knowledge base and help build a set of tested resources to best meet the needs of racially diverse student bodies.



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