



Jesuit Education Offers Tools to Meet the Mental Health Crisis

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Since the [Universal Apostolic Preferences](#) were announced in 2019, I have worried whether, as an educator, I can meet the challenge of accompanying our youth toward a hope-filled future. But Catholic social teaching and Ignatian pedagogy give us vital tools to support our students and help address our nation's mental health crisis.

Those of us in higher education were not surprised by the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, "[Protecting Youth Mental Health](#)," issued in the final weeks of 2021. As the report describes, we are experiencing a systemic public health emergency, and it is a moral and medical imperative for institutions to intervene.

Mental distress is a rational response to prolonged calamities: entrenched inequality, catastrophic climate change, the normalization of gun violence and school shootings, a surge in hate crimes and hate speech, the scourge of opioid and other addictions. The long arm of capitalism has infiltrated nearly every aspect of modern life. Partisanship and discord suffuse public discourse. And technology and social media mean that few of us can disconnect or reboot. All of this predates the pandemic, which has waylaid milestones and further robbed young people of normalcy, safety, and social connection. Meanwhile the new gospel of "self-care" hawks an individual cure for a collective disease.

The statistics reveal an epidemic-level crisis. According to a [2020 report](#) from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than a third of U.S. high school students experienced persistent sadness or hopelessness in the year before, a 40% increase from just a decade earlier. In 2019, 18 percent of U.S. high school students seriously considered suicide, 1 in 5 female students made a suicide plan, and almost a quarter of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students made an attempt. Some young people have heightened vulnerabilities due to economic and social factors or a history of trauma. Others are doing better, either because of luck in the resilience lottery or other protective factors—a strong social network, financial stability, meaningful pursuits outside of school and work. But those of us who teach also recognize cracks beneath the surface even when students appear to excel—self-doubt, demoralization, and a diminished sense of purpose.



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Every one of our universities has deployed an emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We must bring the same urgency to the mental health crisis.

Even more than mission statements, budgets are declarations of values and priorities. Our colleges and universities must invest in highly trained healthcare professionals and wraparound support services for students *and* employees. But personal counseling and wellness centers cannot bear the weight alone. How can those of us who are not health professionals support young people while also managing strains on our own mental health?

Catholic social teaching and Ignatian pedagogy offer several paths forward. First, we can use our classrooms as pivotal spaces for community and belonging. In his third encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis reminds us that “the existence of each and every individual is deeply tied to that of others: life is not simply time that passes; life is a time for interactions.” Our students desperately want connection in a broken world; so do I. Teachers and students both benefit by becoming companions in learning. We can also help students build relationships with each other by facilitating meaningful conversations, active learning, and collaboration—in and out of the classroom. Creating community protects mental health. This is not a peripheral goal of education; it is at the very heart of what we do.

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