As community college education is becoming more accessible, and plans to permit students to attend tuition-free colleges are being established, colleges and universities across the country are reporting an explosion of mental health problems, and today's college students are experiencing an ‘inordinate amount of anxiety’ making college life more stressful than ever.

So to better address, respond, and assess the mental health needs of students, Housatonic Community College (HCC) has partnered with the JED Foundation, a premier nonprofit national organization focused on students’ mental health, social and emotional development, well-being and wellness.

For 16 million or more college students nationwide, the transition into adulthood is a time of significant change and intense challenge to their emotional health and well-being. Research across the field points out that at least three out of five students experience overwhelming anxiety, and two out of five students were too depressed to function. Many other students are struggling with suicidal ideations and substance abuse.

HCC has agreed to a four-year contractual service partnership with JED Campus to prevent and reduce suicide and substance abuse among college students. JED Campus has developed and successfully implemented an integrated, holistic, community-based care and sustainable
framework that intersects several areas of college students’ lives. The program is grounded in the premise that the “emotional well-being of students is the responsibility of everyone.”

Through this partnership as a public community college, HCC has taken yet another evidence-based, comprehensive best practices approach in strategically responding to the mental health needs of its students, foster a ‘culture of care’ and increase the accessibility of counseling services and resources.

Nationally, the mental health needs of students far exceed the resources of most counseling centers, resulting in a substantial unmet need for mental health services/treatment among college students. Only a small percentage of the students seek services and continue with much of their struggle centered on ‘surviving college and doing well’ which again impacts their academic performance.

There exists, however, a disconnect between the seriousness of the mental health problems of college students and in their seeking or receiving timely help. “There’s a very large discrepancy between the haves and the have-nots in our state,” said Janet Spoltore, Connecticut College director of Student Counseling and Health Services, and a member of the legislative task force charged with making recommendations on the prevention and treatment of mental health ailments on college and university campuses in Connecticut.

HCC is taking the first steps to bridge this disconnect with an HCC-JED Campus workshop that was held on Dec. 5-6, 2019. The issue of the well-being of community college students took center stage at the workshop led by a JED Campus team. The initiative was spearheaded by Dr. Indira Reddy, Counselor, who has been proactively collaborating with JED Campus since 2018 to make this partnership possible. Dr. Thomas Coley, Regional President of Shoreline-West Connecticut Community College and acting president of both Gateway and Housatonic Community Colleges, will be involved in discussions related to the initiative.

This first-ever system-wide effort brought together an interdisciplinary taskforce consisting of college leadership, Dean of Student Services Dr. Kim McGinnis and Dean of Academics Robin Avant. Also in attendance were faculty and college mental health counselors, a college librarian, directors of the student services area, public safety officers, FESP/academic advisors, administrators, student services staff, and public safety representatives.

Ms. Lesley Mara, CSCU Director of Workforce Development, Strategic Partnerships, and Sponsored Programs, was interested to learn about the JED Campus approach to student services and to explore the possibility of collaboration among and between the various existing programs across the college system.

The expert team engaged the task force in reconsidering the results of Healthy Mind Survey, existing HCC program/services strengths, discussed their recommendations and recommitted to move forward with the opportunity on hand. Participants tackled the challenge of meeting the mental health needs of community college students and designed potential solutions.
The JED Campus team heard from a diverse panel of community college students who shared their experiences of overcoming challenges to their mental health. The takeaway message from the students was loud and clear: solutions to the unmet mental health needs of community college students must include clear communication through various technological and marketing strategies and the use of peer support.

Emerging from the workshop were several achievable and measurable priorities with the goal of increasing the availability and access to mental health services for students, which would be implemented in phases and stages.

At HCC, the guiding principles shared and discussed at HCC taskforce meetings will form the foundation for effecting enduring, systemic change toward student’s well-being and success supported action steps in creating the‘culture of care. Achieving the anticipated implementation of the entire program priorities provides hope and will require collaborative efforts including:

1) Colleges to rethink their approach to supporting students with mental health concerns, as for some, early intervention may avert the need for professional help.

2) Creative ways to reduce stigma and increase access to tools that may help students better manage stress.

3) Success stories: Students who have the lived experience and know the realities of being in community college and balancing life challenges.

4) The support of community college leadership who understand the presenting mental health needs of students and willing to provide the needed support and help.

5) Mental health professionals (on campus and in the community) who understand the spectrum of mental health concerns among community college students and the cultural sensitivity required in providing satisfactory services.

6) Technology expertise to develop and adapt innovative approaches to meet the mental health needs of students.

7) Strong collaboration.

Considering that students are a key population for determining the economic success of the country, states and communities, colleges must infuse a greater urgency in addressing the mental health and well-being of our college students.