



A Proposal to Support Students on Health Leaves of Absence

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Executive Summary

The Sophie Fund proposes an Ithaca community-based program to aid college students on mental health leaves of absence. The program features a “life coach,” a community outreach worker providing practical guidance and moral support for students in transition. The program also includes a website hosting useful information about college leave policies, strategies for fruitful time off from school, local housing options, and employment opportunities. This proposal should undergo review and any necessary modification by key stakeholders.

Background

In 2016, a local college counseling center director called The Sophie Fund’s attention to a need for a support system for students on health leave of absence. As the director put it: “This is an unmet need in our community. Once students go on leaves for health or personal reasons they are no longer able to access resources at their respective institutions.”

The Sophie Fund found wide agreement about this need among college administrators, student organizations, and individual students facing mental health challenges. In 2017, The Sophie Fund engaged in discussions with various local interested parties to formulate this draft proposal to address the need.

Challenges

Today’s generation of college students is experiencing a mental health crisis in line with the increasing rates of mental health disorders in the general population. College counseling centers are reporting rising numbers of students seeking support for serious depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and other mental illnesses.

The 2015 National College Health Assessment, in a survey of 19,861 students at more than 40 American schools, reported that 35.3 percent “felt so depressed that it was

difficult to function.” The 2014 National Survey of College Counseling Centers reported that 52 percent of students seeking counseling presented with “severe” psychological problems, up from 16 percent in 2000 and 44 percent in 2010.

The 2016 annual report of the Center for Collegiate Mental Health said collected data from 139 college counseling centers showed that 33.2 percent of 150,483 college students seeking counseling in the 2015-16 academic year had “seriously considered attempting suicide.” That was a marked increase from 23.8 percent in the 2010-11 academic year. The data also showed that 9.3 percent of the students seeking counseling had actually made a suicide attempt.

Significant numbers of students are going on leaves of absence, mandatory or otherwise, as a direct result of their mental health struggles. Local colleges have not provided data, but The Sophie Fund estimates that as many as 400 students per year may be taking leaves of absence for mental health reasons from Cornell University, Ithaca College, and Tompkins Cortland Community College.

Leaves of absence entail an often unexpected, abrupt, and painful loss of a structured environment that includes a support network of friends, professors, university staff, roommates and other fellow students, campus organizations, cultural and athletic facilities, and school medical providers. Testimonies from students on mental health leaves of absence relate how it can be a confidence-crushing experience that induces shame and guilt.

At a juncture when they may be least equipped to handle challenges due to their immediate mental health issues, students on leave can experience deep anxieties about housing, personal finances, parental and peer support, health insurance, ongoing medical treatment, school loans, visa status in the case of international students, pathways for reenrollment, and prospects for future academic and life success.

To successfully navigate their transition away from college, and eventually back to campus, students require greater support before they go on leave, while they are on leave, and when they return from leave. Students contemplating taking leaves of absence require integrated consultation by mental health services and academic departments. Students on leaves of absence require wise counsel in handling sudden life changes and charting new courses. Students returning from leaves face challenges related to requirements for reenrollment, resumption of academic work, and establishing new relationships in a changed social environment.

In an article for a Cornell University student publication, Claire Louge ('08), described the shock that students can experience when they find themselves going on a leave of absence for mental health reasons:

“Was I really too weak to fight this on my own? I was a student with nearly perfect grades; my appearance was put together and the demeanor I projected was

that of someone with poise and confidence. To need anyone else's help felt dependent, childish, and helpless.”

Writing last year in *The Mighty*, an online community where people share experiences with their serious health conditions, a Vanderbilt University student named Matt D. described the challenges he felt as a student on leave:

“Isolation really compounded my sense of failure. I thought, ‘Everyone else is doing fine, so it must mean I am that much more of a failure. This is my fault.’ This created a sense of guilt within me that really perpetuated the symptoms of depression I was experiencing. I really wished I could have tapped into a community of people who were on a medical leave or who were thinking about one. Instead I was isolated. I was craving community and structure and didn't have any.

“I wish I had found some kind of program to help me prepare to go back [to school]. It could have been really helpful. Programs like this are like training wheels. They allow you to ‘renormalize’ and learn what it's like to function as a student in society. They ease you back into school to give you a better chance of success. They also give you a community of people who are struggling with some of the same things you are so you don't feel like the only one.”

Program Goals

The program would support students in all stages of their leaves of absence to help make their time away from school a productive and enriching experience with positive outcomes for their educational and life goals.

The program seeks to ensure that students contemplating leaves are fully aware of their options, the pros and cons of taking leaves, their legal rights, the strategies for making leaves a successful option, and the pathways back to school.

The program seeks to ensure that students on leaves have access to information on the full range of challenges they will confront during their leave period—about housing, jobs, educational opportunities, volunteer opportunities, healthcare services, etc. The program seeks to provide substitutes for the campus support systems that become unavailable to students during their leaves, and help students create positive trajectories for the next stages in their lives.

The program seeks to provide students with wise counsel on meeting university requirements and on becoming psychologically as well as academically prepared for their return to school.

Leave of Absence Coach

The life coach, called a Leave of Absence Coach, would be a community outreach worker employed by a local mental health provider. To avoid stigmatizing the program, however, the position would operate entirely outside the physical premises of the

healthcare agency. Instead, the Leave of Absence Coach might hold meetings in neutral spaces such as coffee shops and libraries or other public buildings.

Authorities at Cornell University, Ithaca College, and Tompkins Cortland Community College would inform students going on leaves about the existence of the community-based Leave of Absence Coach.

The Leave of Absence Coach would be tasked with helping students stay connected and avoid the potentially harmful effects of social isolation. The Leave of Absence Coach would hold individual introductory consultation meetings and a weekly general availability for multiple students. These could be designed around topics to offer systematic “training” on resilience and stress-reduction skills, wellness practices, personal enrichment techniques, success strategies, etc. The Leave of Absence Coach would be available for email and text contact on an emergency basis.

Operating as a streetwise mentor/helping hand/shoulder to lean on, the Leave of Absence Coach would provide advice about local employment and volunteer opportunities; housing; psychological and other services; on-leave educational options; career and life planning tools; and reenrollment requirements and related issues.

The Leave of Absence Coach would not perform psychological counseling, but would help ensure students in need are able to find appropriate healthcare, and would be a de facto (and invaluable) early-warning monitor of behavior for students in distress.

Additionally, the Leave of Absence Coach would facilitate “safe spaces” for peer support group discussions—during the weekly meetings as well as on an as-needed basis. The Leave of Absence Coach could also encourage or organize group excursions such as cinema outings, nature walks, and museum visits. Other possibilities for activities include “book club” readings and discussions, and biweekly private lectures for the group by supportive faculty members from local colleges.

The Leave of Absence Coach and peer group would provide an invaluable social outlet for young people struggling through an unexpected anxiety-inducing stage in their lives where they can enjoy camaraderie, gain perspective, escape stigma, receive helpful advice, and feel the satisfaction of supporting others.

The Leave of Absence Coach would primarily provide services to students from local colleges remaining in the Ithaca area. The Leave of Absence Coach would be a useful Ithaca anchor for students leaving the area, providing tangible and moral support for their eventual return to Ithaca.

Leave of Absence Website

The program includes a website run by the local mental health provider (or alternate operator) that provides A-Z information helpful to students on leaves. Examples of tabs on the website:

—Job listings

- Housing listings
- Medical services listings
- Food service listings
- Exercise and wellness listings
- Transportation service listings
- Community services listings
- Local educational opportunities
- Community events calendar (culture, sports, etc.)
- School-specific leaves of absence information and resources
- Recommended readings
- Blogging by leave of absence students
- Advice column responding to emailed questions

Institutional and Financial Support

The program would be managed by a community mental health provider with the capacity to develop and sustain it. The program would seek funding for the estimated \$40,000 to \$50,000 annual cost for the Leave of Absence Coach and website operation from community partners including local higher education institutions.

Next Steps

The Sophie Fund's proposal identifies the challenges faced by students taking leaves of absence and suggests two mechanisms for addressing those challenges—a Leave of Absence Coach and an online portal. The Sophie Fund recommends that the proposal be formally presented to community stakeholders for discussions to begin by November 1, 2017 on program development and funding, and that a program be implemented by February 1, 2018.