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Truman Scholarship Application

Truman Scholarship, the premier graduate fellowship in the United States for those pursuing careers as public service leaders.

Policy Proposal:

**Issue:**
Lack of mandatory mental health literacy modules at Connecticut post-secondary institutions leading to high prevalence of mental health issues and low rates of help-seeking behaviors among college students.

**Problem Statement:**
Young adults (ages 18-25) in colleges are particularly vulnerable to mental health disorders due to changes in environment, addition of new stressors and responsibilities, and transition towards adulthood. In fact, up to one in four college students suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder - and of those students, only about 13% actually seek treatment (Bourdon, 2018). This prevalence of mental health issues and lack of help-seeking behaviors among college students can negatively affect retention rates at higher education institutions. One study suggests that 86% of college students who suffer from a mental disorder withdraw from their institution before graduating (Reavley, 2011). The major factors that contribute to low utilization rate of professional mental health services - and thus lower retention rates in universities - are high social stigma, lack of knowledge of resources offered, and skepticism of efficacy of care (Eisenberg, 2007). All of these factors draw upon a deficiency in mental health literacy - a term defined as knowledge and awareness about mental health disorders, efficacy and availability of treatments, self-help mechanisms to maintain a strong mental health, stigma against mental health disorders, and help-seeking behavior (Kutcher, 2016). Because these barriers to care for mental health issues are deeply rooted in negative perceptions of mental health issues as well as a lack of knowledge about efficacy and access of care, solutions must be proposed to increase mental health literacy among college students. If this lack of mental health literacy is not addressed during such a formative period of personal development, college graduates would likely bring this issue into the workforce, contributing to an overall lower productivity in society. There currently is no state-mandated requirement for higher education institutions in Connecticut to educate their students about mental health issues, risk factors, and treatments.
Proposed Solution:

I propose the implementation of an act through the Connecticut General Assembly which mandates that higher-education institutions in the state of Connecticut must require all incoming freshmen and transfer students to undergo a mental health module that i) educates them on the common risk factors and mental health issues that are widespread among college students, ii) instructs them on healthy coping mechanisms to promote wellness and adjust to their new college environment, iii) dispels common misconceptions and stigmas about mental health issues and seeking treatment, and iv) points to accessible mental health services both on and off-campus that students at the institution can utilize if they require professional care. This module would have the intended effect of decreasing barriers to care through increased literacy - it has been shown that a mental health literacy curriculum leads to increased help-seeking behavior and lower levels of stigma by students and faculty (Kutcher, 2016), leading to greater rates of treatment in the institution. Promoting student mental health through a required module would provide institutions with economic returns through higher retention rates and improved academic outcomes - according to a Healthy Minds study, managing the depression of just 100 students would prevent 6 drop-outs, translating into $240,000 saved per year in tuition on average (Eisenberg, 2013). Finally, mental health literacy would not only improve academic outcomes for students, but also eventually lead to increased productivity and quality of life in the workforce upon graduation. While this mental health module should not be the only avenue of approach to bolster the mental health of the student populations in universities, it addresses a crucial gap in knowledge about mental health issues, resources, and treatment - a root cause of the lack of help-seeking behavior among college students as evidenced by the statistics mentioned above.

Major Obstacles/Implementation Challenges:

A major obstacle is that the modules may not exhibit the intended effect - thus, the efficacy of the module must be continuously monitored through extensive studies at college campuses, and further revisions to programming may be needed. Also, standardization of the curriculum is needed to ensure the intended efficacy of the module while allowing flexibility for higher education institutions to mold the module in a way that fits their own unique campus culture and existing services offered. Additionally, financial feasibility may be an issue for institutions hard-pressed for funding, since educational modules can be expensive to create, revise, and implement. Financial support from the Connecticut General Assembly through a renewable grant, as well as the consulting of a third party contractor and
mental health professionals to create, revise, and standardize the proposed module across the State, can help mitigate these obstacles and ensure the success of the proposed solution.

**Attestation:**

**References, Footnotes, and Exhibits:**


