Embedded counseling services can improve accessibility for students

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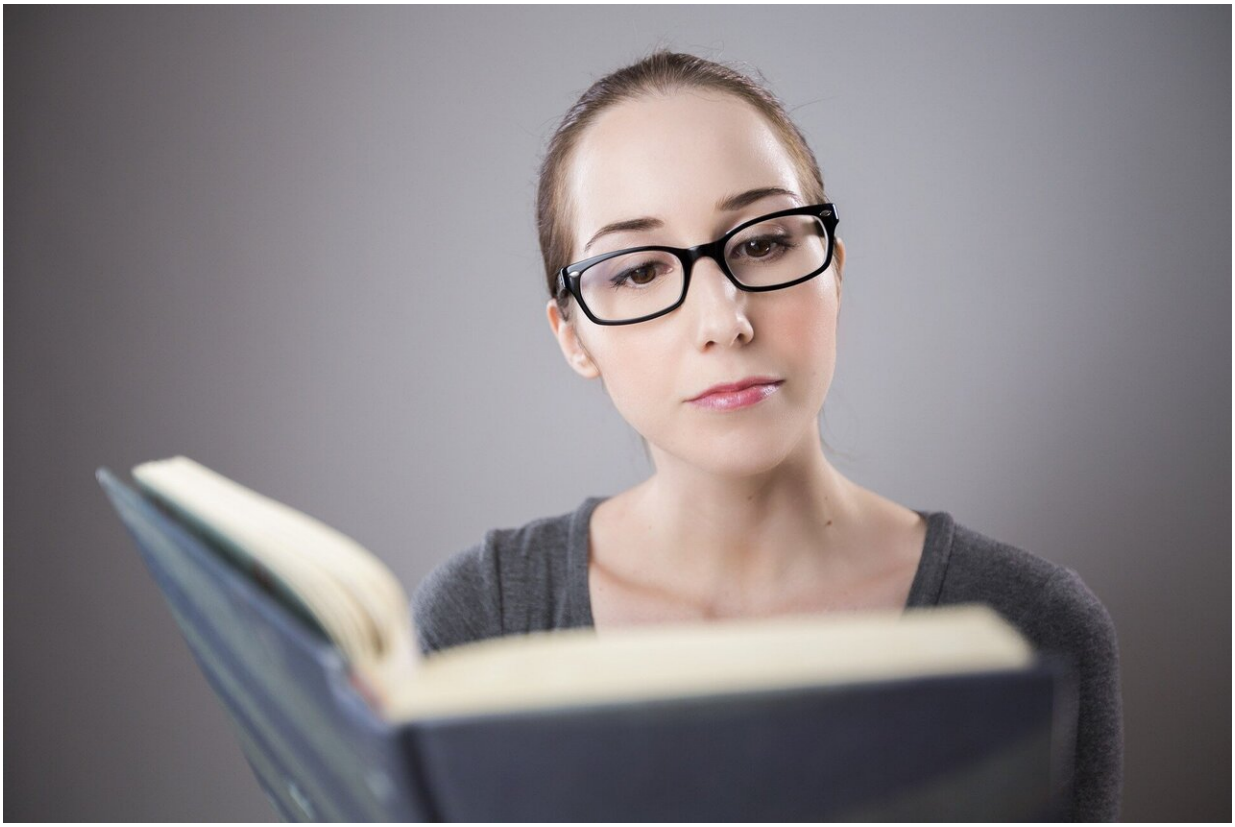

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Kerry Karaffa is the first MU Counseling Center psychologist to be embedded specifically within the University of Missouri College of Veterinary Medicine, where he provides tailored counseling services for

professional students training to become veterinarians. He is also aware that veterinarians are at increased risk for mental health concerns and suicidality compared to the general public due to the stressful demands of the job.

To help universities better serve students dealing with high levels of stress and anxiety, Karaffa conducted a research study in which he developed and distributed a survey to other counselors specifically embedded in veterinary medical programs at universities throughout the country. He hoped to better understand the benefits they provide to their students and create a blueprint for practicing counselors and college administrators considering embedded counseling services in specific programs or colleges on campus. He concluded that embedded counseling services offer a convenient way to increase accessibility to mental health services for students with demanding schedules and made several suggestions for developing and sustaining these services.

"The benefit of being embedded specifically within the MU College of Veterinary Medicine is that I have a greater understanding of the challenges veterinary medical students have, and I am better prepared to tailor services to meet the needs of the students I work with," Karaffa said. "Veterinary medical students may work very long hours in their courses and clinical training, so the fact that my office is located just down the hall from them means they don't have to go all the way across campus to the Counseling Center if their schedule doesn't allow that flexibility."

Karaffa added that as more universities start to consider embedding counselors in specific programs or colleges on campus, several factors should be considered. These include logistical factors such as office space and information technology resources, ethical and practice challenges, as well as the need to hire licensed, well-qualified counselors. In addition, providing the embedded counselors with mentorship and

professional development support can ensure a smoother transition.

"While this particular study focuses on counselors embedded within colleges of veterinary medicine, I also want to help counseling center directors and university administrators who are truly just trying their best to serve their students in a variety of ways," Karaffa said. "Medical schools and law schools are other areas where graduate and professional students are often under a lot of stress, so those could be areas where embedded counseling services could offer tremendous benefits to students going forward."

In addition to improving mental health on college campuses, Karaffa believes improving accessibility to counseling services will benefit students even after they graduate from school and enter their various professions in society.

"People who are psychologically healthy tend to be happier with their jobs and do better work," Karaffa said. "They also tend to have happier relationships, so early intervention and prevention work is always better than waiting until a small problem turns into a big one."

More information: Kerry M. Karaffa et al, Embedded Student Counseling Services: Insights From Veterinary Mental Health Practitioners, *Journal of College Counseling* (2020). DOI: 10.1002/jocc.12171

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