Collaboration

→ *Who should be involved in determining the goals of your program?*
→ *Who can—and should—be involved in campus suicide prevention efforts?*
→ *What are common barriers to effective partnerships?*
→ *How can partnerships be sustained to maximize success?*

Introduction

Promoting mental health and preventing suicide require a set of strategies that address different issues yet work together to form a comprehensive approach. However, no single person or department can put in place all of the strategies that effectively prevent suicide, so suicide prevention must be a collaborative effort.

Some campuses create a mental health task force, while on other campuses, the staff responsible for suicide prevention work one-on-one with departments or individuals on specific strategies. You will need to determine what is most realistic and feasible for the culture and needs of your campus.

Discover the lessons learned from staff on different campuses.

Person #1 - I learned quickly that no one on campus wants a suicide to occur, but sometimes other issues take precedence in certain departments. Once I figured out how their priorities intersected with preventing suicide and promoting the well-being of students, I was able to form some real partnerships on campus.

Person #2 - When we began our suicide prevention efforts, I wanted to understand the staff's perceptions of student mental health issues and suicide, so I met with key stakeholders individually. Through these discussions, not only did my program goals become clearer, but there was also more investment and collaboration by everyone who provided input.

Person #3 - My initial partnerships were with departments that interact with students in crisis, like Health Services, Security, and Residence Life. However, I soon realized that more staff than I anticipated had a stake in preventing suicide, such as the Legal Affairs and Public Relations Departments, so I formed partnerships with them as well.

Person #4 - I was too busy to regularly connect with my off-campus partners. Then we started to hear from students about long wait times for referrals. After that, I met with my partners more routinely and invited them to join our campus advisory board. This really helped improve student access to services off campus.

Steps: Collaboration

A lot of information is available about collaboration, and we've boiled it down to four fundamental steps related to suicide prevention. While all campuses are different, these steps can help any campus develop partnerships and improve collaboration.

Each of the steps below can assist you with collaboration.

Step 1: Start building partnerships

Step 2: Involve partners when developing program goals

Step 3: Identify who can help carry out your programs

Step 4: Sustain partnerships

Step 1: Start building partnerships

Whether you are embarking on a campus-wide suicide prevention effort or focusing on a specific activity such as expanding your off-campus service provider network, you will need to collaborate. It's important to extend your reach beyond your immediate circle and build new partnerships to:

- Let other staff and students know about campus suicide prevention efforts
- Find out what is important to them related to student mental health and well-being
- Help sustain suicide prevention activities so your efforts continue for years to come

Following are common questions about this step.

→ **How should I involve stakeholders?**
→ **What can I do when potential partners or campus leadership don't know who I am?**
→ **What can I do about limited faculty/staff time?**

How should I involve stakeholders?

It's important to include a range of stakeholders in your suicide prevention efforts so that your strategies will be effective and sustainable. However, not every stakeholder needs to be involved in all aspects of your prevention efforts.

Determine in advance the tasks needed to successfully implement your suicide prevention efforts. Then you can identify who might be the best partners to help you accomplish those tasks, and how much they would need to be involved.

Here are some examples:

Major Tasks	Who Can Help	Why Their Involvement Would Be Beneficial	Type/Level of Involvement
Determine suicide prevention goals	Dean of Students	The dean of students is in charge of students' wellness and academic success, so she should be consulted about how suicide prevention can help meet these goals.	Consulted as needed
Consult on program development	Students	Students will know best what messages and images in an awareness campaign will have the greatest impact on their peers.	Consulted as needed
Implement and monitor programs	Psychology Department	Many staff members in the Psychology Department have research experience and can evaluate the effectiveness of your programs.	Actively involved
Sustain programs	University President	Senior leaders have the authority to continue to support suicide prevention, and they may be more willing to do so when they know about your efforts.	Kept up-to-date

What can I do when potential partners or campus leadership don't know who I am?

When potential partners don't know who you are or the administrative leadership changes, set up one-on-one meetings so that you can start to form a new relationship and have meaningful two-way conversations. If it's hard to schedule a meeting with someone on your campus, such as a senior leader, see if there is another staff member who could introduce you and put in a good word.

People are usually more willing to work with you when your agenda aligns with their agenda, and they can benefit from the partnership as well. Begin your meeting by explaining your focus on mental health and suicide prevention and then turn the focus to them. Ask what they are passionate about and figure out how you can support their interests as well as your own.

Here is an example:

Imagine a meeting with the Dean of Students. Find out how she might respond to the following questions, and how you could support her interests.

⇒ Why is student mental health/suicide prevention important to her?

⇒ What are her goals for student mental health/suicide prevention (or for an issue she is concerned about)?

⇒ What data does she collect related to mental health issues (or an issue she is concerned about), and how does she get that data?

You: I'm focusing on suicide prevention. I would like to learn more about your interests and goals.

Dean of Students: I'm concerned about the college's retention rates. Students who are the first in their family to attend college (first-generation students) are less likely to graduate compared to other students.

You: I wonder if these students are having trouble adjusting to college, which could be affecting their mental health and leading them to drop out?

Dean of Students: We would like to maintain or improve our retention rates, especially among first-generation students.

You: Improving students' mental health may be one way to achieve this goal. We can also look at colleges similar to ours and see what programs they've created to reach first-generation students.

Dean of Students: We looked at data that we've been collecting over the past five years on retention rates.

You: Maybe we could hold focus groups for these students to find out how the college can better help them with any difficulties. We could also do key informant interviews with faculty and staff who work closely with these students to find out what they see.

What can I do about limited faculty/staff time?

Time and resources are common challenges. Often people have good intentions, but they don't have the time to collaborate due to competing demands. When partners are too busy, it's best to find ways to involve them that require less of a commitment. Also, keep in mind that time and resources can ebb and flow, so while a faculty or staff member may be less available or supportive right now, that may not be the case next year.

Here are examples from suicide prevention coordinators and how they addressed limited staff time:

- Example #1: I try to have realistic expectations and recognize whatever effort each person has contributed, even if it is just their verbal support. For example, I thank all my partners, since any support they provide is valuable.
- Example #2: I find ways for busy staff members to get involved that are less time-intensive. For example, going to periodic meetings often involves less time than doing a specific task, such as revising crisis protocols. I have also created smaller work groups so that people can focus on discrete tasks to make things more manageable.

- Example #3: When someone cannot partner or participate at all, then I ask if they could recommend someone in their place.
- Example #4: I look for outside providers who could partner with me if campus staff have limited availability.

Step 2: Involve partners when developing program goals

Involving stakeholders early in the process of developing program goals can help foster more buy-in for your work while also providing helpful direction. It is especially important to include members from the group or groups you plan to target with your efforts (e.g., particular student populations such as student veterans or LGBT students) to ensure that what you develop will be relevant and useful for them.

Once you have a clear sense of your goal(s), then you can begin to plan the programs you want to implement.

Following are some common questions about this step.

→ **Who should I involve when identifying program goals?**
→ **How should I handle conflicting priorities?**
→ **What if partners offer suggestions that aren't right for our campus?**

Who should I involve when identifying programs?

Involving stakeholders in the beginning of your planning process can help you get a better sense of the issues that are seen as most pressing on your campus, which could influence your prevention goals. Input from different stakeholders is essential so that you identify the right goals for your campus.

Here is an example:

In the past year, a number of international students at a large, diverse urban university had to be taken to the hospital for serious suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. None of these students had used the campus counseling center services.

The counseling center initially wanted to do an awareness campaign to increase the number of international students who use the campus counseling center services. They obtained input from the following stakeholders to determine if they had the right goal and strategy.

International Center Director: Many international students have difficulties adjusting to college. In addition to homesickness, they also face language and cultural adjustment issues. The Counseling Center and International Center should collaborate on programs, workshops, and support groups about these issues. More students may attend these events if they are held at the International Center and places other than the Counseling Center.

International students: It's tough adjusting to life in the United States and being far from home. Also, most international students on this campus speak Spanish or Chinese, and one reason they don't use the Counseling Center is that it has no Spanish- or Chinese-speaking counselors.

Counseling Center Director: Unfortunately, none of our counselors are bilingual, and we have no budget to hire additional staff. We may be able to establish MOUs with mental health providers in the community who speak Spanish and Chinese so students could be referred to them for individual counseling. Perhaps some of these providers would also be willing to come to campus to run workshops and support groups.

Based on the input from these stakeholders, they revised their goals and strategies as follows:

- Increase the number of international students seeking and obtaining help by providing referrals to off-campus providers who speak the students' native languages.
- Increase connectedness and support among international students by providing workshops and support groups on cultural barriers, homesickness, and mental health needs at the campus International Center to help them adjust to college.

How should I handle conflicting priorities?

On the surface, conflicting priorities can appear to be a significant barrier to forming partnerships, but they don't have to be. Try to understand other people's perspectives and what is important to them. Then reframe your own goal to match their priorities so they can see how it supports their own work.

Here is an example:

On this campus, the Mental Health Task Force priority is suicide prevention, but the Vice Presidents has a different priority, so the task force members need to try to figure out how their priorities could overlap.

Vice President: Suicide prevention is very important, but binge drinking is our priority right now. Too many students have been hospitalized for alcohol poisoning this year, and one student almost died from it. Parents are understandably upset about this, and so is the community.

Residence Life Staff/Member of the Mental Health Task Force: I think some of our students could be drinking because they feel isolated and want to fit in.

Mental Health Counselor/Member of the Mental Health Task Force: We know from last year's American College Health Association (ACHA) survey results for our campus that students who are depressed are more likely to engage in binge drinking.

Here are areas their priorities overlap:

- We want students to be healthy and safe.
- Students under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs are more at risk for a suicide attempt.
- Students may be drinking to self-medicate mental health problems.

The Vice President and Mental Health Task Force should work together because preventing binge drinking can also help prevent student suicide attempts and deaths.

What if partners offer suggestions that aren't right for our campus?

Some stakeholders who are involved in program planning may offer ideas or suggest strategies that aren't aligned with your goals. In fact, their suggestions may even conflict with the data gathered or the input from other stakeholders about what is needed on your campus.

Following is a two-part approach for addressing this situation:

1) **Verify this is the right goal or strategy.** Always go back to the data you have collected from your campus about which groups are most at risk for suicide and where program gaps may exist. It may help to show your stakeholders this information to give them a better sense of where efforts need to be focused.
2) **Validate the partner's suggestion.** Make sure your stakeholders feel that their concerns have been heard. If you aren't able to focus on their areas of concern with your project, provide suggestions whenever possible for how they could find other ways to address these issues.

Here is an example:

Imagine a partner recommended a goal and strategy that isn't right for your campus.

Partner: I think an important goal for our campus is to increase the number of faculty who know how to talk to students in distress and refer them to counseling.

So how about requiring all faculty members to take gatekeeper trainings?

You: Hmm… the data from our annual student mental health survey showed that students prefer to talk to their peers when they have problems. And from key informant interviews with faculty, we know that students rarely come to them with problems. Also, many faculty don't have time to participate in trainings. This suggestion may not be the best goal, but I want this partner to know that I value his ideas.

You: Actually, according to the student mental health survey we've administered over the past five years, students more often turn to their peers than faculty members when they're having difficulties. Based on these findings, perhaps we should train students, instead of faculty, so they will know how to refer their friends to counseling.

And, we could also offer brown bag lunches for interested faculty about how they could better support students' mental health. Then during the session, we can give them information on how to refer students to counseling, too.

Partner: That makes sense!

Step 3: Identify who can help carry out your programs

After you determine your goals, then begin to identify stakeholders who can help you implement your program. Who you choose could be based on political reasons, the department they work in, their area of expertise, or something specific that they bring to the table.

As you identify people to involve, also determine what you want to ask of each person. How they can help may be based on their role on campus, their knowledge or resources, their interactions with students, or how they could be impacted by your goal.

Following are some common questions about this step.

→ **Do I need to involve others with program development?**
→ **What if there are turf issues or challenging staff?**
→ **Who else could I involve?**

Do I need to involve others with program development?

Involving others when carrying out your program can help ensure it effectively reaches your audience. For example, partners can help promote and publicize a program, offer guidance on what works well and what doesn't with a specific audience, and monitor the effectiveness of your effort.

It's important to partner with people from your target audience. They may be staff, faculty, students, or specific student groups (e.g., veterans, LGBT students). Input from your target audience can help ensure your program is a success.

Here is an example:

One campus developed an awareness campaign aimed at educating students about the warning signs of suicide. Initially, they didn't involve students as partners.

Students not included as partners
Campus staff designed posters featuring the warning signs of suicide without any input from students, and put them on bulletin boards around campus. However, the designs weren't appealing to students, the the medical terminology was confusing to them, and the bulletin boards were already cluttered with other flyers.

Result: Very few students noticed the posters or learned the warning signs.

Students included as partners
In the second year, campus staff included students as partners early in the implementation process of the awareness campaign. A group of students selected the photos and language to use on a new set of posters and also identified unique eye-catching locations to hang the posters, such as bathroom stalls.

Result: Students talked about the posters, and more students referred their friends to counseling and/or sought help themselves.

What if there are turf issues or challenging staff?

Sometimes, turf issues arise that create barriers to building relationships. Personality differences or miscommunication can also impact collaboration.

If you face turf issues and challenging staff, it's understandable that you may want to avoid certain partnerships. However, sometimes these barriers can be overcome.

Below are suggestions that have worked for other campuses.

- **Articulate your work clearly**
  Articulate as clearly as possible what you are doing, what you need, and your process. This can help you appear less threatening and also help reduce potential miscommunication.
- **Work collaboratively**
  o Ask staff who may be pushing back on your efforts about their concerns and take time to listen to them. Consider how you could address their concerns in a meaningful way that doesn't hinder your efforts.
  o Work together to determine the goals of your work. This may mean compromising on some aspects you would like to see implemented. However, you will have a greater chance for success if your key stakeholders have bought into your effort.
- **Combine efforts**
  Sometimes a faculty or staff member becomes annoyed if you're performing a task that they usually perform or want to work on (such as developing crisis protocols). When this happens, try to work together on the task, rather than separately.
- **Offer them prestigious roles**
  Give the staff member an important or prestigious task. People often prefer roles in which they feel respected and valued. In some cases, you may need to let them take the lead in order to move forward.
- **Be realistic**
  Be realistic about your expectations and what you have control over. At some point, if you don't make any headway, you may need to let go of this potential partner and focus your energy elsewhere. When this happens, revisit your goals and objectives, and identify what you can move ahead on without that person's support. Or, you may need to let the partner take the lead if that will help your project advance.

Here is an example:

A campus suicide prevention program based in the Health & Wellness Department wants to implement an online screening program to identify students at risk. This will involve sending the screening results to counseling staff, who will then have to follow up with students at risk. Several key staff from the counseling

center oppose this effort. The center is already understaffed, and they are concerned that their staff will not have the time to follow up with students individually about their screening results in addition to their regular duties.

> Possible solutions:
> - Work with these key staff to devise a plan in which subgroups of students are invited to participate in the screening at different times to minimize potential demand on the counseling center.
> - Assist counseling center staff by identifying less burdensome methods for reviewing screening results.

Who else could I involve?

There are many stakeholders on campus and off who may be able to help you. Think outside the box for some unlikely partners you may not have initially considered. For ideas, look at the specific departments on your campus and courses of study, existing organizations in your community, and partnerships on other campuses.

Here is an example:

A campus is doing a means restriction campaign and wants to set up a prescription drop box to promote safe handling of medications so students in crisis don't have access to medications they could overdose on.

Below are some potential partners and how they might get involved in this means restriction campaign.

- **Nursing School** – The staff and students in this school may have an interest in promoting safe prescription drug use and disposal.
- **Environmental Sciences** – Since environmental student groups and this department may be concerned about medications that have been dumped into the toilet or sink getting into the water supply, they might want to promote this campaign.
- **Graphics Design and Communications** – The staff and students in these two departments could help develop promotional materials to publicize the campaign.
- **Public Health School** – The staff and students in this school may have an interest in learning how to evaluate public health campaigns such as this one.
- **Campus Security** – This department could provide consultation on the placement of the prescription drop box and assist with the safe disposal of any medications collected.

Step 4: Sustain partnerships

It's not always easy to involve people in suicide prevention, and it can be equally difficult to keep them involved. However, in any collaborative effort, it's vital to find ways to support your partners and keep them engaged. This is essential to sustaining your prevention efforts since you will not be as successful doing it alone.

Following are some common questions about this step.

→ **How do I keep my partners engaged?**
→ **What should I do when my partners' priorities shift?**
→ **What could I do to sustain a partnership off campus?**

How do I keep my partners engaged?

It can be challenging to keep stakeholders engaged in the long term due to competing demands and stretched resources. So, it's important to consider from the beginning of your program how you plan to keep stakeholders informed about the progress you make and how they can remain involved. Communicating broadly about your program's successes is also essential for maintaining buy-in from senior leadership and stakeholders.

Below are some ways other campuses have kept stakeholders engaged and supportive.

Frequently (Weekly/Monthly)

- Social media postings – Maintain a social media account (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and post program updates regularly to keep students informed about mental health programming and resources.
- E-mails or e-newsletters – Send out regular update e-mails or e-newsletters to faculty and staff partners that summarize key advancements and next steps.

Periodically

- Training and events – Invite on- and off-campus partners to participate in trainings or events.
- Check in with partners – Check in with faculty, staff, and student groups at the beginning of each semester about priorities.

Annually

- Appreciation events – Host an annual stakeholder appreciation event, during which you can discuss program progress and ways stakeholders can assist with future plans.
- MOU review – Check in annually with off-campus partners about the status of MOUs and whether any changes need to be made.

What should I do when partners' priorities shift?

When priorities or agendas shift, you may need to find other ways to collaborate. If your initial collaborative effort was successful and partners felt valued and respected, then they may be motivated and willing to collaborate again in other ways.

Learn about their new priorities, and identify how their current goals might overlap with your own. These new overlapping areas are where you will want to focus your efforts with your partners.

Here is an example:

In the past, you collaborated with the Wellness Center by assessing suicide risk and providing counseling referrals to students. But recently, the Wellness Center has shifted their priority.

Due to several recent sexual assaults, the Wellness Center has now made this issue its priority. Staff are focusing their efforts on providing sexual assault bystander trainings.

Your goals may still overlap
Even though the Wellness Center's priority has shifted, you still share a similar goal: encouraging peers and bystanders to take action if they see someone at risk of suicide *or* sexual assault.

Find new ways to collaborate
Work with the Wellness Center to add suicide warning signs into their bystander training, and help the center organize and promote these trainings.

What could I do to sustain a partnership off campus?

Even if you have some regular partners off campus, you may want to consider how these relationships could be strengthened to better serve your students.

Developing memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with some of your partners can be beneficial. An MOU is a formal contract between the campus and an agency that specifies how they will work together. It can also help sustain a partnership, especially through a period of staff turnover or budget constraints.

MOUs vary in length and formality, so work with your partners to identify what information should be documented through the MOU process.

Here are some tips about how to easily create an MOU.

Tip #1: Purpose
Start off the MOU by identifying the purpose. Focus this section on your shared goals and list specific, measurable objectives for each goal.

Tip #2: Roles and Responsibilities
Describe the partner's role as well as your campus' role. Provide enough information so that it's clear what each of you will do and how your roles and responsibilities relate to preventing suicide. Also include the name of the main contact as well as an alternate.

Tip #3: Communication
Be sure to acknowledge any policies that your campus and the partner has about confidentiality. Depending on the purpose of the MOU you may also want to include any parameters or decisions related to branding, publicity, or other aspects of communications.

Tip #4: Reporting and Evaluation
This section of the MOU helps facilitate accountability and sustainability. List any desired reporting requirements you or your partner has (e.g., progress reports, updates on successes and challenges) as well as the timing of them. Also provide details on any evaluations that will be conducted (e.g., who will do it, methods used).