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EDUCATION

How we did it: A reporting project looking at the mental health resources for college students

BY MONICA KAST, KENDALL STATON, ALEXIS BAKER, MAGGIE PHELPS, ALI COSTELLOW AND DANIEL KEHN
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Herald-Leader interns, alongside reporters and editors, worked on a project addressing the mental health needs of college students this summer. From left to right, interns Maggie Phelps, Alexis Baker, Ali Costellow and Daniel Kehn at King's Island. *Herald-Leader Interns*



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Over the course of eight weeks, a group of Lexington Herald-Leader reporters and interns set out to look at the mental health needs of Kentucky college students, and how colleges around the state are addressing those needs.

We began the project at the end of May, after interns from Western Kentucky University, the University of Kentucky and Ball State University joined the Herald-Leader newsroom. Full-time reporters Monica Kast and Kendall Staton led interns Alexis Baker, Ali Costellow, Daniel Kehn and Maggie Phelps to create a long list of questions related to how college students are seeking out and receiving mental health services.

At the center of our reporting were these questions: Why is there a rise in mental health needs among college students? What are the issues college students in Kentucky are facing now? How are universities addressing those mental health needs?





The four Herald-Leader Interns took on Kings Island last weekend to figure out what to ride, where to eat and what to see. *Herald-Leader Interns*

From there, we contacted 16 colleges and universities across the state, looking at public and private universities, as well as community and technical colleges. We wanted to examine offerings at universities of all sizes and located throughout the state, recognizing that the needs of students could vary across institutions.

“It’s rare for a group of summer interns to join forces, work collaboratively and tackle such an ambitious project,” said Richard Green, executive editor of the Herald-Leader.

“Their reporting, with contributions from Monica Kast and Kendall Staton, was revelatory. Kentucky, like other states, has seen a dramatic rise in the cases of students needing help with their emotional wellness. It’s also reassuring to see how campuses across the commonwealth are taking those trends seriously and directing more resources to meet the demands.”

The following institutions were initially contacted: Asbury University, Bellarmine University, Berea College, Bluegrass Community and Technical College, Centre College, Eastern Kentucky University, Georgetown College, Jefferson Community and Technical College, Kentucky State University, Morehead State University, Murray State University, Northern Kentucky University, Transylvania University, the University of Louisville, the University of Kentucky and Western Kentucky University.

Institutions were sent five initial questions about their mental health offerings:

- How are students at your school told about mental health resources available to them? Please be as specific as possible.
- Does your school have a counseling center for students? If so, how many counselors or therapists are employed? How many work full-time vs. part-time in the counseling center?
- What is the average caseload for each counselor?
- How many students sought out mental health services from the school during the 2023-24 school year? What does that number include (counseling, support groups, referred to another provider, etc.)?
- Has your school seen an increase in the number of students seeking out mental health services in recent years?

We received responses from 15 institutions, with only Asbury University declining to answer the initial questions. From there, we set up follow-up interviews, diving deeper into the offerings of individual schools. We also sought out mental health experts and resources to give an overview of the national mental health crisis and needs.

What we found revealed various mental health challenges faced by students across the state.

At the University of Louisville, the school had to find ways to support students in the aftermath of the 2020 killing of Breonna Taylor, and the months of protests taking place in Louisville. At Eastern Kentucky University, where one-third of students come from the poorest parts of Kentucky, counselors are trained in various forms of trauma therapy.

Jefferson Community and Technical College and Bluegrass Community and Technical College must come up with creative ways to meet the needs of their unique student bodies, who may be single parents or students experiencing homelessness.

Included in this project are four stories, each addressing mental health needs of students across the state.

Here's the data we got from schools across the state:

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DANIEL KEHN

LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER

   810-623-2577

ALEXIS BAKER

LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER

   (859) 382-2848

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