

January 18, 2021

Dear Committee Chair McIntosh and committee members:

My daughter graduated from St. Mary's College of Maryland in the spring of 2018. She suffers from panic disorder and depression and had to take several breaks from college because of these challenges. Here is what I have learned as a parent from her experience:

- The “support” that Maryland’s colleges and universities offer in theory is in reality far from adequate. During my daughter’s freshman year, I discovered that the 24-hour “student mental health line” St. Mary’s advertised as a college program was a 1-800 number for a national suicide hotline, unaffiliated in any way with the college.
- Today, the school’s “crisis response” page suggests calling a grab-bag of “resources,” none of which are trained to deal with psychiatric emergencies. These include campus police, the nearest ER (15 miles away, where the practice is to hand out pills and send students back to campus), various local “minute clinics,” a pro-life counseling and adoption services group, Planned Parenthood, and the same 1-800 suicide hotlines I saw four years ago.
- There is a reference to a “student affairs on-call professional,” but in four years on campus my daughter never knew who this person was or knew of anyone who had availed him/herself of this person’s services. This is despite experiencing and witnessing many incidents where such services were needed—including one incident in which she helped prevent a depressed classmate from jumping from a fourth-floor window.
- Despite the plethora of online/telehealth mental health services available today, St. Mary’s offers no links to any such services.
- When my daughter had to drop out at the end of the first semester of her senior year due to severe depression, in early December, she was told that she had to get all her course work in by January 15 or she would be required to repeat the entire semester. The school was inflexible on this point, despite the fact that a new medication regimen often takes weeks or months to take full effect, and in the meantime she was unable to concentrate enough to do her schoolwork. It was only when I asked if this was the way the school would deal with a student who was in a full body cast due to a car accident that the Dean of Student Services, Joanne Goldwater, seemed to grasp that the school policy did not treat mental health and physical health challenges with the same concern. In my view such inflexibility is a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- On their own, the state’s colleges and universities have little short-term incentive to deal with student mental health issues; alumni are much more eager to contribute money for a new sports complex than for mental health services. St. Mary’s administrators point to the long list of “resources” I’ve mentioned above as proof of their commitment to supporting students but seem uninterested in assessing how well these “resources” actually work. The answer is: not well.

Thank you for hearing me today.

Tracy Content, 13502 Hoffman Court, Bowie, MD /41099107838