

Requesting an Assessment for Student Mental Health Concerns

There will, inevitably, be instances in which a student's functioning and/or behaviors raise questions that relate to whether there is a psychological concern or psychiatric condition that warrants assessment of that student or action by administrators attending to all students' safety and well-being. At times, requests are made to Counseling and Career Services for such assessments, and other times a provider in the private practice sector is enlisted. As part of our commitment to maintaining a supportive campus community, we at CCS offer the following considerations related to requesting an assessment for students exhibiting mental health concerns.

When deciding to refer a student to a referral for an assessment, there are a number of important considerations that can help you address your concerns while also meeting the student's and campus needs. These fall under 3 broad questions: 1) Who should perform the assessment, and why? 2) What action or decision is the assessment expected to inform? and 3) What specific questions are you needing the clinician performing the assessment to answer?

In order to answer these questions in a manner that is consistent with clinical, ethical, and legal dimensions of having a student undergo any kind of psychological or mental health assessment, several considerations must be incorporated into the process. Our goals in this document are to 1) articulate the various roles/responsibilities of all parties involved in an assessment request, and 2) introduce legal and ethical considerations related to requested and/or mandated assessment of a student's psychological functioning, and 3) review the implications of pursuing/utilizing the campus counseling center to perform evaluations of students at the request of administrators at the college.

- 1) [Articulate the various roles/responsibilities of all parties involved in an assessment request.](#)
 - *Role of the Administrator:*
 - *Role of the Counseling Center (including the clinicians employed there):*
 - *Role of the Clinician performing the Assessment/Evaluation:*
 - *Role of the Student:*
- 2) [Introduce legal and ethical considerations related to requested and/or mandated assessment of a student's psychological functioning.](#)
 - Identify and clarify and potential conflicts of interests to all parties.
 - Communicate, in unambiguous terms, who has been identified as "the client" of the clinician conducting the assessment.
 - Clarify the limitations of what an assessment can offer.
 - Emphasize the importance of having clear questions the assessment is expected to answer.
 - Specify what [function the assessment is serving](#) and the impact on all involved parties and confidentiality implications for each function
 - A campus gatekeeper function
 - A counseling/psychotherapy intake function
 - An acute-crisis safety assessment function
- 3) [Review the implications of pursuing/utilizing the campus counseling center to perform evaluations of students at the request of administrators at the college.](#)

Each of these are explored in more detail in the following pages. For your convenience, click on the headings above to in order to see more content on each of the above considerations.

Articulate the various roles/responsibilities of all parties involved in an assessment request.

- *Role of the Administrator:* Responding to the needs of student about whom an assessment is being sought, attending to the needs of faculty, staff, and student impacted by this student, carrying responsibility to ensure a safe, healthy and uncompromised learning environment for all students.
- *Role of the Counseling Center (including the clinicians employed there):* To be available to provide counseling and crisis intervention services to the students, without compromise to the actual or potential counseling relationships between clients and the center by avoidable conflicts of interest.
- *Role of the Clinician performing the Assessment/Evaluation:* To provide an assessment/evaluation addressing the inquiry provided the referring party, qualified by clinical, ethical, and legal standards guiding assessment, including providing informed consent to the student about all the implications of the assessment impacting the student.
- *Role of the Student:* To make informed decisions regarding whether and how to adhere to the policies and requirements related to eligibility to attend the institution, including whether to comply with a mandated mental health or forensic evaluation or to accept the consequences of failing/refusing to do so.

Introduce legal and ethical considerations related to requested and/or mandated assessment of a student's psychological functioning.

It is important to bear in mind that any ethical mental health provider that is asked to conduct an assessment will be guided by legal and ethical mandates that require certain protocols and communications prior to conducting an assessment or evaluation of a student as required by and sought by our administrators (such as the Dean for Academic Affairs). This includes, but is not limited to:

1. **Identify and clarify and potential conflicts of interests to all parties involved** so that the student can make an informed decision about how the various involved parties can impact the student (in either a helpful or adversarial manner, or both).
2. **Communicate**, in unambiguous terms, **who has been identified as "the client"** of the clinician conducting the assessment.
3. **Clarify the limitations of what an assessment can offer**, specifying that licensed mental health providers cannot offer conclusive predictions of specific future behaviors or reach broad conclusions in poorly defined contexts. Examples of questions that will typically not be answered with any confident assertions: "*Will this student engage in violent behavior?*" or "*Is this student capable of functioning in an academic environment without supervision?*". Generally speaking, "yes/no" questions are unlikely to be answered with conclusive assertions.
4. **Emphasize the importance of having clear questions the assessment is expected to answer**, informed by the decision being made as informed by the policies and regulations that guide the practice of the administrator pursuing the assessment.
5. **Specify what function the assessment is serving and the impact on all involved parties and confidentiality implications for each function**
 - a. **A campus gatekeeper function**, where the clinician's assessment informs whether the student can be expected to function/participate in the activities and requirements of university/college life without risk of harm to self or others or without significant disruption to the learning environment, jeopardizing the rights of other students to be unimpeded in their pursuits.
 - i. The administrator in this context is usually "the client" who will receive the findings of the assessment/evaluation. Ethical clinicians will inform the client of this at the onset of the assessment as part of reviewing confidentiality limitations of the assessment.
 - ii. The impact of the findings can include allowing the student to remain on campus, removing the student from the campus, or stipulating requirements to the student in order to remain on campus.

- b. A counseling/psychotherapy intake function, where the clinician assesses in order to make a diagnosis and treatment recommendations to address needs of that student. that will be offered to the student.
 - i. The student in this context is “the client” who will receive the findings of the assessment/evaluation. The referring administrator (or other parties) will only receive findings if the student provides a written release of information authorization.
 - ii. Ethical clinicians will consult with the student the implications of sharing findings with other parties in terms of broadening a support system vs. maintaining privacy to avoid risks associated with disclosure.
 - iii. The impact of the assessment findings includes various possibilities including: conclusion that intervention is not currently warranted or necessary, implementation of treatment/counseling, referral to a provider off campus, and/or implementation of safety measures if the assessment yields imminent risk of harm to self or others.
- c. An acute-crisis safety assessment function, in which the clinician assesses whether the student poses an imminent threat to self or others.
 - i. The student being assessed in this context is “the client” who will receive the findings of the assessment. The referring party will only receive findings if the student provides a written authorization for release of information, specific to what the client/student permits other parties to know.
 - ii. If the student is deemed at high risk of imminent harm to self or other, the findings of the assessment may involve parties needed to secure the safety of the student or those identified as being in danger. This might include family members, campus or local law enforcement, or local hospitals/crisis stabilization centers or other mobile assessment services associated with accessing emergency intervention services, depending on the assessment findings of the clinician.
 - iii. The impact of the assessment includes conclusion that no services appear to be currently warranted or necessary, recommendations to access counseling center services, recommendations to accept referral to appropriate outpatient services, or steps to ensure safety in the case of imminent risk of harm to self/others (see *ii*, above.)

6. Review the implications of pursuing/utilizing the campus counseling center to perform evaluations of students at the request of administrators at the college.

It is important to keep in mind, when identifying who to request a mental health or behavioral assessment of a student from, what the primary functions of the campus counseling center (and the staff members who work there) is at the college. The counseling center must be recognized as the campus resource that provides counseling and crisis intervention services and community level interventions rooted in a safe and trustworthy relationship that ensures students’ privacy and confidentiality. Therefore, to have any staff member at the campus counseling services perform assessments/evaluations that may determine student eligibility to remain enrolled, be permitted to live in campus residence, and/or engage in the campus community immediately locates the center and the staff member in a clear conflict of interest and/or dual roles situations. These must be avoided whenever possible for 2 primary reasons:

- a. Because, especially on small campuses with limited local resources, the counseling center must be understood of serving not only current clients but also previous and potential clients in the student body of the college, all of whom may become reluctant to utilize services when they may need them out of fear that the center reports findings of assessment to administrators that have the authority to remove or limit their access to the college or components of the college experience. This places some students at risk of harm and or inability to function without needed services. Student may also inadvertently generalize this distrust to mental health professionals in general, further impeding the utilization of needed or beneficial services.

- b. Failing to avoid conflicts of interest or dual role situations with clients when possible is a violation of ethical guidelines of Psychologists, Licensed Clinical Social Workers, and Licensed Professional Counselors, some of which are incorporated into state law, and are also prohibited or strongly encouraged by accrediting bodies and organizations that function to uphold highest standards of care, such the American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers, the American Counseling Association, and the International Association of Counseling Services (IACS).