



Student Government Assembly
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To: New York University (NYU) Student Body

CC: Concerned Parties

Dr. Andrew Hamilton, *President*

Dr. Katherine Fleming, *Provost*

Dr. Zoe Ragouzeos, *Associate Vice President, Sexual Misconduct Support Services; Assistant Vice President, Student Mental Health; Executive Director, Counseling and Wellness Services*

Dr. Carlo Ciotoli, *Associate Vice President, NYU Student Health - GNU; Executive Director, Student Health Center*

Robyn Weiss, *LMSW, Assistant Vice President, Student Accessibility; Senior Director, Moses Center for Student Accessibility*

Rafael Rodriguez, *Associate Vice President and Dean of Students*

Lynne P. Brown, *Senior Vice President for University Relations and Public Affairs*

Steve Heuer, *Assistant Vice President for Government Affairs*

Brad Hoylman, *New York State Senator; Chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee*

Subject: Letter of Support Concerning Mental Health Accommodations

Dear NYU Student Body,

We hope that this semester has been going well and that you have been able to adjust to the circumstances of the times as smoothly as possible. It is truly an extraordinary and unprecedented time that we find ourselves in, faced with pressing challenges of inequality, racism, political divisiveness, and a global public health crisis. Though the coronavirus pandemic was certainly a catalyst in unleashing a wave of social issues, it is evident that our collective effort, resilience, and dedication have restored some semblance of normality that we have yearned for. Yet, we acknowledge the difficulties we still face while grappling with these issues. Accompanying the global pandemic is another health crisis — that regarding mental health and wellbeing. Mental health issues and their consequences continue to be both a pervasive and central topic of public discourse across many educational institutions, including our own. Nevertheless, the voices of students themselves, especially college students, are often excluded from the conversation. Thus, we hope that this letter serves as an acknowledgment of your sentiments and addresses a possible solution to help remedy mental health issues that you face in not only your academic endeavors but also in your personal life.

Mental health and its consequences have long been an overarching issue, and the onset of the current pandemic has only exacerbated the crisis. During the pandemic and up until now, students were confronted by a multitude of stressors — the sudden and abrupt shift from

in-person to virtual learning, social isolation and distancing, quarantine guidelines, anxiety about contracting the virus and unintentionally spreading it to family and loved ones, and much more.

Indeed, these circumstances have had a cumulative and deleterious effect on mental health. A survey conducted by the U.S. Center for Disease Control in examining the pervasive effects of Covid-19 showed that among individuals who are ≥ 18 years old, at least 40.9% reported having at least one adverse mental or behavioral health condition, with symptoms that range from anxiety or depressive-related spectra to that of trauma- and stressor-related symptoms.¹ Furthermore, a research study conducted by a group of researchers examining the effects of Covid-19 on college students attending a large public university in New York City showed that at least half of the respondents had been experiencing forms of anxiety and/or depression coupled with financial instability and housing insecurity.² Regardless of the nature of higher education institutions, it is noticeable that college students are deeply impacted by the negative effects of Covid-19. These statistics provide an insight into how widespread the issues regarding mental health are and the urgency that it necessitates. Students cannot be asked to focus on their academic studies if their mental health and well-being are not being taken care of first. In response to this problem, many state governments have implemented an ingenious solution that not only tackles mental health but also does not disrupt student education — mental health accommodation days. We believe that this is something that should be adopted here at NYU.

The premise of mental health accommodation days or mental health days is simple — students are allowed to be excused from classes should they feel that their current mental health may impede their academic learning. At the state level, many pieces of legislation have been introduced and passed as possible solutions, and many state legislators understand the importance of giving equal importance to mental health concerns as to physical health concerns. About the current policies' lack of accommodation for mental health concerns in the workplace, California State Senator Anthony Portantino named it “a flaw in the education code” in 2021³, and in 2019 New York Senator Brad Hoylman advocated for mental health accommodation days for New York students in recognition of “the major public health crisis” that plagues young New

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, August 13). *Mental health, substance use, and suicidal ideation during the COVID-19 pandemic - United States, June 24–30, 2020*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved December 6, 2021, from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>.

² Jones, H. E., Manze, M., Ngo, V., Lamberson, P., & Freudenberg, N. (2021). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on college students' health and Financial Stability in New York City: Findings from a population-based sample of City University of New York (CUNY) students. *Journal of Urban Health*, 98(2), 187–196. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-020-00506-x>

³ Gewertz, C. (2021, June 24). *Why more schools are excusing student absences for Mental Health*. Education Week. Retrieved December 6, 2021, from <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/why-more-schools-are-excusing-student-absences-for-mental-health/2021/06>.

Yorkers⁴. Furthermore, in 2009 Minnesota had added mental illness or mental/behavioral health reasons to the list of reasons for excused absences, with Utah and Oregon following suit in 2018 and 2019, respectively.⁵ In the face of the pandemic, other states have either passed new laws allowing excused absences for mental health reasons, expanded on previous laws that permitted them, or currently debating and crafting legislation related to this topic.

Specifically, the New York State Senate Bill S563 spearheaded and introduced by New York State Senator Brad Hoylman (D-Manhattan) would **require school districts to consider mental health concerns as a valid reason to be excused from schools**.⁶ Emphasizing the dire need for this accommodation, the bill reads: “This legislation would remove barriers that cause kids to hide their mental health struggles, and encourage honest conversations between kids, their parents, and school faculty about mental health.” Although these pieces of legislation only address the concerns of public education, students attending private institutions undoubtedly face the same challenges. As such, this underlying concept of mental accommodation days has been adopted by some private universities without the need for governmental overreach. The Computer Science Department at the University of California, Berkeley has successfully implemented slip days as a means for students to submit academic assignments after their due date without penalty should they have a minor illness or scheduling issues.⁷ We strongly believe that an analogous solution should be adopted here at NYU, but specifically catered to mental health. The intricacies of this proposal remain uncertain, but we are committed to creating an effective model and ensuring that the process is seen through.

We are excited to see how NYU can be an exemplary force in leading changes in the way private universities can effectively address the mental health concerns of their student body. As such, we know this letter is only a first step in the Student’s Government Assembly’s continued advocacy for implementing these types of accommodations. In the coming semester, we are looking forward to engaging in dynamic conversations with the Office of the Provost and deans, and directors of schools and institutes to create a more equitable, inclusive culture surrounding mental health at NYU.

⁴Elsen-Rooney, M. (2019, September 4). New York students would be able to skip school for mental health reasons under new bill. *nydailynews.com*. Retrieved December 6, 2021, from <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/ny-mental-health-school-absence-20190905-hb6agmedanad7hnztxbvmylquq-story.html>.

⁵ Gewertz, Catherine. Why More Schools Are Excusing Student Absences for Mental Health. 2021

⁶ *Ny State Senate bill S563*. NY State Senate. (2021, April 14). Retrieved December 6, 2021, from <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2021/S563>.

⁷ *A guide to handling student absences due to minor illness*. A Guide to Handling Student Absences Due to Minor Illness | Center for Teaching & Learning. (n.d.). Retrieved December 6, 2021, from <https://teaching.berkeley.edu/guide-handling-student-absences-due-minor-illness>.



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Sincerely,

Ana Roudebush

Member of Student Government Assembly as Student Senator-at-Large for Mental Health, Eating Disorders/Disordered Eating, and Student-Athletes

Johnson Liu

Member of Student Government Assembly's Health and Wellness Committee

Fill out this form to sign onto this letter:

<https://forms.gle/n9HC3jyq9ysLqN1q6>

In consultation with:

NYU Student Government Assembly's Health and Wellness Committee

Organizations:

NYU Student Senators Council

NYU Student Government Assembly