

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Carrie Brown:

I think one of the things that we're seeing, not just at Syracuse, but across the board when we look at our national data on college mental health, is we're really seeing an uptick in social anxiety. One of the things that people are saying is their number one thing that they're worried about is how other people perceive them. So when we think of social anxiety, sometimes we think of people being very introverted, and certainly that can be a part of it. But what was really interesting is what students were sharing is they were really more worried about how their peers perceive them. I think social media plays a role into that. There's this expectation that everybody is living an extraordinary life and everybody is doing everything the right way and looks great all the time. I think that that distorts the reality that most of us are really underneath it all just wanting to connect and wanting to be happy. It's a challenge sometimes, I think, not to get in our own heads. That filter prevents us from being our authentic self, which prevents us from connecting.

John Boccacino:

Our guest on the 'Cuse Conversations podcast today is Carrie Brown, the counseling director at the Barnes Center at The Arch here at Syracuse University. Carrie also serves on the Counseling Sexual and Relationship Violence Response Team, and she is here today to pull the curtain back on a very pertinent topic that affects many of our students and honestly, faculty and staff members here at Syracuse University too. The topic is social anxiety that comes from making new friends and finding that community here on campus. Carrie, before we dive into this week's topic, give our audience a little background on yourself. What are your primary responsibilities as counseling director?

Carrie Brown:

Sure. Yeah, so first and foremost, thank you for having me. I'm the director of counseling, as you mentioned, and I've been with the university for 11 years. So I've been in the role of director for I think going on two or three years. But I've held a lot of various roles in our counseling center, from staff therapist to assistant director, to clinic director, to now the director. So a lot of my role is around really supporting mental health and wellness efforts across the campus community. So while I am the director of our department and oversee our department, I work a lot with campus stakeholders and partners as well.

So a lot of what I do often is more external facing actually and outside of the center in terms of really working with the campus community to think about mental health as a community-wide responsibility. Here at the Barnes Center, we really see mental health as a holistic way of treating mental health and really thinking of it as a public health initiative. So our mindset is certainly the people of Barnes Center Counseling are the experts in the area and are the providers, but it's the campus community that's working together with one another to really create a mentally well campus for our students and so-

John Boccacino:

When you say the word holistic development, that gets thrown around a lot to mean a lot of different things to different departments or representatives here on campus. What role does a student's wellness play in their development once they're here on campus?

Carrie Brown:

Yeah, I think it's huge. Yeah, I agree. I think holistic is thrown around a lot and really when we think about it from the Barnes Center lens, we're really thinking about how people are holistic beings in terms of your mental health and physical health and all that comes in together. You can't really foster one without the other. So we really think that there are four main things that we're looking at when it comes to health and wellness, and one is sense of belonging because we know that that is huge, sense of belonging, sense of community. One is having some sense of purpose, so what gives your life meaning? What makes you get out of bed in the morning. The other is looking at physical health, really looking at how do you take care of your body through exercise, through nutrition, through sleep, through different health initiatives, and the other is emotional health.

Certainly, when we think about emotional health, we can think about mental health of course, but it's also about how well do you manage stress? How well do you regulate your emotions? How well do you just work with the adversities that we all face in life? Let's face it, going through this life where you're going to run into adversity and challenge and you really need those skills to be able to make it through those adversities and those challenges. So I think when we think about holistic health and wellness, we're really thinking about it in that lens and those ideas. I think we see the campus community as really playing a part in that, not just the Barnes Center, but our faculty, our staff, our students, and how they're able to cultivate wellness through those areas.

John Boccacino:

What was it about this opportunity and this campus, what drew you to Syracuse in the first place?

Carrie Brown:

Well, first and foremost, just to be transparent, I am from central New York. I actually grew up in western New York, but I was born in Auburn, originally, lived in a really small town called Brock, which a lot of people probably don't know where that is. It's near Moravia, New York, which is about 30 minutes, I think, near Auburn, but grew up west of Rochester in a town called Brockport and really wanted to be closer to my family. I had been away for, gosh, at that point a decade about getting my education and doing some internships in other states and really wanted to relocate back to Upstate New York. I love it here. That's really where I feel the most at home, so that's what drew me to Syracuse initially. As I mentioned, I started here 11 years ago as a staff therapist and then just fell in love with the culture of the university, especially our Student Experience Team and portfolio.

Just thinking about how much the people who work in Student Experience really do care about the student and how we're creating such innovative and new ways of really looking at things. I've never been bored in my job. It always feels like there's something new to explore, something new to try. I love being in higher ed. I think there's so much passion and excitement and learning and curiosity, and so it just keeps me growing and keeps me being challenged. I'm somebody who likes to grow and be challenged. I don't like to be stagnant and feeling like I'm not doing meaningful work. I feel like the work that we're doing here at Barnes Center is extraordinarily meaningful. So that's what drew me here, and that's what keeps me here.

John Boccacino:

If you had to encapsulate it, knowing your love for higher education and knowing that this is a topic that really has been on the rise, this mental wellness, this mental well-being is a critical aspect of students' developments, what is it about... before we dive into some of the problems, let's look at some of the

positives here. What do we do really well on campus when it comes to addressing issues of mental health and mental well-being?

Carrie Brown:

I think here at the Barnes Center, we always joke that we're a group of perfectionists, and we are. So I think we often are always looking for what can we improve? But I think what is really humbling is, so I travel across the country to a lot of national conferences, American College Health Association, national conferences for other directors of counseling centers. When we talk about what we do here at Syracuse in terms of what we're doing with integrated health and wellness to address mental health, we're at the forefront of that. It's really a movement that we're starting to see more nationally because we do recognize that therapy is one piece of the puzzle. It can be a very important piece of the puzzle for a lot of people, but it is one piece of the puzzle. So what we're doing really well here, I think, is we're creating a lot of different opportunities for people to work on health and wellness that's not only what you might think of as a traditional western model.

So talk therapy can feel very traditional, very Western, certain medical models can feel that way. So we're really branching out in looking at how do we offer diverse experiences? So for example, we have a person on our staff named Diane Shenandoah who refers to herself as one who helps them, and Diane provides Indigenous healing practices to our campus community. So doing different practices for all of our students, certainly our Indigenous and Native students, but any student can work with Diane on a variety of different holistic health and wellness opportunities from an Indigenous lens to get a different perspective on how they may care for themselves and try something new. But I think we've also created a lot of great opportunities with looking at how to infuse recreation into mental health. There's so much research out there that indicates that exercise is really profoundly impactful for moderate levels of anxiety and depression.

Oftentimes, the research is telling us it's actually more effective than medication, and so we're really looking at how do we take advantage of the great services that we have here in recreation and pair that with mental health? So we refer students to personal training. If they get referred from counseling, they get three free sessions. A lot of people sometimes are like, "I don't know about the gym. I'm a little unsure about that." So it's a nice foot in the door and a way to maybe help answer those questions of, "How do I use the equipment? What do I do for anxiety and depression? What's the best type of exercise for that?" We do a series called the Adventure-based Counseling Series, which is between recreation counseling and health promotion, and it is the group therapy series that involves using the climbing wall and going out to our outdoor adventure course. It's challenge by choice, but it's a way to really get in touch with your body, build connection with other students and then find ways to manage things like anxiety in a really unique way.

So I think we do those unique things really, really well. I also think we do the very, what you might think of basic traditional therapy things really, really well as well. We've been fortunate to be able to recruit and retain a very diverse staff in terms of identity but also discipline. So we have psychologists, social workers, marriage and family therapists, licensed mental health counselors. So they all come in with a different perspective from how they were trained, and we have people of various different identities speaking different languages. So I think we're able to offer really unique perspective to our students because I think our counselors really reflect our student body. We see that across the Barnes Center, not just in counseling that because we have a really diverse staff here, there's 140 people on the staff in the Barnes Center that we're able to hopefully connect with our students on a different level because they're going to be able to meet with a variety of different people from a variety of different backgrounds who are really expertise in the area.

John Boccacino:

It's reassuring to hear the wealth of resources, but also the diversified approach that we take to the mental health. Before we go a little further on down the rabbit hole, I want to ask you a bit of a personal question about this topic 'cause it's obvious this is a passion of yours, and our students and our faculty and staff benefit from it. Where did that passion come from for you? Was there a seminal moment that led you down this path?

Carrie Brown:

Sure. It's funny you say that. You always reflect and you're like, "How did I get here?" Some of my earliest recollections are, I remember when I was 10 years old, I wrote something, and I found this later as an adult and it said that I was going to cure AIDS and end racism. I was like, "Well, that's pretty ambitious. That's probably not going to happen." But I've always been somebody, I think, who's a very empathetic person and somebody who really, really cares about other human beings and wanting to, I know it sounds cliché, but wanting to help people. I feel like that's been deeply ingrained probably from my parents because they're pretty amazing people, and I think that they really ingrained in myself and my brother to care about other people. So I think it started there.

Then in seventh grade, I was voted to be a peer mentor in my middle school by my peers, so they all picked somebody that they thought they could trust and they could go talk to. So it's been a stepping stone to counseling. Instead of going to a counselor, you would meet with a peer mentor and try to work out whatever situation you were struggling with. I was like, "Wow, that was really pretty cool." I went to a fairly large high school, almost 400 students, and to think that you were chosen out of a small group of people to be someone that your peers felt like that they could trust or that they thought would be helpful to them.

So I think that's where it started early on and then certainly fostered through my college experiences. I went to Nassar University it is now, but when I went there, it was Nassar College in Rochester and majored in psych there. Really started out, I think initially thinking I wanted to go into academia, but then in grad school, really starting to see the connection you make with clients as a therapist. So my love of the work started as a therapist. Then over my transition through different roles here, really recognizing for me that while I still love therapy and I still see students in that capacity, even to this day, I was really excited about, is there an additional impact that I can have, and what does that look like, and how do I help mentor other people into having that passion as well?

John Boccacino:

I want to pivot on the podcast to the student piece of it. When it comes to what we offer here at the Barnes and what you and your staff will provide for our students, there's a lot of questions that students have as they're finding their way. It's a large campus that can be very intimidating. So what advice would you have starting off for students as they're trying to find that community here on campus?

Carrie Brown:

I agree with you. I think it can be, I know that the student body can be larger than some of our students' hometowns. It's coming to this realization that you're in this big place and there's so many people and there are so many opportunities, and I agree with you. I think sometimes it feels like there's so many items on the menu you don't know where to start. Makes me think about that big book like the Cheesecake Factory has, and you're like, "I don't know what I want. There's too much to choose from." I think it can feel that way sometimes for sure, especially when you're first coming to college. I think

something to think about is as hard as this is, is to recognize that it's not going to happen always instantaneously, and that's okay 'cause I think we forget that when we were in high school, it took us some time to cultivate the relationships we had with our friends.

A lot of times, maybe these are people you went through elementary and middle school together, or you at least had four years of high school with together. It wasn't necessarily instantaneous then either, but I think there's this pressure that students feel to find community and find connection really quickly, and I get that because it's so important, and we are social creatures. Psychologically, we are driven to connection. It is one of the most important parts of the human experience. It keeps us psychologically healthy, it keeps us physically healthy. So I get there's a lot of pressure to make really fast friends, but I think what happens is that community can be found in so many places. I think sometimes for students, there's this feeling of, "If I don't find my friends within the first few weeks or my community within the first few weeks, it's never going to happen."

I can say just anecdotally from being here for 11 years, I've seen students find community that they were surprised they found in their senior year. While it feels sad to go, "Oh, my gosh, it took me so long to find this," it's still really, really meaningful to have those opportunities and we all change. You might not always keep the friends that you had your first year, they might become acquaintances and then you might make different friends. So I think there are so many opportunities. I think what we need to think about is, how do I gently challenge myself to take advantage of some of those opportunities and get out there and make connection. That can look like joining a club for sure, but it could also be coming to the Barnes Center of Fitness class.

It could be joining sports clubs. It could be through your on-campus job. So I think there's a lot of different spaces that students can connect and find their community. I think our Intercultural Collective and Schine is a great place for a lot of students to find connections with people who look like them or have similar identities to them. I think it's about finding similar interests and finding your people that feel like they get you. There's no surefire guaranteed way to do it aside from getting out there and trying to connect with people. It might not always work the first time around. But what I see, like I said just from my time here, is students are able to find community even if it's not necessarily within those first two weeks.

John Boccacino:

Do you find that one of the mistakes people make is they want to fit in so they'll change maybe something about themselves, a value, a trait to try to fit in to find that friendship at the sake of who they might be at the core?

Carrie Brown:

Yeah, I think that that certainly can happen. I think sometimes there can feel like a pressure to think, "Well, this is what everybody's doing here." But I think what we know and we see at the counseling center is there's actually a lot of diversity in how people are connecting. This is certainly a great choice for people, but not for everybody, but we'll hear, "Well, everyone here is involved in a fraternity or a sorority." While there's a large portion of the campus that is really appealing for them, there are also a lot of students who aren't involved in that and find connections through other ways.

So I think if you do try to force a connection, it usually doesn't end up panning out as you hoped. That being said, I think it's good to take healthy risks and try something that maybe you're like, "Oh, I don't know," because you might try to find out you actually do really enjoy it and do really connect with that group of people. But I think trying to change fundamentally who you are to connect with a group often

isn't successful because at the core of it, you have to really feel like it's important for you. If it doesn't really feel that way, it's hard to fake it, if that makes sense.

John Boccacino:

What are some other mistakes or things that you see students doing that you would probably tell them not to do when it comes to finding that community?

Carrie Brown:

Yeah, I think sometimes it can be really hard to actually go places alone. So I think a lot of times if they don't have somebody to go to with something, they won't go. I think that that can end up being a mistake. While I understand the appeal of being like, "I at least feel like I need to know somebody," but I think that's where sometimes the beauty of some of our staff and our student staff, like our residence advisors, our different people who work on campus can perhaps be that bridge. They could be that person maybe that goes with you to that event. But I have heard that a lot of students will say, "Well, I don't even have anyone to go with, so I'm not going." I think that that can really be a missed opportunity. Believe me, I'm not saying that's easy. I understand the discomfort of walking into a room and not knowing anybody. I think that is a universal experience for a lot of people to go, "Ooh, I don't know anybody here. I'm not sure what to do."

But I think it's a great opportunity to meet new people, especially if it's an interest that you're really wanting to explore. I would hate for someone to miss an opportunity because they feel like they can't explore that by themselves. I would say the other thing sometimes is staying too connected to the people that aren't here, if that makes sense. While you need to foster, of course, your relationships that you have with your friends back home and family members, I think it can be easy to fall into, "I'm just going to be texting those people all the time or messaging them all the time, and I'm not going to be present here because maybe it is scary and it's big, and that's my comfort human nature to go to what's familiar." So I think that that can be a mistake too because then you're not really physically present, and you're missing maybe those opportunities to connect with the people who are actually here with you.

John Boccacino:

Is it normal for students to struggle with that confident level of trying to find friends and find that 'cause not the easiest thing in the world these days to go out there and make new friends?

Carrie Brown:

Absolutely. I think one of the things that we're seeing not just at Syracuse, but across the board when we look at our national data on college mental health is we're really seeing an uptick in social anxiety. One of the things that people are saying is their number one thing that they're worried about is how other people perceive them. So when we think of social anxiety, sometimes we think of people being very introverted, and certainly that can be a part of it, like a fear of public speaking or all these different things that might come to mind. But what was really interesting is what students were sharing is they were really more worried about how their peers perceive them.

I think social media plays a role into that. There's this expectation that everybody is living an extraordinary life and everybody is doing everything the right way and looks great all the time. I think that that distorts the reality that most of us are really underneath it all just wanting to connect and wanting to be happy. It's a challenge sometimes, I think, not to get in our own heads about overthinking, "Well, how did that person think about what I said? How did I sound in that moment?" That filter

prevents us from being our authentic self, which prevents us from connecting. We're all going to make mistakes. We're humans, right?

John Boccacino:

Sure.

Carrie Brown:

Sometimes you might do something awkward at a party or at an event, but I think it's being able to be kind to yourself. I think self-compassion is so important, but it's also hard to cultivate because I think we as a culture tend to be pretty hard on ourselves about again, being perfect, having this extraordinary life and not looking at the fact that at the end of the day, most people are just doing the best they can.

John Boccacino:

What would you point to as some of the causes in this spike in social anxiety on college campuses?

Carrie Brown:

Yeah, think it's definitely there's certainly multiple causes. One of the things that I think about the reason why we're seeing it coming out of our 2022 data, I certainly think that the pandemic plays a role in that. I think when we all had to go remote there in 2020, a lot of our students did remote learning in their high schools, in their school system. We were doing some remote learning here. It really disconnected us from each other. Being on a screen is not the same as being in person with somebody. Oftentimes, we know that students turn their cameras off or maybe they're not able to be as intentional with giving all their attention to the situation when you're online 'cause there's distractions. But I think we had to reemerge out of that and learn how to connect with each other again for a bit, and so I think that played a role in it.

But again, I don't think that's the only thing. I think we're definitely seeing social media play a pretty profound role in that, especially for young people. The research shows us that adolescents actually struggle the most with anxiety and depression as a result of overuse of social media. By no means am I here to say that social media is the big bad or that you shouldn't be on social media, but I think it's about moderation. It's about finding time to unplug. We are constantly bombarded 24 hours a day with the ability to be connected too, which is great. Also, sometimes people need space and there's this idea that you should get an immediate response, or if somebody reads your text message or somebody sees your story and they don't respond, "Why are they doing that?"

So it can lead to that spiral thinking of, "Why didn't they like my posts? Why didn't they respond to me?" Because we expect 24/7 ability to connect with each other. We also have 24/7 news cycles about everything. I think it's hard for people if they're not able to unplug, to not get sucked into a boom and noom mentality. It's healthy to take a break from it for a moment and allow yourself to embrace the things that are beautiful about the world, nature, human connection, et cetera. Our students have also grown up in an area where we know that there's a lot of mass violence, not just in schools, but in our country. There's a lot of tensions that are happening politically, et cetera. I think that there's just a lot of real things to cause anxiety, and I understand why people feel that way, and I think we need to reprieve from them right now. That's why it's good sometimes to unplug and reconnect with the people who are important to you so that you can maintain hope.

John Boccacino:

Unfortunately, there is still a stigma around mental health and having to seek some sort of counseling. What would you say to someone who is maybe battling the, "Oh, boy, if I need counseling, something's wrong with me, I'm not strong enough. How do you break through the noise and break through the stigma to reassure them that this is a good step?"

Carrie Brown:

Yeah, I think one thing that we are seeing, which I think is tremendous, is we are seeing some of that stigma decrease, especially for our younger generation. I think there is a lot more awareness around mental health and a lot more awareness around universal struggles that we all have. So I think that that's been helpful to break down some of those barriers, but I do know that it still exists. I certainly think different cultures have different levels of stigma related to mental health, depending on what country you're from, what your cultural background is, what your familial culture is. Sometimes families might not be as supportive because as you mentioned, for some people it may look like you're not trying hard enough, you're not working hard enough, you're not doing the right things, and now you need someone else's help that shows somehow that you're not putting in enough effort.

What I would say to that is I think it's so interesting to look at mental health that way because we never think about this. If you broke your arm and you had to go to the emergency room, we wouldn't be like, "Oh, John, you didn't work hard enough to fix that broken bone. Why are you going to the emergency room?" So it's so fascinating to me that we can see physical health in that way, but we don't see mental health in that way. We don't look at it as part of the human experience as being, we are all emotional being. We might not necessarily all have the same types of struggles, but everyone in their life is going to experience something along the way that they probably would need support for. I think mental health therapy can look a lot of different ways.

Certainly, a lot of times when people see a therapist ongoing, there might be more underlying things going on or more things they need long-term support for, but sometimes people just need a one time that they stop in and they talk with somebody and they get a different perspective or they learn about resources that they didn't even know existed. They learn about holistic health and wellness and that maybe really what they're looking for is connectivity and they didn't know that this group existed on campus or they didn't know that exercise was helpful for mental health, and now they know that and they can try that. So coming to Barnes Center Counseling, it doesn't always mean that you're in need of, let's say, mental health treatment if you will. It means that you're looking at how do I get support around something that I find I've tried different things and it's just not changing?

So a lot of times we need that outside perspective. We need somebody who's not in the weeds with us to be able to give us a clearer picture and a clearer idea of how to work through what we're struggling with. It's rare for us to have people come to counseling because everything is going perfect. That usually doesn't happen. Usually something's happening in their life that they're struggling with and they probably have tried things, but they're not finding their answer. We might be people who either can provide that answer or help get them to that answer. So I think it's just important to know that there's a variety of reasons why people would come to counseling. We see every academic here close to 15% of the student body. So I think it's also important to know that people are coming and that they're finding it helpful and they're taking away that information of, "What can I do now? What can I do now?"

John Boccacino:

For students in particular who might want to seek a counselor and don't feel comfortable doing the one-on-one, I want to shine a light on what I think is a really cool opportunity here at the Barnes Center. It's



the group counseling that's available through the Barnes. How do you think group counseling centered around a specific issue or an interest can really help benefit our students?

Carrie Brown:

Yeah, absolutely. So this is going to probably sound really wild to some of our students out there, and I don't know about to you, John, but actually the best treatment for social anxiety is group therapy. A lot of people are like, "What are you talking about? Well, I'm already feeling socially anxious and now you want to put me with other people?" It's like, "Actually, yeah," and there's a reason behind that. Our research indicates that group therapy is an opportunity to almost practice what you want to do outside of the group therapy room. So it's an opportunity to come together with other people who share in common either an identity to you. So we might have identity-themed groups where people are coming together and they're connecting over a common identity and a common experience as a person in our world living with that identity. So we have groups for our LGBTQ+ community.

We have groups for our BIPOC students, and so they may be coming and connecting on that identity piece and what it's like to be a member of that community at Syracuse. But we also have different groups too, for people related to depression, anxiety, groups related to trauma, groups related to skill building, groups related to anxiety, skill building and connecting. So you come into that room and you're with people who are experiencing similar things to you, and then you're learning together how to navigate those things, how to build connections, skills to work through anxiety. Then you get to the beauty of not only you have two therapists in there, but you have usually it's eight students, so you have seven of your peers too.

So you're actually getting a bunch of different people trying to help you navigate things, and you might learn something from one of your peers and go, "I hadn't thought about that," that maybe we as therapists wouldn't even think of because we're not living in the residence hall and we didn't know that, and we didn't think about that, but your peer did know that. So there's actually a really, really meaningful way of building up your ability to connect. So with anxiety, one of the things that's actually the most helpful with anxiety sometimes is building up that tolerance, for example. So if you're afraid of flying, sometimes the more you fly, the less afraid you become because you're like, "Oh, I flew several times and I was okay, and we landed all right. We got there, and now I know what the sounds the plane makes."

Well, the same thing can be with socializing. "I practiced socializing in my group therapy experience. I got to meet people, I got to get outside of my comfort zone a little bit and it was okay and I did it. Maybe I can do this outside of this room." So it really is an opportunity to connect with people and cultivate skills to then take those into your life, and it's usually found to be one of the more effective treatment modalities for this age group because there's something I think really important when you're emerging as an adult and you're still figuring out a lot of things about yourself. It might be your first time away from your family. You're really figuring out what you value, who you are, what you want to do with your life outside of your small bubble that you come from or your big bubble that you come from. It's really a great opportunity, I think, to get different perspectives from different people and really learn who you are and group gives you an opportunity to really try that.

John Boccacino:

The tips you've been giving have been very beneficial, very helpful, and they apply to all of our students here, but I want to narrow in a little bit with this next question. I feel like international students have a slew of different challenges and opportunities that they have to face when they come to campus here at

Syracuse. How do you view things being differently under the mental wellness and the anxiety issues for international students?

Carrie Brown:

Yeah, I think you're right. I think when you come to a new place, like you said, it's always a challenge, but then think about everything is different. It's not just, "I'm now at a bigger college campus than my hometown." It's, "Now I am at a different country where maybe a different language is spoken, maybe the food is different, cultural expectations are different. How people socialize might be different." We are obviously all human beings, and under that there's universal similarities. There's actually six universal emotions and there's different things that we all have in common just as being humans, but there's also a lot of cultural differences depending on where you come from. So then just coming to this area, I think it's common to experience, I know people used to call it culture shock, just this ability of like, "Whoa, this is very different."

But I think what's really nice about Syracuse is we have such a robust size of international students that often there's communities that are formed among international students with each other in terms of there's the connectivity with international services. There's a lot of orientation processes, a lot of chances for international students to meet one another and really connect. In addition to coming to a new culture, there may be things happening at home that you feel very separated from because home could be very far away. I know over the years, I've worked with students where there might be war happening in their home country and they're here. There might be political uprisings happening in their home country and they're here. There could be a major illness outbreak happening and they're here and they can't get back home and they haven't been home in years or fill in the blank.

So that is a very different set of things to take into consideration for that population because most of our domestic students don't necessarily have those similar experiences. Because even if you're in California, you often can get on a plane ride and be home in several hours versus if you're your family's in China, it could take days or you might not be able to travel. But I think our university does a fantastic job of providing support to that community through, like I said, our international service office does a wonderful job. We have our folks here at Barnes really looking to connect with the international students. We did a focus listening group with international students last academic year as part of our diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility initiatives.

Really listening to them about what has been your experience with Barnes Center? If you're not coming, what are the barriers? How can we help decrease some of those barriers? Through some of those efforts, we have hired bilingual therapists. We've really looked at trying to have things be more accessible in different languages. One of the things that I think has been really cool is this year, at least in counseling, we saw the largest number of percentage of international students that we've seen since I started working here. 18% of our students were international students. The university benchmark is 21. So I think we're doing something to really de-stigmatize mental health for that population and really bring people in.

John Boccacino:

If you had to look into the proverbial crystal ball, what do you think could be next when it comes to addressing mental health needs? What are some areas that we're not quite as sufficient in meeting our students' needs that we can improve upon over the coming years?

Carrie Brown:

Yeah, that's an awesome question. We're actually starting to talk about this as a leadership in Barnes Center of really looking at, again, Barnes Center is the health and wellness building. It is the hub, but it's not the only entity involved in health and wellness. It really needs to be a campus-wide initiative. So some of the things that we've been thinking about is down the road, how do we think about the residence halls and how do we create maybe those spaces to really enhance wellness within them? So for example, things like blackout curtains in the residence hall, so that having a dark room improves sleep quality, maybe better temperature control in the residence halls to improve sleep quality. We've started expanding our MindSpa. So downstairs on the first floor, we have a MindSpa and it has massage chairs and biofeedback and yoga instructions and art supplies. We now are going to be looking to have a MindSpa, I believe they have one over on the Mount.

I know they're looking at putting one in Bird Library, looking at putting one on South Campus, so how can we expand those things and have more satellite things on campus, meditation walking paths on campus, just really looking at different things. Like if you asked me pie in the sky dream, I think it would be wonderful for us to be able to have... I know a lot of universities are doing things like napping pods or places where people can go so they can relax if they feel like they need a break, really working with our faculty and staff to think about maybe altering the time that assignments are due. So instead of defaulting to things being due at midnight, maybe they're due at 8:00 PM, so that way it incentivizes students to hopefully sleep more 'cause we know sleep is such a big predictor of physical and mental well-being. So I think down the road, those are some great opportunities, and I'm really hopeful that Syracuse will go in that direction 'cause I think it is such a priority for them.

John Boccacino:

It's also reassuring to know that our students, our faculty and our staff are in really good hands when it comes to the resources available to them to deal with any mental health and well-being issues that they're dealing with. Carrie, I want to thank you so much for making the time to stop by and join us here on the podcast. She's Carrie Brown, the counseling director here at the Barnes Center at The Arch. Best of luck with everything moving forward with our students, our faculty and our staff. Thank you again for your expertise.

Carrie Brown:

Thank you so much.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations podcast.