

 **Fast, Steve**

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Heartland first to offer new Distance Counseling services to support students

NORMAL, IL, June 21, 2018 – Heartland Community College is incorporating some new technology to offer more mental health support and stress reduction techniques to students.

Beginning this fall semester, Heartland will be the first community college in Illinois to offer confidential and secure video counseling via Student Counseling Services.

Three years ago, Heartland implemented “distance counseling” services by phone and email to students with difficulty making it into the campus office. This summer the College is adding a system that uses video counseling as another tool to support students.

Heartland is one of the few community colleges in Illinois that has a standalone counseling center for students to talk about college and life experiences. In confidential sessions, students can seek help with a variety of issues, ranging from stress and anxiety to depression and trauma.

With campus locations in Pontiac and Lincoln, as well as the Bloomington-Normal flagship, access to services for all students can be a challenge. The practice of “telemental” health services has been helping meet those needs.

Faye Freeman-Smith is Heartland’s Director of Counseling Services. Freeman-Smith has been credentialed as a distance counselor since 2009. As a board member for the Higher Education Mental Health Alliance (HEMHA), Freeman-Smith has helped develop a set of guidelines published this year for distance counseling at colleges and universities.

“Many students are more comfortable talking with technology, and may be more open and unintimidated to approach counseling,” Freeman-Smith said. “Removing any barriers we can further the goal of supporting students and their success.”

Distance counseling is offered to students at the Lincoln and Pontiac campus locations, but also to students with disabilities that make it difficult reach the offices at Heartland’s main campus in Normal.

In the age of Skype and FaceTime, incorporating video counseling might seem to be as easy as finding an iPhone, but the system is complicated by a major factor: privacy.

“Video conferencing system requires advanced encryption to protect our student’s privacy,” said Freeman-Smith. “This is a secure platform with encryption technology that exceeds the standards that are required for email exchanges.”

Student Counseling is also tapping into a growing affinity for mobile devices to help students with stress-reducing practices via mindfulness and mediation phone apps.

Freeman-Smith said she expects the video conferencing software to be available for use by Counseling Services by mid-July.

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