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Short communication

Survey on UC San Diego Students' Attitudes on Mental Health Reveals Shortcomings of the Mental Health Care

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Mental health impacts everyone and suicide rates in young adults (15-24) have tripled since the 1950s [1]. According to a recently published study, the number of college students seeking treatment for their mental health has risen by almost 30% from 2009 to 2015, according to the Center for Collegiate Mental Health [2]. Since many of these students look towards their on-campus facilities for mental health support and treatment, it is important that resources are available to adequately meet the demands of mental health support in order to prevent serious incidents from occurring.

Advocating campus-wide support for students with mental health needs is an important mission for students-run mental health support organizations such as Active Minds at University of California, San Diego (UC San Diego). We believed it was important to provide a platform for students to openly express their concerns pertaining to mental health in order to assess if students feel that their mental health needs are being adequately addressed on our campus. Active Minds conducted an online survey in March of 2018 to research the attitudes among students on mental health and campus-wide mental health resources. Of the 1,300 individuals who accessed the survey link, 255 responded. The ~19% response rate is similar to that of 2014 Climate Survey conducted by the University of California Regents [3]. The survey includes questions regarding how important mental health is in our student body, the degree of which existing mental health resources is being utilized, and how students feel about their experiences. This survey study is an important first step to shed light on whether further initiatives are needed to meet the growing needs of mental health services for our students.

Thirteen multiple choice and free-response questions were included in our survey. Almost all respondents (~94%) reported that mental health is something that should be taken care of on a daily basis. A high percentage (~84%) of responders reported to have been impacted by mental health issues either personally or by someone close to them. However, only 62% of respondents rated mental health as a high priority (Figure 1). The discrepancy between the percentages of respondents who feel mental health should be taken care of daily (~94%) versus those who actually treat their mental health as a priority (62%) suggests that people are aware of and want to take care of their mental health, but may encounter hindrances from doing so. Identifying the barriers that keep students from seeking mental health care is important to improve overall mental health at UC San Diego as well as other universities and colleges.

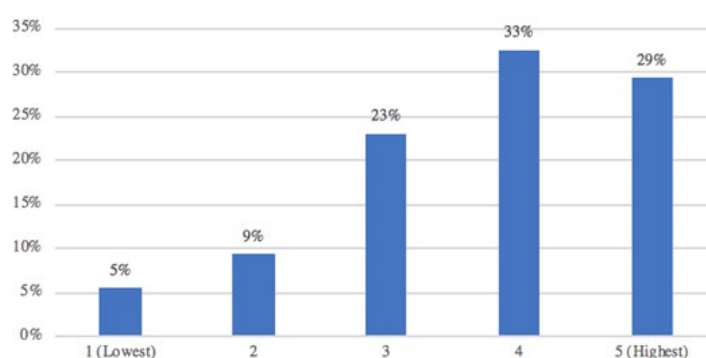


Figure 1. How high of a priority is taking care of your mental health?

We asked respondents to report any concerns they believe to be important pertaining to mental health on campus. The answers were categorized into the following: “resources”, “academic pressures”, “stigma/hostile culture”, and “others”. The answers for the “resources” category revealed that a lack of adequate resources was the predominant concern reported by survey respondents (49%). The “academic pressures” category referred to the stress of the academic cycle, while the “stigma/hostile culture” category described the negative climate surrounding mental health (Figures 2a and 2b). A high percentage of respondents (44%) commented on the long wait time for seeing a counselor with Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). Some answers suggested that even in urgent cases, students seeking help were not being responded to in a timely manner. One of the possible explanations for the long wait time may lie in a shortage of counselors per student body in UCSD CAPS. As of the 2017-2018, UCSD has a total of 36,624 students [4], but only about 30 full-time counselors. The International Association of Counseling Services recommends a 1 to 1000 counselor to student ratio (International Association of Counseling Services Inc., n.d.), a statistic currently unmet by CAPS. Although the long wait time at CAPS appeared to be the biggest complaint, the majority of those (91%) who have utilized CAPS services reported high satisfaction in their services [3].

This highlights the need to improve bottlenecks that cause the long wait-time reported by the respondents so those in need of services can receive timely care. Regarding climate and culture that affect mental health, one student commented that “people make jokes about serious mental health issues that are rampant across campus” while another felt that students tend to

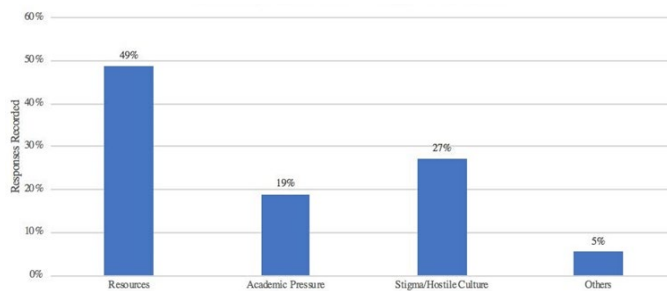


Figure 2A. Additional Mental Health Issues Important to Address

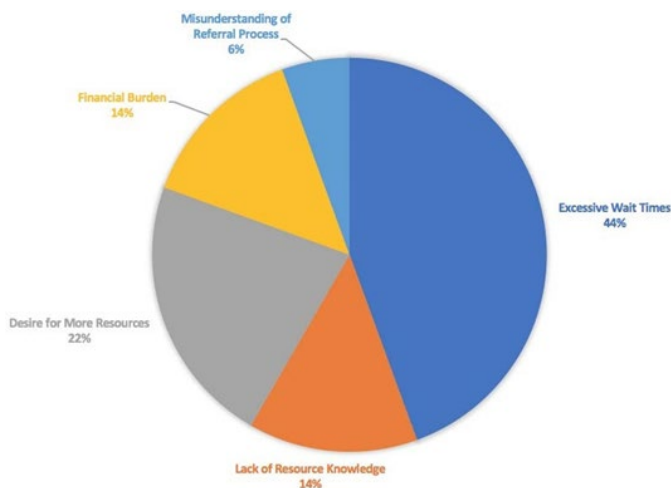


Figure 2B. Resources Break-Down

place a higher priority on academic responsibilities while neglecting their mental health. Other respondents reported feeling that students “competed” with each other on who has the hardest schedule, who slept the least, etc. These behaviors and social interactions among peers contribute to a culture on campus that can stigmatize mental health and create stress. While it is important that university students place emphasis on their studies, it is equally important to ensure that students are taking care of their physical and mental well-being.

Lacking knowledge in how to obtain access for mental health treatment (besides CAPS) appears to explain some responses of “having insufficient resources available.” To determine the degree of students’ knowledge of the availability of professional resources on campus, we asked respondents if they were aware of other mental health professional resources available on campus besides CAPS. 84% of respondents could not identify any. While CAPS has been the primary mental service that provides professional counseling to support students, in fact, UC San Diego now offers Mental Health Care for College students that includes emergency help number 24/7 [6,7]

However, not all students are covered by the insurance plans College Mental Health Clinic accept. Without the accepted form of insurance, students are subject to pay a full session amount, starting at upwards of \$180, even with a discount. The lack of knowledge on how to obtain help besides going through CAPS is alarming as some mental health crisis can be serious without immediate intervention. In parallel to professional clinical support, UC campus has many peer-sponsored organizations

offering support and mental health resources to students - such as Active Minds, the Zone, the Wellness Peer Educators, and Tritons in Recovery. By taking the time to care for our daily mental well-being, students may be less likely to fall in a crisis situation. Active Minds represent one of the peer-run organizations that regularly host and support de-stress events on UC San Diego campus. This survey allowed us to gather data from students to better understand what aspects of peer-based mental health support are utilized and enjoyable to users. We first asked if students had ever attended any de-stress event, the majority of respondents (63%) saying “no.” When asked to elaborate on the reasons why they had not attended the events, about a third said they lacked the time, a third was uninterested, and a third felt uncomfortable. However, those that did attend these events felt they were able to relax and enjoy themselves. Over 50% of those who had attended a de-stress event went to Therapy Fluffies (by the Zone) where service dogs were provided for socialization with the students.

Future program planning should aim to encourage higher participant rates and to reach out to a wider audience by better advertising through social media methods and campus flyers. Our survey demonstrated that the majority of survey participants do value mental health highly. In addition, the data showed that although students put a high priority on mental health, those who desired and needed help may not be receiving it in a timely fashion, highlighting a need to increase the accessibility of CAPS and other mental health clinics to all students on campus. Furthermore, mental health stigma, and campus culture all appear to play a role in opinions and attitudes about mental health and care on campus. The results of the survey have shed light on what immediate steps we can take to begin improving processes and resources so together, we can improve students’ experience with mental health care on campus. We also want to encourage the student body to continue the necessary dialogue about the importance of mental health, learning effective communication to destigmatize mental health, educating ourselves and others about mental health facts, showing support and compassion for each other, and taking the time to care for ourselves.

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