Mental Health on College Campuses

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Abstract

Compared to decades ago, the mental health epidemic has risen in numbers amongst college students in higher education. This report looks to define the exact factors in higher education causing mental health diagnoses to rise. In addition, research will be conducted to determine the projected outcome of our young generation if the upwards trend in diagnoses shall continue. Through these rigorous evaluations of known research on the mental health crisis, clear solutions will be provided for all higher education universities to consider in hopes of aiding in this epidemic. For the betterment of the society of higher education, all universities should be aware and take action in regards to this problem.

Key Words: mental health, college, university, higher education
Mental Health on College Campuses

The process of becoming a student in higher education, without a doubt, mentally changes someone. Entering a university, at the average age of eighteen, brings on numerous feats to surpass in order to be successful in their education and in the future. Stress from new classes which are more demanding than high school, and the anxiety following immersing oneself in college culture, can become too much when only given what seems like a few months to adjust. These changes are overwhelming, and for many students, they are too overwhelming. Catering to their students’ needs when balancing this new lifestyle is pertinent for any university, for the mental health effects created if the student is left alone are detrimental. With some college students battling anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses, the potential success for those students in the classroom decreases exponentially. It is the university’s job to aid in these student’s needs, not only for the betterment of that specific student, but the college’s atmosphere as a whole.

Students have always battled mental health issues, but, with increasing expectations in today’s college environment, students are detrimentally affected compared to students from decades ago. No longer will past advancements in mental health be beneficial, but only a small step closer to aiding society’s current students. Universities around the world should be required to take steps forward in developing a system which caters to the students at their institution. This would not only help individuals in a constant battle, but also provide a healthy, supportive environment for all who may be studying at a university. Here, we can ask, in what ways may higher education decrease the likelihood of their students acquiring mental health issues?

Literature Review
This literature review provides insight on the facts known about the mental health crisis, along with certain problems found within resolving it.

Declared by Daphne Watkins et al (2011), “most lifetime mental disorders have first onset before or during the traditional college age of 18-24” (p. 320). This claim makes sense, for new students are found to be dealing with a large amount of work in smaller amounts of time, therefore causing stress. Paola Pedrelli et al (2015) notes these students are also being faced with the duty to complete adult responsibilities without yet obtaining the skills or cognitive maturity necessary to complete them (p. 2). The stress of completing a heavy workload, along with the stress of becoming an adult, are noted as triggers for developing a mental health issue (See appendix 1, image 1). However, with the consistent claim that students today experience more stress than those from decades ago “some argue that all this is nothing new, that school has always been anxiety inducing” (Burwell, 2018, p. 153). Sylvia Burwell (2018) argues that regardless if students today experience a “greater number of stressors than generations past” (p. 153), there is a small amount of doubt that the “impact of those stressors is felt more than before” (p. 153).

Although one might develop a problem within their own mental health, there are unseen effects from this development. Daniel Eisenburg et al (2009) states a clear connection between mental health and academic success. With that connection, it was found to create “a potentially important but relatively unexplored factor in explaining human capital accumulation during college” (Eisenburg et al, 2009, p. 1). For example, battling mental health issues in college is said to affect students’ “academic outcomes along two margins: 1) the decision to remain in school; and 2) productivity, or performance, given that one is in school” (Eisenburg et al, 2009, p. 5). To be specific, being diagnosed with depression, anxiety, and eating disorders are shown to
be indicators of a “lower GPA and higher probability of dropping out” (Eisenburg et al, 2009, p. 1). In addition, students today are also known to be struggling because they are entering college “with less resiliency and a lower appetite for risk and failure” (Burwell, 2018, p. 153). While campuses are taking into account the rising numbers in students seeking help from mental health facilities, there is an issue within their responses to the problem. Taken from Watson’s et al (2011) research, “oftentimes the broader campus becomes aware of the mental health needs of their students only after a crisis occurs (Anderson, 2003)” (p. 334). This issue was found to lead administrators confused about how to handle the crisis at hand while simultaneously maintaining the promotion of their current mental health services (Watkins et al, 2011, 334). With young adults committing suicide being the “third leading cause of death among young adults” (Pedrilli et al, 2015, p. 3), Watkins et al (2011) finds that the reaction to a student committing suicide is often a prime example of the situation above. In line with Watkins’ research, Daniel Eisenburg et al (2009) decided it is a college campus’ job to invest in mental health resources before a tragedy occurs, therefore being able to “further their central educational missions, and generate significant economy returns for society” (p. 1).

With the knowledge found from these researchers, one can agree that the mental health crisis is in fact a crisis. While the research proves the idea that the significance of the students being diagnosed is jumping in numbers, I will be conducting research on what exactly can be done. These specific resources hold numerous claims noting that being enrolled in a university alone can determine whether someone will have a healthy mental state or not. But there were no clear answers on how exactly to implement a system to aid in the mental health of their students for the betterment of the society of higher education.

Methodology
To determine the effect of higher education on a student’s mental health, a process known as photovoice was utilized. With the combination of real-life photos representing the issue and peer-reviewed research to examine these photos, an explanation for this problem is clearly outlined. To find a proper photo for this research, online searching on the topic of college mental health was completed first. Discovering research texts outlining this topic was completed by utilizing Indiana University’s library database, EBSCO, along with other online databases such as Google Scholar. Searching the same key words used to find research on this specific topic determined what photo was comparable and, therefore, able to be used for further analysis.

**Findings**

The potential loss of academic success and capital accumulation found in previous sources brings a large worry for the future. Not only are these mental health disorders affecting one’s college life, but perhaps will prevent the student from having a successful income or employment opportunities in the future. But, recognizing the correlation between mental health and academic success is the first step in “preventing, detecting, and treating mental health issues among young people” (Eisenburg et al, 2009, p. 2). Unfortunately, more needs to be done than just understanding the severity of this situation. Because of the sudden incline for the need of mental health facilities among college campuses, these universities are finding it difficult to employ and pay those working to help their students. For example, there are major problems with, “1) increasing numbers of students with severe emotional problems (Kitzrow, 2003), 2) students and families who look primarily to universities to provide mental health and other supportive services for their students, and 3) budgetary cutbacks that make growth in mental health staffing difficult (Marsh, 2004)” (Watkins et al, 2011, p. 321). Before implementing a successful system to help this epidemic, these specific concerns must be addressed.
WHAT WILL WE DO?

The problems listed above draw back to one specific issue: there is an extremely large number of students needing mental health services within their college campuses. While many campuses may not be able to afford their student’s mental needs with the solution of paid counselors, some universities have found a successful way around the problem. For example, Colby College, located in Maine, has found a way to support their students within student-ran clubs and services. Groups on Colby’s campus such as the “Student Health on Campus (SHOC) and Colby Outdoor Orientation Trips (COOT) foster support and social connections for the entire Colby student body” (Harward, 2019, p. 1). Allowing for student-to-student therapy sessions and exercises not only helps with one’s personal problems but creates a safe environment for those struggling to find like-minded friends. Beyond student-ran services, colleges are implementing systems to alleviate the one-on-one work that a counselor might deal with daily. Carleton College, located in Minnesota, has developed a therapy session able to be completed away from the counseling center. Students, specifically with seasonal affective disorder, are able to loan a light box from the counseling center and bring it back to where they live. This light therapy, free of charge and done at home, is supposed to relieve oneself in “at least 30 minutes” (Harward, 2019, p. 2). Systems such as these have received positive feedback, but still seem to not suffice in fully aiding in this epidemic.

Even my own college, Indiana University, advocates for mental heath. With CAPS, a service offered amongst many higher education universities, students are able to receive two, free sessions every semester with a counselor (Indiana University Bloomington, 2019, Health, Wellness, and Safety). In comparison to Colby College, Indiana University Bloomington also offers a student-ran organization known as Crimson CORPS. This specific organization works by gathering students interested in advocating for others experiencing the same mental health
problems in their day to day life. Indiana University supplies sufficient help within this program with “1 half day training per semester, 90 minute training sessions once per month, participation in monthly task team meetings, volunteering requirement of 2 semesters, and participation in 2 outreach programs per semester” (Indiana University, 2019, Health, Wellness, and safety). Yet, the addition of these programs still is not enough, for 50% of new students visiting CAPS at Indiana University Bloomington in 2015 were diagnosed with anxiety (Ernsberger, 2015, State of Mind).

Exactly what more can these higher education universities do to provide proper mental health care for their students? Just as a student’s curriculum begins as a young child, the screening of their mental health also needs to occur at a young age. Paola Pedrilli et al (2015) found that most students with suicidal thoughts do not take the first step to seek treatment (See appendix 1, image 2). So, beginning at home and prior to college, it is “critical to implement screening strategies to identify them and engage them in treatment” (Pedrilli et al, 2015, p. 3). If suicidal thoughts begin in college, it is just as important for students to participate in similar screening strategies to catch the issue before it becomes a reality. To alleviate the stress of the increasing number of students seeking help for counselors, Daphne Watkins et al (2011) found that some administrators were trained to seek guidance for severe situations. Increasing administrator’s competence for taking care of the complex needs of their students avoids counselors not “receiving increased resources for staffing or physical space” (Watkins et al, 2011, 332). In addition, it was found that splitting up the workload amongst other service providers such as Social Work, the Department of Psychiatry, or those connected to a community clinic, also alleviated the demand for counseling services (Watkins et al, 2011, p. 331).

Recommendations
There are many acclaimed solutions being found at various universities across the society of higher education. As mentioned before, requiring students to participate in different variations of mental health screenings prior to college and during their college journey might lead them to get help before a tragedy occurs. Avoiding crisis is pertinent to keep the demands of counseling services low. I propose universities also seek out students with a passion for mental health, allowing for the building of a student-ran service to be created. Providing different options for counseling might be beneficial as some students may find clarity in seeking help after talking to their peers. To avoid the cost of expanding services within a university or the services’ buildings, requiring all professors to train for mental health crises might help as well. While a student might not feel comfortable sharing their personal feelings with another student or counselor, they might find speaking to a professor they have built a relationship with to be beneficial.

Aiding in this mental health crisis does not have to require an extreme amount of funds. Different administrators in the university can take on different tasks to avoid putting more workers in counseling centers. Regardless, if all universities were to utilize this research and implement it in their own school system, the mental health crisis would be alleviated tremendously. This topic of mental health is one that all universities in higher education need to seriously consider, for their students’ success and perhaps life depends on it.
References


Appendix 1: Photovoice Images

Image 1

SOURCE:
https://www.google.com/search?q=stressed+student&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS864US864&source=lnsms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjittoOX3fvlAhVDgK0KHTkaAkoQ_AUoAXoECBAQAw&biw=1200&bih=698#imgrc=eQ1dZ66vCY2CSM:
WHAT WILL WE DO?

Image 2

SOURCE:
https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS864US864&biw=1200&bih=698&tbm=isch&sa=1&ei=Et7VXceoNsX_gTHrp7gCw&q=depressed+student&oq=depressed+student&gs_l=img.3...0.0..3066...0.0.0....0......gws-wiz-img.O4e49Y_iBMY&ved=0ahUKEwjHc7eifrlAhXFv54KHUeXB7wQ4dUDCAc&uact=5#imgrc=XX32A3sH9yUmXM:
### Appendix 2: Photovoice document

**SHOWED: Images 1 and 2**

Task: Using the space below, explore your images (data sources) further.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S</th>
<th>What do you see here? (using bullets)</th>
</tr>
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</table>
|   | - There is one well-dressed boy sitting on the ground outside of class, the frame is focused on him.  
|   | - The backpack is placed on the other side of the brick wall, zipped fully.  
|   | - The area around the student is emptied. He seems to be the only person around.  
|   | - There is a girl who is surrounded by her school work, tired of overwhelmed by the stress. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>H</th>
<th>What is really happening here?</th>
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<td></td>
<td>While the boy in the picture seems studious and well put together, his hands around his head and his backpack placed away from him shows a different story. He is disconnected from his school life, consumed by the thoughts roaming around his head. Although it is assumed he is sitting during a class period or after school, his loneliness shows the truth about having a mental illness. No one is there to help him in his time of need, and he is choosing to be alone because he believes he believes his problems are not big enough to burden someone else with. The girl in the first picture is shown to be extremely stressed out. While assumed that it is caused by her school work, she has underlying implications due to her mental health issues. Her tired and stressful mind is causing her to stop working on her homework, an issue that could cause a failure within the classroom.</td>
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<th>O</th>
<th>How does this relate to our lives (yours as a college student; others who attend Indiana University)</th>
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<td>Being enrolled at a university like Indiana University has shown me the true meaning of being alone. Just because one passes by thousands of students every day, does not mean we are not alone. Often times students believe their problems are not important enough to tell someone else, or that they have it figured out on their own. With counseling centers being overwhelmingly packed, sometimes students believe it might be easier to deal with their problems on their own. This alone deepens the severity of having a mental illness. The stress that follows schoolwork and the lifestyle of being enrolled in a university can cause deeper problems than shown on the surface. The girl in the first image could potentially fail her class due to her underlying mental health problems.</td>
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<td>W</td>
<td>Why does this problem or strength exist on our campus? In higher education settings?</td>
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<td>Entering college at such a transitional age brings on the problem both pictures depict. With the transitional age comes more homework, taking on adult responsibilities, being surrounded by new people, and more. This problem exists in higher education settings because students are not finding more than the counseling center to go to for their everyday problems.</td>
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<th>How can we become empowered about this issue?</th>
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<td>Teaching our professors about mental health problems will allow for more understanding around this issue, thus more helping on this issue. Creating a knowledgeable student and staff environment around the problems of mental health through seminars and group training will show the severity of this situation.</td>
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<th>What can we do about it?</th>
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<td>By training the staff our students see every day in class, more relationships outside of the counseling center are able to be formed. Also, with the staff’s knowledge on mental illness, they might be able to target a student in need without the student needing to approach them originally. Implementing student-ran organizations supporting those with mental health problems will also be beneficial, for it provides a more safe and comfortable space for certain students.</td>
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