

To Whom it May Concern,

Our names are Kori Taber and Kaitlyn Simmons and we are students at St. Mary's College of Maryland. For part of our class "Topics in Anthropology: Medical Anthropology," we did a research project of our choosing. Our research project was assessing suicide prevention efforts and mental health programs on the St. Mary's campus, and how they are perceived. As well as how aware the students are of these programs. Through this project we wanted to find what our school already has in terms of mental health programming, what our wellness center could do to change and improve upon what they are already doing, and if the Behavioral Health Action Team (BHAT) would be able to fill in any gaps that we may have on our campus. Below is a selected section from our final paper. We also can provide you with the full paper if you so wish. We also have found ways in which we believe the BHAT program could potentially help in some ways.

By not making mental health a prevalent discussion throughout an individual's time at college, this issue is put on the back burner and the stigma surrounding mental health and suicide is perpetuated. In a study done on an individual's personal stigma versus their perceived public stigma, researchers found that individuals consistently perceived the public stigma to be greater than their reported personal stigma. An individual's perceived public stigma was also found to be directly correlated to their help-seeking behavior, meaning the greater someone perceived the public stigma to be, the less likely they would be to seek help (Eisenberg, 2009). Therefore, the type of environment a college creates and the prevalence of mental health programs on college campuses are important factors to include in order to ensure students feel comfortable to seek help.

In St. Mary's County of Maryland, the Healthy St. Mary's Partnership includes a Behavioral Health Action Team (BHAT). One of a few topics that BHAT deals with and programs for is suicide prevention in St. Mary's County. They host events and support programs that are aimed to decrease the stigma surrounding mental health and suicide, and in turn aim to decrease the suicide rate in St. Mary's County. This organization works closely with local schools, from elementary school to colleges, as well as the military base in this county. They have a network of diverse resources that allow them to work with and cater to the needs of this wide range of people.

The objective of our research was to see if the culture on campus prioritizes mental health as the baseline for overall wellness. Awareness of suicide prevention programs and resources as well as attendance to these events and use of these resources among St. Mary's students would show that both the students and administration understand the importance of mental health and through this understanding, are actively engaging with it. Initially, we wanted to collect data on the awareness and perception of BHAT programs on campus specifically, but early on we discovered they have only had two events on campus in the past two years. The focus of our research was then shifted towards awareness and perception of mental health programs run through the Wellness Center on St. Mary's College campus and seeing if there were areas in which BHAT could fill the gaps. By the end of our research, we wanted to be able to come up with

ways in which we could strengthen the relationship between Healthy St. Mary's and St. Mary's College of Maryland, as well as help to strengthen the already established programs and resources that are taking place on the campus.

## **Methods**

In order to research our topic we have collected qualitative data about student awareness and perception of mental health programs on campus. Awareness, was measured by participation in events and having programs specifically mentioned by students. Perception was evaluated through the feelings and positive or negative anecdotes students had about the Wellness Center. We conducted a participant observation at the St. Mary's College of Maryland Wellness Fair as well as the Peer Health Educator (PHE) event, Hump Day Help. We also performed semi-structured interviews with the Peer Health Educators, regular students on campus, and a BHAT representative about the suicide prevention efforts on campus and the BHAT of Healthy St. Mary's events related to this topic. Lastly, the websites of both BHAT and the Wellness Center were evaluated using content analysis.

### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Given the sensitive nature of this topic, we had taken precautions to prevent psychological harm to our interviewees including, trigger warnings, consent forms, and ensured all personal information was kept confidential. All interviewees were eighteen years or older and were made aware that they could stop the interview at any time and could refuse to answer specific questions. These conditions were stated in the consent form and audibly read aloud for the participant before starting.

The interview conducted with the BHAT representative focused on the programs they have at St. Mary's College of Maryland and how successful they believe these events were, as well as getting information about future events that they feel would have success on St. Mary's campus.

The interviews with the Peer Health Educators and regular students of St. Mary's College of Maryland were focused on how students perceive the mental health programs on campus and their awareness of the events to support this cause that are already in place. As these were informal interviews, we voice recorded and transcribed the conversations. This was only done if we had the informed consent of the participant to record their words. We however did not record names or any personal details and, any personal or identifying details stated were redacted from the transcriptions.

### *Participant Observations*

Both the Wellness Fair and the PHE program, Hump Day Help, were observed for at least half of the allotted time given for each event. During these events notes were taken on attendee behavior, comments, and the overall structure and function of the event. While observing these events, we also took part in them, interacting with the activities in both events and talking with the people running them.

### *Content Analyses*

For the St. Mary's Wellness Center the analyses were focused on the accessibility of information on mental health programs. The organization, quality, and level of updated content were all factors that were considered during this process. The information on the website was then compared to the misconceptions about the Wellness Center that were stated by our interviewees. This was done to see if these misconceptions were due to a

lack of information on the Wellness Center's behalf or due to a lack of awareness on the students' behalf. The BHAT website analyses were focused on their relationship with the community and schools in the area.

## **Discussions**

One of the major aspects that we were looking for was the awareness and perception of these programs and events. Overall for awareness we found that students were mainly only aware of the SMART program and the therapy offered by the wellness center, because those are areas that have been talked most about. The programs that are run by the PHEs are either new or updated as they have instituted new types of programming. These programs are normally only advertised on insideSMCM and sometimes through the use of flyers which after asking the people that we interviewed we found were mostly ineffective. Overall, we found that students generally tend to hear about events that either have a reputation on campus, or from the word of other people such as their friends. It could be possible to move to having people advertise these events on sites that people use such as Facebook.

As for perception, we found that many students relate the funding of the wellness center and of the college in general as a problem for the wellness center, this however is something that is only assumed by many people because they hear these as reason from word of mouth from other people, but they cannot give specific reasons as to why they think this. This in turn has led to some students having a poor view of what the programs that they do, giving it an overall poor reputation. However, through the students that we interviewed, there was a large disparity between experiences. For some people they have had really great and positive experiences working with and using the services offered by the wellness center. However, others did not have great experiences using the different services. This seemed to be that the experiences depended mostly on the availability of services during the time that sought them. All of this has overall caused a sense of distrust of the wellness center. This has become problematic because people that possibly need help are not going to the wellness center or wellness center sponsored events, and are missing out on care that they may need.

Another aspect of this is that many students did not mention or know about other forms of self care and mental health programs such as the PHE's. The PHE's run many self care events and also provide support in the walk in hours of the wellness center by running student and peer to peer therapy. Some students may feel more comfortable talking to other peers as well as the times of the peer counseling my work better for them than the appointments made by the traditional therapists.

The PHE's also run other self care events throughout the semester at multiple times, some of which are in the later afternoon or at night. These events are not specifically targeted for therapy, but after talking to the PHE's they have stated that these events are a good way to open conversation about mental health, and being able to talk about it in a safe space while also providing strategies and activities that are good for general self care.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, we found that mental health programs on this campus are good. Like anything they could be better, but the general problem that the St. Mary's College students have is that they are unaware of the general programming of the Wellness Center and other groups such as

SMART and the PHE's. The other main issue that students have is their ability to use these services due to lack of information, or the times in which they can go conflicting with their schedule.

Some suggestions that we offer, are to extend or move hours of operation to later in the day or the weekends. We understand that this is something that hinders on staff availability, and budget, but it is something that many of the students we talked to offered as a suggestion. This also could be taken up by someone such as the PHE's running peer counseling on the weekend. This is something that they are already trained to do from being part of this program, but providing more or different hours could be beneficial to students. Another way that students could be reached is by advertising more frequently or in more visible locations. It also would be possible to have students talk about and "hype" up the events, this could help to gain general interest from the students.

Another aspect that can be explored is the revival of past events that have had success on St. Mary's campus. These being the panel discussions run by the BHAT program as well as campus walks such as the out of the darkness walk. These events could be beneficial to open the conversation about mental health in an environment that is not therapy programs, but is still equipped to handle the brevity of this conversation.

Overall there are many different aspects that can be added or changed however, we understand that there are constraints such as budget and funding that we cannot know about. We hope that these findings contribute even in some small way to the overall goal to destigmatize mental health.

Overall, we hope to be able to work with you in some way to be able to further our goal of destigmatizing mental health wellness and conversations, for not only our campus, but to be able to set an example for others in the future.

Thank you,

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