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ASSESSING STUDENT UTILIZATION, ACCESSIBILITY, AND AWARENESS OF
MENTAL HEALTH PRACTICES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA

by

Melissa Pham

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
University Honors Program

Department of Counseling and Psychology in Education

The University of South Dakota

May 2022

The members of the Honors Thesis Committee appointed
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ABSTRACT

Assessing Student Utilization, Accessibility, and Awareness of Mental Health Practices

at the University of South Dakota

Melissa Pham

Director: Harry Freeman, Ph.D.

Mental health is critical to the overall wellbeing of individuals. However, college students oftentimes are at an increased susceptibility to encountering mental health issues including but not limited to depression, anxiety, stress, difficulties with concentration, and suicidal ideation. This study aims to assess the mental health perceptions, utilization, awareness, accessibility, and barriers to seeking out mental health aid at the University of South Dakota.; furthermore, this study investigates if and how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced student mental health. Through the distribution of an anonymous survey to University of South Dakota undergraduate students, this thesis project can provide a better understanding of the various attitudes that students have towards their mental health and the mental health services offered to them. In addition to the anonymous student survey, an interview is conducted with a representative of the Student Counseling Center to provide an insider perspective of utilization numbers and mental health prevalence at the University of South Dakota. Finally, this study also presents potential ideas that can be implemented to increase awareness of mental health resources across campus.

KEYWORDS: Mental Health, Counseling, University Students

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I would first like to thank my thesis director Dr. Harry Freeman. He has been pivotal to teaching me the process of conducting research and has motivated me to explore different perspectives when it comes to research. He has also been such an admirable mentor, and I am incredibly grateful for the time and energy he has given to assist me in this project.

I would also like to thank Dr. Langellier and Dr. Oyen who have been an incredibly supportive thesis committee. Their kindness towards me and their feedback for the thesis project have been incredibly helpful to me during this project.

Finally, I would like to show my gratitude towards my family, friends, the Honors Program, and the University of South Dakota community. As an undergraduate student, I have first-handedly seen how impactful mental health, especially in college, can be on an individual and how important it is to have a strong support system. After seeing other college students in the community struggle with their mental health, I was inspired to conduct my thesis regarding the assessment of mental health perceptions at the University of South Dakota. With the help of my family, peers, the Honors Program, and the University of South Dakota students and community members, I was encouraged to research a topic that I truly am passionate about and hope to see additional growth in for the future.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

College students face many stressors that can contribute to poor mental health outcomes; this has a problem that has increased dramatically over the past several years. For instance, reports of moderate to severe anxiety have risen from 17.9 percent in 2013 to 34.9 percent in 2018 (Duffy et al., 2019). Meanwhile, rates of moderate to severe depression have risen from 23.2 percent in 2007 to 41.1 percent in 2018 (Duffy et al., 2019). In response to these continuously emerging mental health issues, colleges usually provide a variety of different services that to meet or assist the mental health needs of students. Nevertheless, it is unclear what percentage of students access or use these services or engage in other types of self-help and wellness activities, and what barriers prevent or slow utilization. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has had some sort of influence on lives of college students making it worthwhile to gain a better understanding of the impacts COVID-19 has on college student mental health. The purpose of this study was to examine student awareness, utilization, access to college mental health and awareness services, and to investigate how COVID-19 impacted these factors.

Defining Mental Health

Mental health refers to the overall emotional, social, and psychological well-being of a person (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). A person's mental health can constantly change and affect how they go about their life. As many traditional students transition from high school to college, they face a plethora of stressors, new obstacles, and lifestyle changes. For many college students, living on campus is their first time

being independent and being away from home. This autonomy can be wonderful for personal growth if the students are conscientious about prioritizing their mental health. Additional commitments, such as work or children, can also be stressors to the mental health of non-traditional college students. Despite the abundance of stressors that college students experience, prioritizing one's mental health can be valuable in improving a balanced and healthy lifestyle. Mental health has become a topic of increasing importance. However, there are a plethora of additional factors that affect the mental health of college students, such as wellness activities.

Wellness refers to the activities, lifestyle choices, and healthy habits of individuals to pursue good overall health. Wellness-related practices can work to improve and maintain the wellbeing of both mind and body. Oftentimes, wellness is commonly made up of several components or dimensions. These dimensions of wellness can include physical, emotional, social, intellectual, vocational, and environmental aspects (Stoewen, 2017). Psychological factors such as self-esteem, self-confidence, loneliness, and individualized personality types are instrumental to the mental wellbeing of college students (Mofatteh, 2021). Overall wellness is important for college students since it can encourage balance in multiple aspects of an individual's life.

Self-care refers to the more immediate wellness practices and activities that are done by college students. It is the responsibility of the individual to initiate self-care practices to contribute to positive mental health. Despite the stressors of college, students must prioritize engaging in healthy daily tasks such as getting an adequate amount of sleep, eating healthy, socializing, and being mindful of their mental health (Moses et al., 2016). Self-care does not always have to be presented in a physical form; practicing

gratitude, prioritizing personal needs or goals, and having a positive mindset can all be beneficial ways to practice self-care (National Institute of Mental Health). The seemingly simple tasks are critical in taking care of the daily wellbeing of an individual's mental health. Self-care practices can be one of the simpler methods that college students can utilize if they are optimistic about taking care of their mental health.

Mental Health Issues and Their Prevalence to College Students

Issues pertaining to mental health, such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, overwhelming stress, and eating disorders, can be common phenomena in undergraduate students (American College Health Association, 2009). In many incidents, students may experience the onset of mental health disorders during their time in college, or their previous mental health disorder symptoms may be aggravated (Pedrelli et al., 2015). Individual and socioeconomic backgrounds also can play a role in the development of anxiety and depression in college students; students that come from challenging backgrounds such as financial instability, domestic violence, and child poverty are more susceptible to facing mental health issues during their undergraduate journey (Mofatteh, 2021). College students who are part of minority groups such as black, international students, and LGBTQ+ are at an additionally higher risk of facing anxious and depressive symptoms (Mofatteh, 2021). In addition to academic performance and personal background, students can face additional stressors that might include time constraints, extracurriculars, jobs, social behavior, and familial relations. Depression and anxiety are the most prevalent mental health disorders that students encounter (Turner & Keller, 2015). Some of the symptoms of depression and anxiety presented in college students include lacking energy, feelings of being overwhelmed, emotional outbursts, loss of

interest in activities, or difficulty handling schoolwork (Mayo Clinic Health System, 2021). In national surveys collected from 2013 to 2018, studies have found that rates of moderate to severe anxiety have increased from 17.9 percent in 2013 to 34.9 percent in 2018, and rates for moderate to severe depression have risen from 23.2 percent in 2007 to 41.1 percent in 2018 in college students (Duffy et al., 2019). This exhibits how rates of anxiety have doubled during a five-year period and how rates of depression have nearly doubled during an 11-year period. About fifty percent of college students have reported experiencing a sense of overwhelming anxiety in the past year (Mayo Clinic Health System, 2021). This anxiety may be attributed to the academic and societal pressures continuously placed on college students which can also lead to the exacerbation of mental health issues (Mayo Clinic Health System, 2021). It is critical that depressive symptoms and anxiety in college students receives attention, awareness, and aid.

Ignoring mental health related issues can be damaging to the overall wellness of college students in the long run. Unfortunately, most college students who sustain a mental health disorder remain untreated (Bruffaerts et al., 2019). Poor mental health that remains untreated can negatively impact the quality of lives and academic performance of college students, presenting in ways such as distress in relationships, lack of self-confidence, suicidal ideations, decreased academic integrity, and alcohol or substance abuse (Mofatteh, 2021). Frighteningly, the third leading cause of death for college students is suicide (Mayo Clinic Health System, 2021). Understanding the various mental health issues that commonly plague many college students is pertinent for protecting their wellbeing and lives.

Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Resources

Although mental health is becoming a more widely discussed topic nowadays, there are still barriers that prevent individuals, especially students, from seeking out help. The number of college students seeking help has surged over time, but there is still a large proportion of students whose mental disorders are left untreated (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Further, the utilization and knowledge regarding mental health services is on the rise due to increased conversation about the topic, but students still may not feel urgency when it comes to taking care of their mental health (Eisenberg et al., 2012). Based on surveying college students, approximately 75 percent of students who struggle with their mental health are reluctant to seeking help (Mayo Clinic Health System, 2021). Many students may know that resources are available to them, but they still face hesitancy when it comes to utilizing their resources. This personal hesitancy may be attributed to a variety of factors such as skepticism of effectiveness, time inconveniences, and concerns about privacy (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). The reluctance or refusal of seeking out mental health aid can increase the risk of negative life outcomes for students; for example, these risks include poor academic performance, substance abuse, dropping out of college, or potentially suicide (Mayo Clinic Health System, 2021).

Another common reason that students struggle to utilize mental health resources is because they do not perceive their issue as being critical enough to reach out for assistance (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). College students have also indicated that they commonly prefer to handle the issue individually or by talking about it with family and friends (Erbert et al., 2019). However, students should feel encouraged to utilize professional services that can aid their mental health despite the level of seriousness they

perceive their issue to be. Unfortunately, seeking out help can be a difficulty for college students, especially due to the widely known stigma that has surrounded mental health. Incoming or new college students who undergo stress are less likely to seek out counseling help and tend to avoid their tribulations (Tirpak & Schlosser, 2015). Freshmen college students tend to view counseling with more negative attitudes, such as being invaluable and ineffective, especially when their perceptions of their self-efficacy are low (Tirpak & Schlosser, 2015). Stigma-related attitudes towards seeking out mental health resources are significantly demonstrated more by male students than female students (Vidourek et al., 2013). As a result, female college students tend to have more positive attitudes towards counseling services than males (Tirpak & Schlosser, 2015).

It is paramount to ensure there is an increased amount of conversation about mental health on college campuses. Increasing discussions about the topic may guide college students to not feel stigmatized when seeking mental health help.

Mental Health Practices and Their Benefits

Understanding where to start and how to implement beneficial mental health practices into daily routines can be difficult for some college students at first. Many universities offer mental health resources and services to their students. An analysis of past studies has demonstrated how utilizing services such as counseling or therapy can serve to be an excellent start for the mental health as well as the academic performance of students (Kivlighan et al., 2021). In fact, students who attended counseling sessions in college tend to see a greater increased rate in their grade point average (GPA) when comparing post-counseling GPA to pre-counseling GPA (Kivlighan et al., 2021).

Additionally, the integration of stress management programs is helpful for the overall wellbeing and mental health of students. Stress management programs demonstrated a high impact on improving anxiety and even depression in college students (Amanvermez et al., 2021).

Although an apparent positive mental health practice is utilizing counseling and therapy services, there are additional mental health practices that can be integrated into the daily lives of college students. One simple yet effective practice is meditation and breathing. Past studies exhibit that the method of mediation can lead to changes in the brain areas that are associated with stress and anxiety (Afonso et al., 2020). Another free and simple wellness practice for students is physical activity. Physical activity can be instrumental in preventing and managing mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Teychenne et al., 2020). Physical activity can simply mean just moving around more and trying to live a less sedentary lifestyle; participating in leisurely physical activity daily may allow students to reap benefits to their mental health and overall state of wellness (Teychenne et al., 2020).

Maintaining a strong social support system is another valuable mental health benefit for college students. College students who lack social support or have a low quality of social support are associated with negative mental health (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). Social support can include friendships, faculty support, and familial support (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). On the other hand, students who perceived their social support as high quality were associated with lower risks of mental health issues including depression, eating disorders, anxiety, and suicidal ideations (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). Social support systems are pressing for the mental health of college students, and it is

crucial to identify students who are disadvantaged in having social support.

Encouraging group activities that allow for increased social interactions may be beneficial in helping to guide students in creating social support systems.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Mental Health

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic affected students across the United States as students learned how to transition into virtual education. The COVID-19 pandemic affected multiple aspects of students' lives causing them to worry about their families, finances, anxiety, social isolation, academic performance, and more (Son et al., 2020). The lifestyle changes that resulted from COVID-19 commonly instigated an overwhelming feeling of fear and uncertainty in college students which could be tolling on their mental health (Son et al., 2020). In a survey conducted at a large university in Texas, 71 percent of students said they experienced increased stress and anxiety due to the pandemic while 44 percent indicated that they experienced depressive symptoms (Son et al., 2020). Loneliness in college students also seemed to dramatically increase in correlation with the COVID-19 pandemic (Labrague et al., 2021). In a study surveying the rates of loneliness in college students because of mandatory lockdowns and social isolation, 56.7 percent of students reported feeling moderate levels of loneliness while 23.6 percent of students reported feeling severe levels of loneliness (Labrague et al., 2021). Furthermore, students were already struggling with mental health problems prior to the COVID-19 pandemic faced exacerbated issues pertaining to their mental health (Zhai & Du, 2020). In fact, offering telehealth options to students to increase mental health aid accessibility during times of social isolation were imperative to the mental health of college students (Zhai & Du, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded

not only undergraduate students but also university administrators of the importance of tending to one's mental health, especially in order to increase student resilience in unprecedented times.

Mental Health Resources at the University of South Dakota (USD)

The University of South Dakota offers a large number of options for students to tend to their mental health. As of Fall 2021, there were 6,987 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of South Dakota (University of South Dakota). The Student Counseling Center is located at USD's Vermillion campus at the Cook House building; it offers a wide array of counseling services that are free to students. By providing free services, such as individual, couples, and group counseling, the University of South Dakota's Student Counseling Center makes itself a valuable, accessible option that students can utilize. University of South Dakota students can request an appointment through the Student Counseling Center website, by phone, or by email. Furthermore, the counseling center offers same-day appointments that can be scheduled online. In addition to traditional counseling services, the Student Counseling Center site also offers students the opportunity to participate in group therapy such as the "Mindful Self-Compassion Group" and "Managing Anxiety Group" (University of South Dakota).

Due to the high number of student cases that the Student Counseling Center attends to, students who are seeking out assistance may be referred to additional clinics on campus; these clinics include the Psychological Services Center and the Counseling and School Psychological Services Center (University of South Dakota). The Psychological Services Center is currently located in the Union building while the Counseling and School Psychological Services Center is in Delzell Education Center.

These clinics do not require a referral, and they both offer appointments after 5 p.m which presents students with another accessible counseling option. The clinics are training clinics which means that students will meet with a 3rd or 4th year student while being supervised by a licensed professional (University of South Dakota). In addition to offering in person appointments, the Psychological Services Center also offers telehealth appointments which again increases the accessibility and options that students can utilize for their wellbeing.

For students who may not be comfortable with receiving mental health services in person, they are able to utilize the Therapy Assistance Online (TAO) program that USD offers. This program serves as a “self-help” tool, and user utilization is completely anonymous, preventing the Student Counseling Center from collecting any information from the platform (Student Counseling Center, personal communication, March 2022). The Therapy Assistance Online can be accessed by students through USD’s mental health services website for free and at any time. This platform can be a useful tool for day-to-day wellness and mindfulness practices through the incorporation of brief and educational resources about mental health, wellness, and substance abuse topics (University of South Dakota). TAO consists of over 150 virtual sessions and even implements interactive mindfulness exercises (University of South Dakota). To reiterate, there are a plethora of mental health resources that University of South Dakota undergraduate students have available to them ranging from the Student Counseling Center, the Psychological Services Centers, and Therapy Assistance Online. Additionally, students can also participate in healthy mental health practices such as attending a meditation class at the University of South Dakota Wellness Center,

participating in individual or group fitness through the Wellness Center, or taking care of their overall wellbeing in general.

Current Study

The goals of this study are to examine student awareness, utilization, and access to college mental health and awareness services. Furthermore, the impacts of the COVID-19 on student mental health will be investigated in addition to the previously listed goals through an anonymous survey distributed to University of South Dakota undergraduate students. This study will address the role mental health has at the University of South Dakota, the prevalent mental health issues that students at USD struggle with, the barriers that prevent USD students from seeking mental health help, and the influence of COVID-19 on the mental health of USD students.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

Recruitment

Recruitment was conducted for two different data collection methods following Institutional Review Board approval. First, undergraduate students at the University of South Dakota were recruited to complete a survey regarding individual mental health perceptions. The second method involved contacting student counseling centers at three different universities for an interview.

For the survey portion of this study, the inclusion criteria required that participants were current, undergraduate students enrolled at the University of South Dakota. Participants were recruited through the University of South Dakota SONA platform, promotion to students through the USD Honors Program email list, marketing to students by asking University of South Dakota professors to share the survey, and through snowball sampling. A survey link was distributed to students who were not accessing the survey via SONA. Students did not receive any financial compensation for their participation. However, some professors may have provided extra credit in their courses if the survey was completed via SONA.

For the interview portion of the study, the University of South Dakota Student Counseling Center agreed to participate in an interview after communicating through email. Additionally, phone calls to two other universities were made, asking for an opportunity to interview a representative from the universities' mental health services department to assist in this Honors thesis project. After placing phone calls and sending voicemails, I never received a response. The original intent of this was to compare

mental health service utilization numbers at the University of South Dakota in comparison to other universities of similar undergraduate student size. However, this study objective was dropped from the study due to incomplete data from comparison schools.

Participants

A total of 136 responses were collected during the response period of the survey. However, 10 responses were dismissed from the study because they were at least 50 percent incomplete. The remaining 126 responses were used for the study. Responses were collected from participants identifying as male (20.0% of respondents), female (78.4% of respondents), and non-binary or third gender (0.8% of respondents). All undergraduate academic levels were represented in the survey responses including freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior. Participants ranged from ages 18 to 45; the median participant age was 20 years old, and the average participant age was approximately 20.29 years old. Undergraduate students of the major ethnicity groups were invited to participate in the survey including Caucasian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Black or African American, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Additionally, respondents were asked if they were a first-generation college student or not; 25.6% of respondents reported that they are first-generation students while 74.4% of the survey respondents reported that they are not first-generation students.

Table 1: Demographics of survey respondents

Age	Percentage (%)
18	12.0
19	35.2
20	27.2
21	16.8
22	3.2
23	1.6
> 23	4.0

Academic Level	Percentage (%)
Freshman	38.4
Sophomore	25.6
Junior	25.6
Senior	10.4

Ethnicity	Percentage (%)
Caucasian	84.6
American Indian or Alaska Native	5.38
Black or African American	5.38
Asian	4.62
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.0

Materials

For this study, an anonymous, online survey was conducted through Qualtrics to assess and gain a better understanding of the undergraduate utilization and awareness of mental health resources at the University of South Dakota. The survey received approval from the University of South Dakota Institutional Review Board on March 4th, 2022.

For the interview portion, a representative of the University of South Dakota Student Counseling Center consented to an interview through Zoom. Prior to the interview, the interviewee was asked to bring helpful counseling center utilization numbers.

Procedure

The survey was released to students through Qualtrics from March 7th, 2022 to March 22nd, 2022. After agreeing to the informed consent statement, participants were able to complete the survey. The survey was completely anonymous and did not collect any identifiable information besides generalized respondent demographics. Participants were not required to answer all the questions; however, participants who did not complete at least 50 percent of the survey were removed from the study. The survey consisted of multiple-choice questions, multi-select questions, matrices, and free response questions (see Appendix B). The survey generally took participants about five to ten minutes to complete.

A virtual interview was conducted in March with a staff member of the University of South Dakota Student Counseling Center. The interviewee consented to having the interview recorded and used for research purposes. The purpose of this interview was to present the perspectives of the mental health culture at the University of South Dakota

from a representative from the Cook House, providing a more administrative approach of sorts. The duration of the interview was about twenty-five minutes.

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS

Purposes of This Study

This study set out to answer the following set of questions:

1. What are the mental health services available at the University of South Dakota?
How are they utilized by current, undergraduate USD students?
2. How aware are students of the services available at the University of South Dakota?
3. What are students' perceptions of their individual mental health status, and how do they feel the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced it?

University of South Dakota Student Mental Health Survey Results

The following survey results were collected to assess the following variables: (1) student mental health perceptions, (2) what mental health issues University of South Dakota undergraduates struggle with, (3) the awareness of mental health resources at the University of South Dakota, (4) the accessibility of these resources, (5) the barriers that students encounter when it comes to seeking out mental health assistance, and (6) the role of COVID-19 on mental health perceptions.

Figure 1: The figure displays the survey respondents' perceptions of mental health effects on their academic and social lives; additionally, it displays the perceived effect that the COVID-19 pandemic had on their mental health.

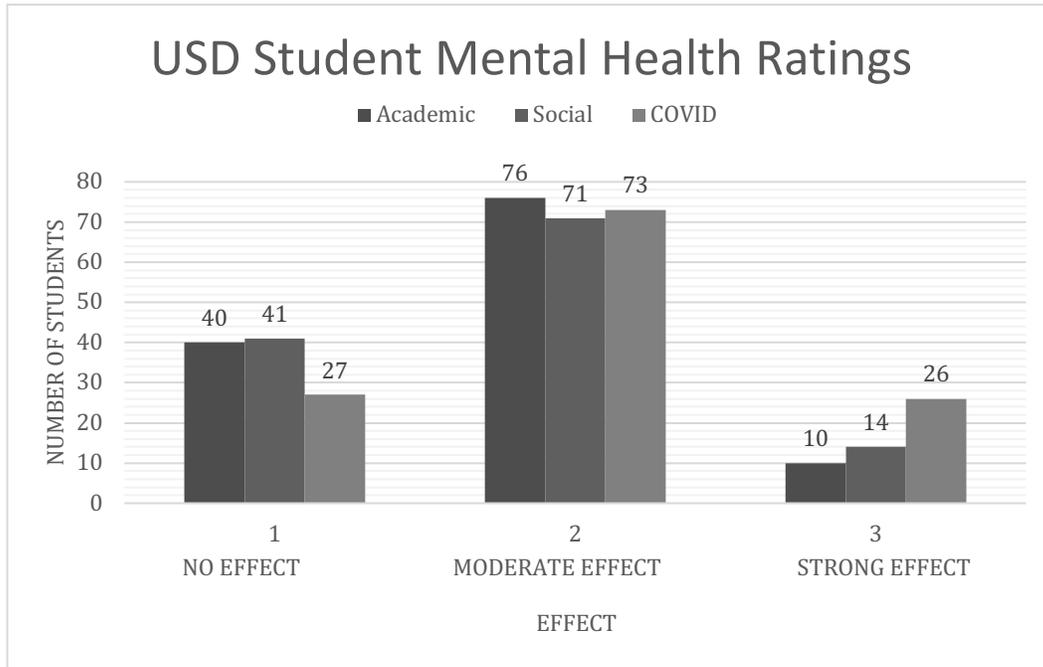
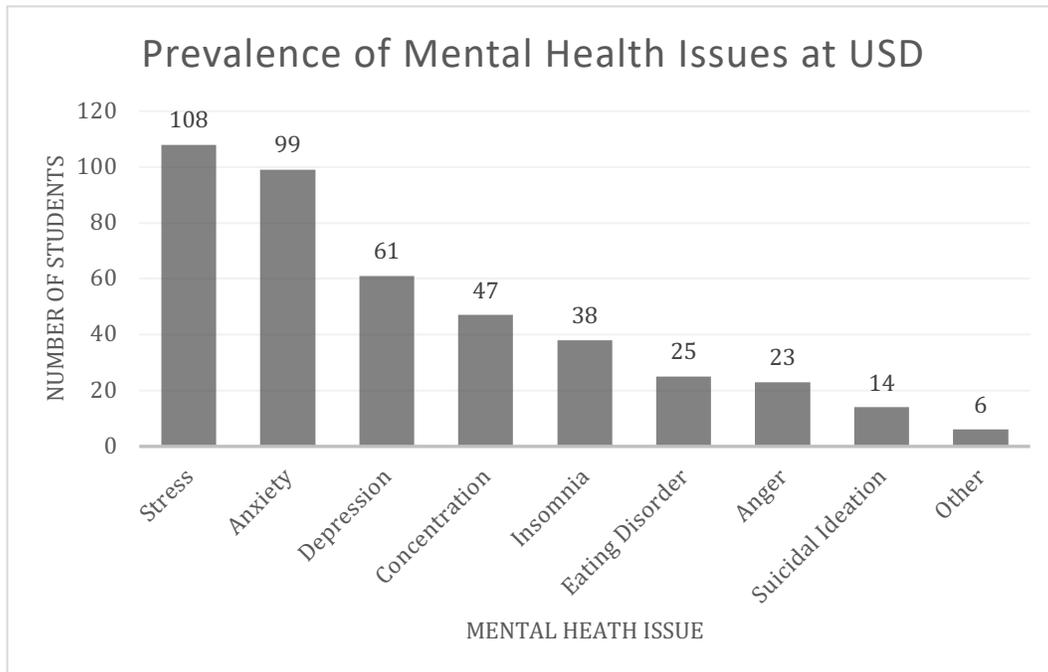


Figure 1 compiles the survey ratings of individual mental health perceptions into having one of three possible overall effects: no effect, a moderate effect, or a strong effect. The leftmost (darkest shade) bar for each of the three effects is representative of the perceived mental health effect on an individual's academics. The middle bar for each of the three effects is representative of the perceived mental health effect on an individual's social life. Finally, the rightmost (lightest shade) bar for each of the three effects is representative of the perceived effect that individuals believe the COVID-19 pandemic had on their mental health. No effect is represented by a rating of "1". A moderate effect is represented by a rating of "2". A strong effect is represented by a rating of "3".

More than half of the surveyed students feel that mental health has a moderate to strong impact on their academic life. About 2 out of 3 students feel that mental health has a moderate to strong impact on their social life. Nearly 3 in 4 students feel that COVID significantly affected their academic and especially social outcomes. There is a small association between feelings that COVID affected mental health and the students' general report of mental health.

Female students were more likely to report poorer mental health, especially COVID-19 having a larger impact, but gender differences were not significant in student reports of mental health effects on academic or social life. In general, other demographics (first generation, age) were not related to mental health or to accessing mental health services – except upperclassmen students reported slightly more effect from COVID on their mental health.

Figure 2: This graph portrays the mental health issues that University of South Dakota student respondents report to struggle with.



In Figure 2, the option “Other” allowed for write-in responses. The additional responses included mental health issues pertaining to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), seasonal affective disorder (SAD), and attention-deficit / hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

For this survey question, students were able to select multiple mental health issues. Based on student rankings, stress is indicated by 84.4% of survey respondents as the most popular mental health issue that students struggle with. Anxiety is an issue that 77.3% of survey respondents struggle with. About 47.7% of students indicated that they struggle with depression. Additionally, students also indicate struggling from issues such as concentration, insomnia, eating disorders anger, and suicidal ideations.

Figure 3: This graph portrays some of the mental health practice options that are available to students and which mental health practices respondents are aware of.

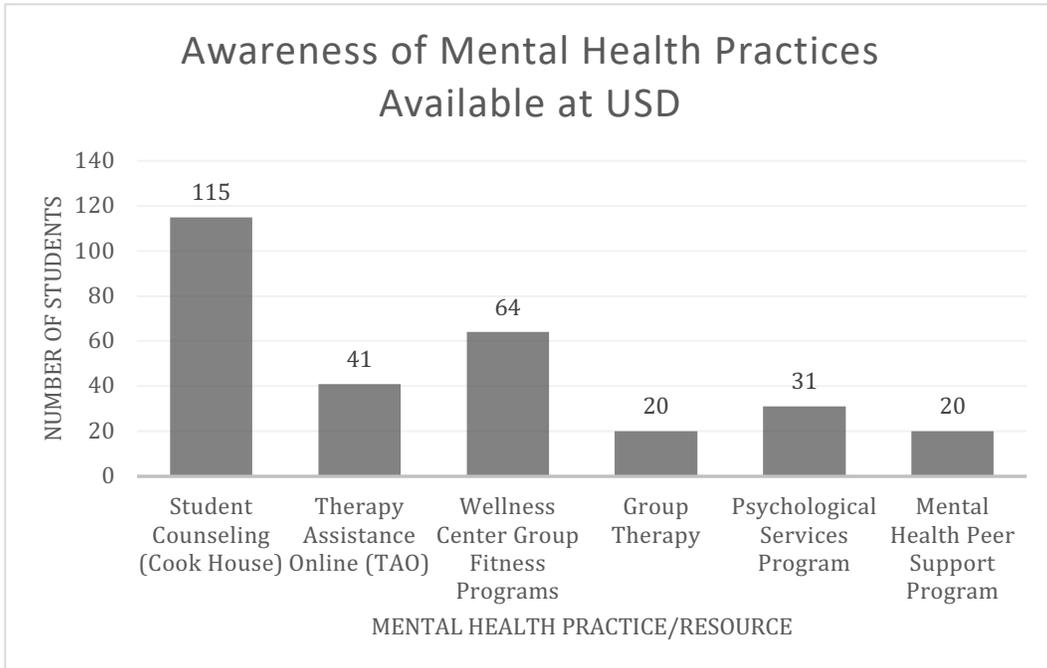
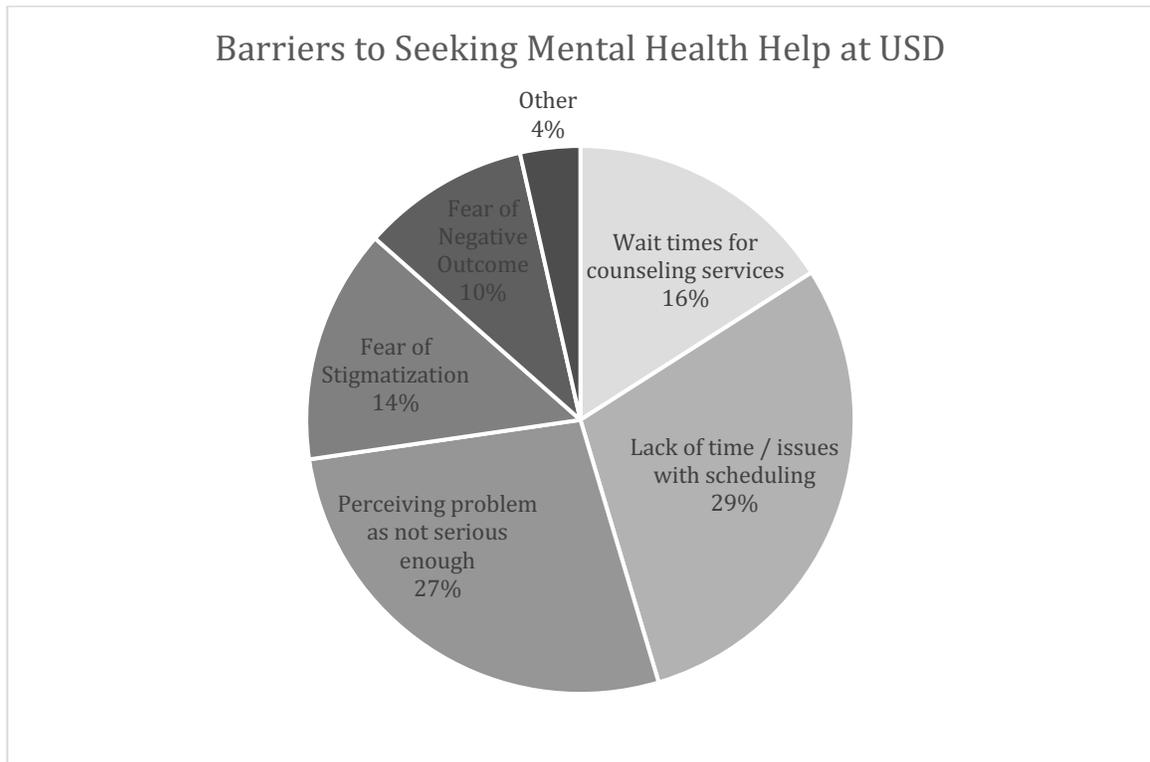


Figure 3 exhibits how student counseling through the Cook House (about 91% of respondents) is the most well-known mental health resource option at the University of South Dakota. Meanwhile, students report that they are less aware of other options such as the Therapy Assistance Online platform (32.5%) Psychological Services Center Programs (24.6%), group therapy (15.9%), and mental health peer support (15.9%).

Almost 100 percent of survey respondents report that they are aware that the University of South Dakota offers mental health services; only one respondent said they did were not aware. However, when asked if students knew how to access mental health resources at USD, 67.5 percent of respondents reported “Yes” while 32.5 percent reported “No”. Students were asked if they were made more aware of University of South Dakota mental health resources during the COVID-19 pandemic; 27.2 percent reported that they were made more aware of resources while 68 percent reported that they

were not made more aware of mental health resources. There were 4.8 percent of the respondents who reported that they felt they could not adequately compare their experiences with USD mental health resources because they were not in attendance at USD prior to the start COVID-19.

Figure 4: This figure demonstrates the most common barriers that students face when it comes to seeking out assistance for their mental health through survey response percentages.



The option “Other” included free-response answers such as poor counseling outcomes in the past, fear to admit the struggle with a mental health issue, worries about feeling uncomfortable, and hearing that peers had a poor experience. The fear of a negative outcome as a barrier was associated with reports of mental health impacts on academic and social outcomes, poorer general mental health, and stronger impact of COVID on mental health. Additionally, wait times for counseling services were associated with reports of mental health impacts on social outcomes and poorer mental health in general.

Additional Mental Health Survey Utilization Results

Poorer mental health ratings are associated with use of Cook House and counseling services. Students that use counseling services are also more likely to use resources from the Cook House. Academic problems are a weak predictor of accessing the Cook House and not related to using counseling or online services. Meanwhile, social problems are a moderate (i.e., stronger predictor) of utilizing the Cook House but are a weak predictor of utilizing counseling services and are not related to utilizing online services.

University of South Dakota Student Counseling Center (SCC) Interview

Throughout the interview, there were a few common themes present:

(1) Utilization

There were 772 unique students that were seen by the Student Counseling Center in the 2021 academic year. The number of students that have been seen by the Student Counseling Center staff has increased by approximately 100 individuals when compared to the 2020 academic year. The number for the 2022 academic year is anticipated to increase significantly more than 772 as demonstrated by the number of students placed on the waitlist during the 2022 academic year.

Unique refers to the individual students. This does not include the number of times an individual student could have potentially come back for a repeat counseling visit.

Students can participate in about eight counseling sessions per semester due to the high demand for counseling services. Students that are high-risk are seen more often, depending on their individual needs.

There were 7,812 scheduled appointments through the Student Counseling Center during the 2021 academic year.

Currently, a single therapist at the USD Student Counseling Center will have a caseload of about 45 students at one time; meanwhile, this caseload used to be about 25 students in past years.

Although the most popular service utilized by students at the SCC is individual therapy, the Student Counseling Center offers additional services such as group therapy, couples therapy, and are an accredited alcohol and drug treatment center.

Anxiety (60 percent of cases) is identified as the top reported reason for individual therapy while depressive symptoms (40 percent of cases) is reported as second. About 30 percent face issues with concentration. Approximately 12 percent of cases involve relationship issues. Additionally, there are some cases that deal with sexual assault and past traumas. In total, these cases total to add over 100% since students may face comorbidities regarding mental health issues

(2) Barriers

The Student Counseling Center details that although there has been a shift, there is still a stigma around mental health that might correlate with mental health seeking attitudes. The Student Counseling Center also notes that individual backgrounds such as cultural or familial might have an impact on the attitudes towards utilizing mental health services. The fear of the unknown or conversing with others who may have had poor, previous experiences with counseling are also prevalent barriers that discourage students from seeking help.

Another potential barrier is the Student Counseling Center waitlist, which is a trend at many college campuses.

(3) COVID-19

In association with the COVID-19 pandemic, the University of South Dakota Student Counseling Center saw an increase in depression and an increase in anxiety in students. According to the USD Student Counseling Center, the pandemic also seemed to increase conversations regarding mental health.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic encouraged the USD Student Counseling Center to utilize telehealth which allowed for more outreach and accessibility.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION

Findings and Interpretations

This study is valuable in gaining a better understanding of how mental health plays an active role in the lives of undergraduate students at the University of South Dakota. Many student respondents signify that mental health has had at least some effect, either a moderate or severe one, on their academic and social lives. This emphasizes the crucialness of strategizing how to best meet the mental health needs of University of South Dakota students. At the University of South Dakota, the mental health issues that students seem to struggle with the most are stress, anxiety, and depression respectively. This concurs with past research studies and reiterates the value of this particular study, affirming why it is relevant to understand the mental health perceptions of our community of students here at the University of South Dakota. Furthermore, even though almost all of the surveyed students reported that they have awareness that mental health resources are available to them through USD, about one-third of the respondents are unsure how to access these resources, emphasizing the importance of implementing additional awareness techniques to educate students on how they can easily access the mental health resources that they may need. Most students are aware of the existence of the Student Counseling Center, located at the Cook House. However, students seem to lack awareness or are unsure about additional mental health options such as the Psychological Services Centers and the Therapy Assistance Online platform.

Since students with poorer mental health seem to utilize mental health resources such as the Cook House and counseling services, this may be indicative that acknowledgement and awareness of individual mental health may correlate with help-seeking behaviors. Furthermore, since female students at the University of South Dakota tend to have poorer mental health, they may be more open to seeking out mental health support if they are aware of their mental health status as described by past literature. This correlation is valuable in considering which students would potentially be most receptive to an increased presence and awareness of mental health options around campus.

Unfortunately, there are still a variety of barriers that discourage or prevent students from seeking out assistance for their mental health. Many of these barriers, such as perceiving a mental health issue as not serious enough or fears of stigmatization, can potentially be reduced if University of South Dakota students are encouraged more by other students, faculty, and administrators to prioritize their mental health, no matter how small of an issue it may seem like. It is crucial to promote healthy attitudes towards help-seeking behavior to create a healthy campus culture regarding mental health.

In regard to the influence of COVID-19's influence on the lives of college students, this study correlates with past findings indicating that COVID-19 affects the social aspects of college students. Again, this is most likely the result of the loneliness that emerges from social isolation as seen in past literature. It is encouraging to note that about 1 out of 4 students indicated that they were made more aware of mental health resources at USD because of the pandemic. Additionally, this coincides with the Cook House interviewee's findings signifying that there has been an increase in mental health conversation especially due to rising anxiety and depression rates. Admirably, the

University of South Student Counseling Center was able to adapt to the mental health needs of its students by providing telehealth counseling services which potentially boosted mental health resilience in the campus community even during unexpected times.

The interview conducted with the staff member of the USD Student Counseling Center called to mind several intriguing points. First, although the Student Counseling Center is able to provide an abundance of valuable resources to the undergraduate student population, regular and continuous counseling appointments at the Cook House are oftentimes capped due to the high demand for counseling assistance. It is also important to note that the caseload of the Cook House seems to be rapidly increasing every year which can contribute to the limiting of number of resources for individual students. Again, the Cook House staff will find a way to see at-risk students in urgent circumstances, but it still can be difficult for them to see students right away if they are simply seeking out first-time counseling help. This ultimately results in a waitlist for students. The idea of a waitlist oftentimes deters students from making an initial impression appointment. Additionally, many students are deterred by the waitlist since they do not perceive their issue as severe enough and worry that they are taking someone with more dire needs' spot. However, University of South Dakota undergraduate students should not feel unencouraged by the waitlist at the Cook House. Instead, it is critical to bring more awareness to the other counseling options that are available to students outside of the Cook House but still on campus. Since fear of a negative outcome because of counseling and wait times for counseling services are associated with poorer general mental health, it is crucial to provide and make students aware of quality mental health services available throughout campus. Again, these options include appointments

through the Psychological Services Center or the Counseling and School Psychological Services Center. Raising awareness of these additional counseling clinics will ultimately allow students who are discouraged from seeking help, due to wait times, personal fears, or scheduling issues, to be reached and helped.

Limitations

Unsurprisingly, this thesis research project faced several limitations. One of the main limitations to this study is the amount of time the survey was distributed. Ideally, I would have liked to release the survey for a longer amount of time in order to receive more responses from various student groups across campus. However, I was still impressed to receive over 100 survey responses in about a two-week release period. Due to the time constraints of my thesis project, I was unable to advertise and distribute the survey to students in many varying disciplines i.e., student athletes, sorority and fraternity life, and more non-Honors students in general. Marketing the survey to different groups of students might have had produced slightly diversified results.

Furthermore, I was unable to contact a large number of additional out-of-state universities due to the time constraints of the thesis project. This restricted my ability to compare the University of South Dakota's mental health service options and utilization numbers to other universities. However, after studying what options the University of South Dakota offers its students in terms of mental health resources, I can contentedly observe that there are plentiful mental health resources provided by the University of South Dakota; additionally, these resources can be excellent for students as long as students are aware of them and are able to access them.

Another limitation I discovered after I had already had my survey approved and released to students was that I did not address other mental health issues including but not limited to imposter syndrome, burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder, and seasonal affective disorder. It would have been worthwhile to have asked students about their perspectives and experiences with mental health issues pertaining to these topics especially since a few of them, such as burnout and imposter syndrome, are becoming more recently discussed. However, when creating the questions for the survey, I did not take these topics into account. Studying these additional mental health issues and how they pertain to both undergraduate and graduate students would most likely produce worthwhile findings.

Future Directions

The University of South Dakota provides undergraduate students with several options for healthy mental health practices. While these resources and services can be incredibly useful to the mental health of students when utilized, many USD students are not aware of all the resources available to them. Ideally, it would be beneficial to bring in another therapist for the Student Counseling Center; however, this may not be as feasible and simple as it seems since there are various factors to consider such as budget constraints. Promoting more advertising around campus, in student housing areas, campus buildings, and on USD social media, can bring an increased awareness of the wide array of mental health resources that students can access. Additionally, increasing the exposure of the various mental health resources to University of South Dakota students through tabling in the Muenster University Center or hosting events is another option to increase accessibility to students.

Furthermore, it is promising to see how the adjustments to the accessibility of mental health resources through the University of South Dakota's website has developed for the better. Through the old University of South Dakota website, using the keyword search "mental health resources" would only produce mental health services for students as the eighth website hit; however, through the new USD website implemented in the Spring of 2022, the keyword search "mental health resources" immediately guides students to mental health service options as the number one hit on the site. It is worthwhile to note that although this change may seem miniscule, it actively is a simple stride being taken to improve mental health resource accessibility at the University of South Dakota.

Another way that the University of South Dakota can be proactive in promoting healthy mental health practices across campus is by incorporating mental health days into the curriculum. Students are commonly overwhelmed by their busy schedules, course loads, and extracurricular activities. Allowing students to take a day off can encourage them to tend to their mental health however they see fit. Additionally, offering more student programming or workshops that focus on student wellness and stress relief can potentially increase the amount of healthy conversation pertaining to mental health attitudes at the University of South Dakota. Although there are a wide variety of mental health resources that students can utilize, there are still potential future measures that can be implemented in the future to foster a strengthened and mentally healthy environment at the University of South Dakota.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

Mental health continues to be a prevalent issue that students struggle with daily, and the undergraduate students at the University of South Dakota seem to be no exception. However, the University of South Dakota is generously resourceful to their undergraduate students when it comes to mental health. Through an assessment of the anonymous survey responses, the interview with the USD Student Counseling Center, and the research of mental health resources on the University of South Dakota's official website, there are numerous, excellent mental health options available to undergraduate students. The University of South Dakota's mental health resources and services are accessible and simple to utilize, and the resource accessibility and ease create a sense of healthy encouragement for students to cultivate their mental health. By encouraging students to prioritize their mental health, barriers to seeking out mental health may slowly become alleviated or improved over time. However, there is still a discrepancy in student awareness or lack of understanding for certain mental health resources available such as group therapy, the Psychological Services Centers, and Therapy Assistance Online. Furthermore, it is critical to be able to continuously meet and adapt to the mental health needs of University of South Dakota students to strengthen mental health resilience, especially in case of unprecedented issues as exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Future measures, such as marketing the various forms of mental health resources through social media and at student events, should be taken to increase awareness of available services that are supplemental to the overall mental health of University of

South Dakota undergraduate students. Additionally, it would be beneficial to cultivate a healthy campus mental health culture by implementing interactive student workshops or programming that focus on mental health topics such as stress relief, wellness, and managing anxiety. This study exhibits that there is already some awareness and utilization of mental health resources by University of South Dakota undergraduates, but further steps must be taken to reduce the barriers that make these services more accessible for all students to help as many students as possible. Although University of South Dakota students are welcome to participate in various, valuable methodologies to tend to their mental health, it is pertinent to continue to analyze how resources can be further improved and modified to best contribute to a mentally healthy campus culture.

APPENDICIES

Appendix A: University of South Dakota Student Counseling Center Interview Questions

1. What mental health practices do you think are most important for college students to participate in?
2. How many students utilize the student counseling center or its services?
3. What are some of the most utilized student counseling services used by students?
4. What attitude do you think the University of South Dakota community and its students have towards seeking help for mental health?
5. How do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the mental health of our students?
6. What barriers do you think prevent students from maintaining mental health practices at the University of South Dakota? What barriers are there to seeking counseling help, such as through the Cook House?
7. Since the Cook House can be very busy and has a waitlist, what would you suggest a student do if they wanted immediate help?
8. Are there any additional resources that the Student Counseling Center would need or could use that would benefit the mental health of students in the long run?

Appendix B: University of South Dakota Mental Health Survey

Please review the consent form below and at the bottom of the form click Agree if you wish to continue with the study, or NO, if you wish NOT to participate.

Informed Consent Form

If you agree to participate in the study, please click on AGREE below. If you do not wish to participate, click on - NO, I do not want to participate, and you will be taken to the end of the survey.

- AGREE (1)
 - NO, I do not want to participate (2)
-

The next set of questions asks about mental health services and your mental health. Mental health refers to problems such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, anger, stress, eating disorders, and concentration issues. These problems can be mild, moderate, or serious.

Q1 How much has your mental health impacted your academic success at USD?

- None at all (1)
 - A little (2)
 - A moderate amount (3)
 - A lot (4)
 - A great deal (5)
-

Q2 How much has your mental health impacted your social life at USD?

- None at all (1)
 - A little (2)
 - A moderate amount (3)
 - A lot (4)
 - A great deal (5)
-

Q3 Are you aware that the University of South Dakota offers mental health services?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
-

Q4 Which of these mental health services at the University of South Dakota are you aware of?

- Student Counseling (Cook House) (1)
 - Therapy Assistance Online (TAO) (2)
 - Wellness Center Group Fitness Programs (3)
 - Group Therapy (4)
 - Psychological Services Center (5)
 - Mental Health Peer Support Program (6)
 - Other (7) _____
-

Q5 On a scale of 1-10, how healthy do you feel your mental health is?

- 1 - Not healthy at all (1)
 - 2 (2)
 - 3 (3)
 - 4 (4)
 - 5 (5)
 - 6 (6)
 - 7 (7)
 - 8 (8)
 - 9 (9)
 - 10 - Very healthy (10)
-

Q6 Do you know how to access mental health services at USD?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
 - Other (3) _____
-

Q7 On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your mental health/wellness practices?

- 1 - I pay no attention to my mental health. (1)
 - 2 (2)
 - 3 (3)
 - 4 (4)
 - 5 (5)
 - 6 (6)
 - 7 (7)
 - 8 (8)
 - 9 (9)
 - 10 - I am very active in taking care of my mental health. (10)
-

Q8 Which of the following mental health issues do you struggle with (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY?)

- Anxiety (1)
- Depression (2)
- Suicidal Ideation (3)
- Anger (4)
- Insomnia (5)
- Concentration (6)
- Eating Disorder (7)
- Stress (8)
- Other (9) _____



Q9 What things do you do to attend to your mental health?



Q10 Which mental health practices have you participated in during college?

- Exercise (1)
 - Meditation (2)
 - Counseling (3)
 - Deep Breathing Exercises (4)
 - Eating well (5)
 - Socializing (6)
 - Sleeping around 7-9 hours a night (7)
-

Q11 Do you feel COVID-19 has affected your mental health?

- No, COVID has not affected it at all. (1)
 - COVID has somewhat affected my mental health. (2)
 - Yes, COVID has drastically affected my mental health. (3)
-

Q12 Were you made more aware of mental health services at USD as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
 - Other (3) _____
-

Q13 Did you utilize any mental health services during COVID-19?

	Yes (1)	No (2)
Student Counseling Center (Cook House) (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Psychological Services Center (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Therapy Assistance Online (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Wellness Center Group Fitness Programs (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q14 Would you use mental health services if you were more aware of their availability?

	Definitely yes (1)	Probably yes (2)	Might or might not (3)	Probably not (4)	Definitely not (5)
Student Counseling Center (Cook House) (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Psychological Services Center (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Therapy Assistance Online (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Wellness Center Group Fitness Programs (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q15 What barriers (stopped you from going) do you think there are to accessing mental health services at USD?

- Fear of stigmatization (1)
- Lack of time / issues with scheduling (2)
- Wait times for counseling services (3)
- Fear of negative outcome (4)
- Perceiving problem as not serious enough (5)
- Other (6) _____

Q16 Is there another type of mental health service you would use if it was available?

Q17 Do you have any other comments, concerns, or suggestions about the mental health services available at USD?

Q18 What is your academic year?

- Freshman (1)
 - Sophomore (2)
 - Junior (3)
 - Senior (4)
-

Q19 How old are you?

- 18 (1)
 - 19 (2)
 - 20 (3)
 - 21 (4)
 - 22 (5)
 - 23 (6)
 - Other (7) _____
-

Q20 What is your gender?

- Male (1)
 - Female (2)
 - Non-binary / third gender (3)
 - Prefer not to say (4)
 - Other (5) _____
-

Q21 Are you a first-generation college student?

- No (1)
 - Yes (2)
-

Q22 What is your ethnicity?

- Caucasian (1)
- American Indian or Alaska Native (2)
- Black or African American (3)
- Asian (4)
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (5)

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