

Mental Health and the College Freshman: An Exploration of Effective Ways to Address Mental Health Education in a First-Year Experience Course

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Mental health education is growing in importance among college students, as students are arriving on American college campuses with more diagnosed and medicated mental health problems (Gallagher, 2005). The first-year classroom is an excellent setting for raising awareness about the importance of identifying and treating these issues in order to ensure that every student has an enjoyable, successful, and healthy college experience. This article compiles research gathered by a graduate student in a higher education master's program during an internship with the First-Year Experience Office at Florida State University. It discusses the growing need for mental health awareness on college campuses, identifies current trends in mental health education in the first-year classroom, and presents several useful resources for those campuses who are considering including this topic in a college transition course.

As an intern with the First-Year Experience (FYE) Office at Florida State University in Tallahassee, I originally set out to compile research information to contrast and compare how FYE programs from similar-sized Canadian post-secondary institutions and several schools in the United States approach social justice/victimization and mental health education in their programs.

In conducting this research, I have made the following adjustments to this initial goal statement:

1. My research has been broadened to include relevant information outside that which I gathered from program directors/administrators affiliated with a particular FYE Office (excellent resources were obtained from the National Mental Health Association and from a search of related literature).
2. Since the information I gathered on one of the three outlined areas of research proved broad enough to investigate, I limited myself to exploring only the topic of mental health education as addressed in the FYE classroom.
3. Although contact was made with both Canadian and American schools, the majority of the responses received came from American schools.

Background

A mandate of most FYE courses is to help incoming freshmen make an effective

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transition from high school to college by giving them the knowledge necessary to tackle new issues that arise in their new surroundings. Students come to campus with a variety of needs and questions, and an FYE course can be an excellent opportunity for students to receive information and resources relevant to their personal needs. Gallagher (2005) noted that the current body of students on today's college campuses already is arriving on site with more widely known and medicated mental health problems. In his 2005 National Survey of College Counseling Center Directors, Gallagher summarized the following information based on data provided by directors from 366 counseling centers, representing institutions from numerous states and provinces:

- 90.3 % of directors believed that in recent years there has been an increase in the number of center clients with severe psychological problems. (p. 4)
- 95 % of directors reported an increase in students coming to counseling who were already on psychiatric medication (Up from 92% in 2004). (p. 4)
- 96% of directors believed that the increase of students with more serious problems was a growing concern in their centers, 78% believed it was a growing concern for the institution's administration; 69% of faculty and 88.5% of residence life staff also expressed these beliefs. (p. 4)

In summary, counseling center directors believed that the increase in students' mental health problems should be a concern for all areas of college life, making it a necessary topic to be covered in FYE courses.

In 2004, the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) published a report that summarized the dangerous results that can arise when mental health issues are ignored. According to the report, Goldsmith, Pellmar, Kleinman, and Bunney (2002) claimed that "untreated mental illnesses—specifically depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and substance abuse—are the leading contributory causes of suicide in young adults" (SPRC, p. 22). The SPRC report went on to state that "progress has been made in the scientific understanding of suicide, mental disorders, and substance abuse, as well as in developing interventions to treat these disorders" (p. 22). To further this progress, mental health education needs to be an ongoing priority in the lives of young adults. The FYE classroom is an excellent opportunity to further educate college-aged students about the importance of understanding mental illnesses.

Research Summary

In order to identify trends in current mental health education within the FYE classroom, I began by e-mailing several FYE offices in both the United States and Canada. Offices were identified at random through an Internet search. I chose offices that seemed to follow a similar model as the FYE Office at Florida State University, with the FYE class component being an essential part in choosing schools to survey. Through Web sites, I established contacts with professionals in each office, and communicated to them via e-mail the following survey:

1. Please provide me with a brief summary of your program and its purpose.
2. Is your program mandatory for all incoming freshmen?

3. Does your class/program address issues of mental health? If so, how? If not, do you plan to address this in the future?
4. Is there a need for mental health education on your campus?
5. What offices or other professionals on campus do you engage to help with this area of programming?
6. Do you have any templates or programs you use that I could have? Which of these programs have been met with success/failure?
7. Do you see a need for programs addressing these issues to continue? If so, do you foresee a change in topics covered or an increase in demand? If not, why?

After experiencing little success with this initial wave of contacts, I posted an e-mail to the national FYE listserv¹ hosted by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. This combination of attempts yielded excellent responses from several schools, with specifically useful responses provided by A. Barnes at The Ohio State University and M. Marino at the University of San Diego.

In the following e-mail correspondence, Barnes spoke about how Ohio State's FYE program addresses mental health education, and she touched on the importance of collaborating with outside offices to help more accurately address mental health concerns in the FYE classroom:

We address mental health issues through our First Year Success Series (a series of over 300 workshops in the fall that compliment the first-year survey course). Academic advis[e]rs require students to attend a certain number of these sessions and our office coordinates the Success Series. We have 9 themes as part of the program and one is "Anxiety and Mental Health." We work closely with our Counseling and Consultation Services office to provide programs addressing mental health concerns. (personal communication, June 29, 2006)

M. Marino discussed the following resources that the University of San Diego FYE program utilizes to help address mental health education:

We have several mental health articles that [will] be available online in a few weeks through a brand new activity we are calling "FYE Online Resources." It is a series of short articles written by professionals/faculty on campus to help first-year students succeed in and out of the classroom. The website [*sic*] will be up around the middle of August, feel free to take a look:

<http://www.sandiego.edu/sli/FYEOnlineResources.php>. (personal communication, August 2, 2006)

In response to the latter research questions, the e-mail results were not overly useful for the purpose of this paper. Most FYE professionals mentioned that they were aware of mental health education as a priority for college students and were working to find more effective means to assist their student populations. A. Barnes (personal communication, June 29, 2006) stated that she "definitely expect[s] an increase in the number of programs that we offer that deal with topics of mental health and social justice." It is hoped that the resources compiled in this research project will be helpful in FYE

¹ <http://www.sc.edu/fye/listservs/archives.html>

programs across the country.

Addressing Mental Health in the FYE Classroom: Activity Suggestions

The most beneficial aspect of this research project was the plethora of resources that was offered up through initial e-mail contacts and the listserv posting. Several excellent resources were suggested as educational ways to address mental health education in the FYE classroom. Below is a summary of the most interesting/relevant suggestions. These resources could be the basis for FYE class discussions, assignments, resource handouts, or starting points for collaboration with other offices (i.e., a counseling center) on a college campus.

Online Mental Health Screenings

Screening for Mental Health, a program through the Pennsylvania State University Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), offers an online mental health screening.² As stated on the CAPS Web site (2003), this screening does not replace the assessment of a trained psychologist, but may be a good starting point for further mental health evaluation. The tests cover a variety of topics (including depression, eating disorders, and alcohol abuse) and take approximately 5 minutes to complete. This activity could be used as the basis for a reflective journal assignment in an FYE class. Students could be required to visit the online screening site and then comment on questions related to the experience in an assigned journal entry.

Emotional Quotient Inventory

The Post Secondary Emotional Quotient Inventory: Short (EQ-i:S)³ gives students the opportunity to learn more about their coping skills and mental health by being scored on the five major areas of emotional intelligence: intrapersonal, interpersonal, stress management, adaptability, and general mood. Many colleges have begun using this inventory as a part of their FYE programs under the assumption that understanding emotional intelligence may help students be more successful in balancing the demands of college life.

Parker and Duffy (2005) commented on the importance of understanding students' emotional intelligence and its implications for college student behavior and success. They state:

First year programs at most colleges and universities spend considerable time and resources helping students with organization, time management, and related academic skills. The growing interest in EI [Emotional Intelligence] within higher education is

²This online screening can be accessed at <https://www.mentalhealthscreening.org/screening/welcome.asp>.

³More information on this assessment tool can be found at [https://www.mhs.com/ecom/\(r0jzrvn4prktye45lmwvjx45\)/product.aspx?RptGrpID=EQP](https://www.mhs.com/ecom/(r0jzrvn4prktye45lmwvjx45)/product.aspx?RptGrpID=EQP). There is a fee associated with this tool and a qualified user must be enlisted to interpret the data.

fueled by the fact that emotional and social skills can be enhanced, just like study skills, through targeted interventions.

The use of assessment tools to help understand students' emotional intelligence may prove to be a beneficial step for many FYE programs.

Online Pamphlets and Informational Materials

There are several collections of online pamphlets and related resources to mental health education. These sites offer a variety of educational materials on topics related to mental health. Dr. Bob Hsiung (2007), from the University of Chicago, maintains an online pamphlet collection entitled, "The Unabridged Student Counseling Virtual Pamphlet Collection."

The National Mental Health Association (2007a) runs a College Student and Depression Pilot Initiative outlined on their Web site. The site makes the following statement on mental health in college:

For many young adults, the college years are the best times of their lives. But too often these critical years of adjustment are undermined by depression, anxiety, substance abuse and eating disorders, sometimes leading to suicide. Researchers are finding that many mental illnesses may be traced to trauma whose damage surfaces in times of stress and change, such as the college years.

The National Mental Health Association (2007b) offers several college-specific fact sheets that can be accessed online. These fact sheets highlight the connection between several choices/behaviors (including alcohol and eating disorders) and depression.

Further Suggestions From Related Literature

O'Connor (2001) made several suggestions about how to approach mental health education in the college setting. She stated:

Campuses are increasingly recognizing that mental health is a critical factor in students' academic success, giving it attention psychologists only dreamed about a generation ago. More schools are beefing up their counseling centers and emphasizing mental health through innovative programs aimed at helping students before a serious problem emerges.

O'Connor makes the following suggestions when it comes to approaching mental health education:

- Rewarding good ideas [monetary prizes increase awareness of mental health issues on campus]
- Staving off mental health problems among students with disabilities
- Finding the students where they live [residence hall presentations; train resident advisers]
- Wooing students with an MTV-style approach
- Partnering with student groups
- Expanding faculty involvement

Richard Kadison (2004) makes several excellent suggestions on how colleges can more effectively address mental health on campus. Included are the following suggestions:

- *Provide rapid access to care.* Students must be reached when they are in distress and looking for help. Appointment delays reduce the chances of reaching students in need. Kadison suggests group and short-term therapy as a means to more effectively use resources and help students.
- *Prevent problems.* Preventative education about the warning signs of mental health problems is necessary to help students identify problems before they escalate. These programs also assist in getting the staff of the counseling center more widely recognized on campus.
- *Coordinate care.* Coordinating treatment is necessary to best serve the student. Kadison points out the need for all support services (i.e., academic counseling, health services, career counseling, and housing) to work together both in treating a student and in following up.
- *Involve other students.* Peers can be a powerful tool to reach students. By including students as peer educators and outreach specialists, students are more likely to identify with presenters who are close to their age.
- *Post information on the Web.* As has been made evident in this article, there are many excellent online resources addressing mental health. Because today's college student spends a great deal of time on the Internet, making these resources widely known could prove beneficial.

Kadison also states that

academic success goes hand in hand with emotional and physical well-being. Even students who “get by” or succeed academically can be at risk if unhealthy behavioral patterns follow them after college. Promoting emotional health in students is an investment in the future. It should be part of the mission of all colleges and universities. (p. B20)

Mental Health Education in the FYE Classroom at Florida State University

As an assistant instructor for a section of FYE at Florida State, I was able to assess from the inside where mental health education could fit into a class. The current program at FSU gives instructors subject guidelines, a textbook, and several mandatory class sessions and assignments including a visit to the library (research methods and using electronic databases) and the Career Center (identifying career paths, exploring resources), a presentation by the FSU Victim Advocate Program (sexism in the media, self-advocacy), and the completion of an academic advising form. Beyond that, the instructional team (an instructor or instructor/assistant instructor paired with a student Peer Adviser) is given much autonomy in the design and implementation of the class. With the help of the material offered in the textbook, my instructional team chose to cover topics including involvement on campus, academics, money management, personal wellness, diversity and values, and stress/time management. This topic selection

provided our class with a wide variety of information and resources, but made only loose references to mental health under the topics of personal wellness and stress management.

The FYE Program at FSU is a well supported and thoughtfully planned program that engages a large number of freshmen every fall. The course is developmentally engaging as it gives first-year students a venue to ask questions that are not answered anywhere else on campus. However, this FYE program, as well as many others, could work to further integrate mental health education into the core curriculum. Education on this topic should focus on the connections between mental health and academic/personal success, impressing upon students the serious impact that stress and pressure can have on mental health.

Conclusion

Incorporating mental health education into the FYE classroom will help students understand the seriousness of mental health problems and will give them the tools to identify warning signs. The FYE classroom is the ideal setting for education on this subject. This article represents a beginning step toward developing a strong mental health education component for the FYE course at one institution. It is hoped that other institutions similarly will consider the importance of incorporating this critical topic in FYE courses and other initiatives for first-year students.

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