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Topic: Mental Health First Aid Training Experiences and Outcomes at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Project Summary

A large number of college students present with mental health problems including anxiety, depression, substance use, and suicidal ideation. These issues appear to be on the rise at a disproportionate rate among young adult college students. However, some research suggests that over half of students are untreated due to a variety of reasons (e.g., lack of knowledge of signs of mental illness and/or resources, barriers to treatment). Gatekeeper training programs such as Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) are a popular, systems-level approach to addressing mental-health related concerns, including accessibility issues, in young adult populations, and these programs are critical in addressing the elevated risk of mental health concerns in collegiate settings.

However, there are mixed results regarding general gatekeeper training programs and their effects on increasing utilization of mental health services among college students. There does not appear to be any recent holistic, mixed-methods program evaluation of MHFA on a large campus. Mixed methods with quantitative and qualitative information is essential for comprehensive understanding of how MHFA is viewed on our campus, especially through the lens of our undergraduate and graduate students, as we seek to improve the program at our university and expand its breadth and impact.

Our project will address this overall knowledge gap by expanding our MHFA program evaluation at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) and incorporating a mixed-method design with both quantitative (e.g., logic model goals, pre- and post-test surveys, Qualtrics surveys with three- and six-month follow up) and qualitative (e.g., one-on-one interviews with MHFA trainees) data.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences and viewpoints of individuals who have been trained in MHFA at UNC-CH to assess program outcomes for program evaluation and improvement purposes. Informed and strengthened by the qualitative findings, I will report on our strategic MHFA program evaluation implementation in hopes of helping to lay the foundational groundwork for other colleges to follow suit in expanding MHFA on campuses to improve mental health-related outcomes. The knowledge provided by this project is essential as mental health concerns continue to rise at college campuses, with traditional mental health resources being scarce or difficult to access.