Student Leaders as Advocates: A Collaborative Approach to the College Mental Health Problem

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"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has." —Margaret Mead

Student mental health issues are a growing concern across college and university campuses in the United States with the American College Health Association's finding that 24% of students report having considered suicide and 9.6% having considered suicide in the past 12 months (n = 19,861; ACHA, 2015). An additional study of higher education populations reported high rates of passive suicidal ideation amongst students, claiming that during a twelve-month period approximately 37% of undergrads (n = 15,000) and 30% of graduate students (n = 11,441) thought, "I wish this all would just end" (Drum, Brownson, Burton, Denmark, & Smith, 2009, p. 216). Students' suicidal ideation is often influenced by underlying mental health problems and previous traumatic experiences (Wilcox et al., 2010). These underlying conditions often negatively affect student engagement on campus and student relationships, that in turn, negatively influence their likelihood of graduating (Salzer, 2012). These individual problems often create a unique problem referred to as the 'college mental health problem' that includes a lack of knowledge pertaining to these mental health issues and a lack of resources for treating these issues that then present unique problems for institutions of higher education. Recognizing the magnitude and diversity of this problem, university administrators and researchers across the nation have sought to better understand student mental health issues to help find solutions and to help more students succeed (Castillo & Schwartz, 2013; Kitzrow, 2003).

Despite the efforts of administrators and researchers, many of the programs implemented to address the college mental health problem do not harness the collective efforts and influence of student leaders as advocates (see Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2011 for a review of common approaches across the United States). Recognizing the opportunity to harness student-led efforts, student leaders at Utah State University, in collaboration with administrators, delivered programming that addressed student mental health issues by increasing awareness through media campaigns, increasing access to mental health resources by advertising therapy services, and by fostering student skills through workshops. This programming, now known as the annual Mental Health Week at Utah State University was made possible due to student leaders being advocates on the issue and helping lead their fellow students and administrators to find new solutions to a known problem.

This paper uses the theoretical framework of Burns (1978) transformational leadership theory to explain how student leaders worked with their fellow undergraduate and graduate students to develop a unique vision to guide a university-wide effort of addressing the college mental health problem. More specifically, this paper outlines how student leaders systematically evaluated the college student mental health problem on our campus and worked directly with administrators in identifying potential resources to address the problem. Lastly, this paper describes how student leaders used this information and rallied the entire university campus to deliver programming that advocated for awareness and access to mental health resources for students. It is through this three-part process that student leaders were able to become effective advocates for change regarding the student mental health problem.

Theoretical Framework

Burns' (1978) original propositions on transformational leadership described leaders as existing on a continuum with the transformational style at one pole and the transactional style on the opposite pole. A transformational leader works collaboratively with others to help them to reach higher levels of motivation and morality, and in turn, others influence the leader to reach similarly high levels (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). Conversely, the transactional leader initiates contact with others to exchange things of value including performance rewards and mutual support. Burns (1978) originally explained that through interactions with others, a leader could be identified as either being a transformational or transactional leader. However, in more current iterations of this theory, transformational leaders are often characterized as those who are able to articulate a lucid vision of the future that can be easily shared with their peers to help motivate them while also noticing and bolstering individual differences in those

around them (Yammarino & Bass, 1990). While the transformational leader may use transactional skills, the bedrock of the transformational leader relies on their overall ability to create a unique vision to guide the efforts of their team.

Transformational leaders may seek new ways of working, identify new opportunities and approaches (despite risks), and prefer effective answers rather than efficient answers to address new and old problems alike. These leaders attempt to shape and create their environment through vision rather than reaction to their circumstances. In doing so, transformational leaders are able to intellectually stimulate their peers to help accomplish goals (Avolio & Bass, 1988). Based on the principles of transformational leadership (Burns, 1978), student leaders worked collaboratively with administrators at Utah State University to address the college mental health problem in three steps. First, student leaders identified how the college mental health problem affected their campus. Second, student leaders identified possible solutions to the unique problems on their campus helping create a holistic vision to deliver to administrators to gain their support. In doing so, student leaders used this vision to inspire their fellow students and to convince administrators to respond to the problem in new ways. Lastly, student leaders worked collaboratively with the campus community to deliver new, holistic programming to address the college mental health problem.

Understanding the Problem

Because of the complexity of the college mental health problem, it was important that we as student leaders first understood how students on our campus were affected. In the following two sections, we discuss the framework of how student leaders at Utah State University researched the college mental health problem on our campus and give an account of our personal experiences working to understand this problem.

Researching the problem. In researching the college mental health problem, three questions guided our process: (1) what do we already know about how this problem affects our campus; (2) what do we need to know about the way the college mental health problem affects our campus community; and (3) what can we do as students to address this problem? As a group, we addressed each of these questions in sequential order seeking to build a deeper understanding of the problem. First, we worked together to collect both qualitative accounts from fellow students and administrators, and then quantitative accounts from existing literature on the college mental health problem. After gathering this data, it was evident that much of the problem on our campus centered around a lack of awareness of problems and access to mental health resources. Based on the identification of these two problems, we as student leaders began the process

of identifying possible solutions by deepening our understanding of how to help make students more aware of the problem and how to help them access more resources.

Experience as a student leader. As student leaders guided by transformational leadership theory, we found it crucial to learn about problems that influenced our fellow students' experiences in school to help motivate them to improve their experience. In conversations with students, stories regarding their mental health and how it negatively influenced their success became increasingly common. The common theme amongst these shared experiences was a lack of awareness of the mental health problems individuals were experiencing or the problems that their friends were facing. Additionally, many students talked about the lack of available resources and explained that they often felt discouraged in seeking services due to the negative stigma surrounding these problems. It was from these conversations that we were encouraged to work directly with administrators to learn more about the problem to facilitate improvements in our students' lives.

After talking with students, we approached both administrators and faculty members at our university to determine what else we as student leaders needed to know about the problem in order to positively influence our fellow students' experiences on campus. We asked administrators how the university approached this problem and the types of resources they were using to address the problem. In talking to faculty, we would seek to better understand what current strategies were supported by research and how these programs could be implemented on our campus. In these talks, it was as equally important for us as student leaders to inform administrators and faculty about the student experience as it was for us to gain information regarding possible approaches to address this problem. In these initial meetings, it was crucial to emphasize the skills of a transformational leader and deepen relationships with both groups to encourage future collaboration to ensure the successful implementation of our future programming. Each of our conversations with students, faculty, and administrators led us to ask ourselves, "what do we do about this problem?" It was after this moment, that we as student leaders, decided that we would begin to work together to identify possible solutions to this problem that were not already being implemented and in doing so, be both advocates and leaders of change.

Identifying Possible Solutions

After talking with students and administrators on our campus, it was evident that students were affected by the college mental health problem in a myriad of ways. For instance, several students experienced a lack of ability to attend courses due to prevailing conditions, whereas other students, had a hard time paying attention in class due to their

mental health problems. Recognizing the magnitude and diversity of the problem, we started to identify possible solutions that responded to the problem appropriately. It was during the process of identifying possible solutions that we worked together as student leaders to create a vision that challenged the status quo and influenced our administrators on campus to address this growing problem in a new way. In the following sections, the general framework we used to identify possible solutions will be described.

Identifying a solution. In identifying a solution, the following questions guided our process: (1) what current university programs address student mental health issues; (2) what current community programs address student mental health issues; (3) what current student-led programs address student mental health issues; and (4) is a new program needed to address the current problem? In processing through these four questions, we were able to identify possible groups that addressed awareness of student mental health problems and how students could access resources for these problems. It was important to document how each of these organizations outreached to students and to identify if there were any possible barriers to students accessing these organizations and their resources. Additionally, it was important to brainstorm possible programming that student leaders could use to fill possible service holes to address the problems of awareness and access to resources.

Experience as a student leader. In identifying solutions, we started by reviewing each of the resources that were offered by our university. This process was completed by searching the internet for mental health resources on our campus and the surrounding community. It was through our internet searches that we recognized it was relatively difficult to find what resources were offered and how students could access them. Because of this, we decided it would be effective to increase the efficiency of accessing these resources for students and increasing the transparency of each agency we researched.

During our searches for mental health resources, we also identified that these services were often expensive and hard to access. For instance, mental health counseling on our campus had a relatively long wait time for regular sessions and community counseling resources were significantly more expensive and still had significant wait times. We recognized that while there were many services that were useful for students with these problems, there was a general lack of transparency and accessibility to these resources. From these conclusions, we decided it would be beneficial to create a student-led program addressing student mental health issues. It was at this time we worked together to create a vision that would guide the formation of mental health programming on our campus with the help of our administrators.

Developing Programming

Once a thorough understanding of the problem was created and possible solutions were identified, we worked together with administrators to create programming that worked to address students' mental health issues on our campus. In doing so, we drew upon our unique vision of engendering hope to guide collaboration with fellow students and administrators. The following sections outline the process we used to deliver mental health programming on our campus.

Creating a new solution. Based on the information garnered from researching the problem and identifying possible solutions, a clear framework was provided in creating a new, student-led program that would address the college mental health problem on our campus through the creation of the Mental Health Week. In the initial development of this week of programming, two goals were identified by student leaders: (1) increase awareness of mental health issues and how they impact the college experience and (2) increase student access to mental health resources. Working to address these goals, student leaders declared a week's worth of programming that included an educational speaker, mental health workshops, a mass media campaign, and fundraisers for continued access to mental health services. After the initial planning of the week occurred, a careful budget proposal was developed to ensure that programming could be completed. It was through effective collaboration with administrators that a proper budget and subsequent funding was accomplished. By motivating an entire campus community in each of the previous steps by sharing our common vision, student leaders were able to create a mental health week addressing transparency and access to resources while staying within a reasonable budget and receiving the support of administrators.

Experience as a student leader. Creating student-led programming that addressed students' mental health issues was made possible because we understood the problem, identified specific goals, and collaborated with fellow students and administrators to create a holistic plan. In our efforts to create a solution, we created a mental health programming week that was called "Mental Health is No Joke: Stand Up to Stigma." Our week showcased an acclaimed mental health speaker, mental health workshops led by clinical graduate students, a mass media campaign led by students, and a suicide awareness walk that included both students and community members. In creating these events, we collaborated closely with administrators to identify budgeting needs and to help recruit financial supporters that would invest in our programming. It was through this collaboration that we were able to accomplish this programming and help our students.

The Mental Health Week would not have been possible if we did not draw upon a vision that was created through collaboration with the entire campus community. Without researching students' mental health problems, understanding how students were affected, and knowing the resources available to these students, we would not have been able to create a meaningful plan. Without this plan, we would not have inspired other students to take action and to convince faculty and administrators that this problem was worth addressing in a new way. It was by being encouraged by the spirit of transformational leadership that students were able to be leaders and advocate for change and, with the help of administrators, carry out the first mental health week on our campus.

Conclusion

Students' mental health issues are a growing problem affecting a significant percentage of the college-aged population (American College Health Association, 2016; Blanco et al., 2008). This problem is unlikely to disappear in the near future making it important to continue identifying new strategies that interact in effective and meaningful ways. This paper has outlined a process student leaders used to address the student mental health problem on a college campus by creating a new strategy. Student leaders on our campus were able to better understand a problem and possible ways of improving this problem, creating a unified vision. Through research, student leaders then created a holistic plan that rallied an entire campus community to address the problem.

It is through the process outlined in this paper that student leaders can be both leaders and advocates by developing collaborative approaches to any problems including the student mental health problem. This has been documented at Utah State University by the creation of an annual Mental Health Week that provides specific programming sponsored by Utah State University. It is through the efforts of these students that more students have been able to have more open dialogue about mental health problems, access mental health resources, and have the opportunity to receive increased funding to directly address resource shortages.

Explanatory Note: The experiences of student leaders outlined in this paper took place at Utah State University, a school within the Utah System of Higher Education, during the 2015-16 academic year. The first step of the process, "Understanding the Problem" took place immediately following the inauguration of student body officers in April of 2015. After several months of investigating the problem, student leaders transitioned into "Identifying Possible Solutions" near the end of November 2015. Student leaders worked collaboratively with administrators, faculty, and staff during the holiday break to identify possible solutions and began developing programming to address this problem during February 2016. Student leaders developed programming, identified possible monetary donors, and delivered programming during the student-led mental health week at the first week of April 2016. The student-led mental health week programming lasted for the entire first full week of April 2016 from Monday to Saturday. It is important to note, however, that a pilot 'Mental Health Is No Joke' Week was implemented during the 2014-15 academic year providing the foundation for the future success of the 2015-16 academic year. Without the efforts of the initial team that founded the mental health week, student leaders would have been far less successful in their efforts outlined in this paper.

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