

Team 6: Stressed Out Students Final Report

How Might We:

How might we diminish excessive stress in Georgia Tech undergraduate students?

The Problem:

Problem statement and significance:

According to the American Institute of Stress, stress is classically defined as “a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.” [1] Over the past 10 years, this condition has become more prevalent as surveys have shown a decrease in the number of college students who rate themselves as above average in mental health from 53% in 2000 to 46% in 2010 in women and 64% to 57% in men [2]. Approximately 80% of all college students throughout the nation report being moderately to frequently stressed [3]. The causes are increased academic standards, as well as changing lifestyle habits, increased financial responsibility, ineffective coping strategies, and decreased stress tolerance [4]. In addition to the significant impact that stress has on the individual, it costs Georgia Tech and other universities in overall enrollment as well as in the reputation of the college based on its retention rate. Others affected by this problem are friends, colleagues, and family of stressed students because of the concern for the students overall health, as well as Georgia Tech administrators and professors because of the vested interest of increased student performance. The consequences of not addressing college student stress are increased prevalence of depression and suicide rates according to recent trends while the benefits of addressing the problem are increased student performance and improved individual mental health. The major barriers for clients to utilize services are awareness and accessibility. Barriers in the Georgia Tech community that impact change in the problem area or keep clients from service are the availability of students to go to time management workshops or other stress-relieving programs because of the many different strenuous schedules that these students may have.

Context of the problem:

Stress affects a large portion of the college student population and diminishes self-esteem and confidence. In large enough quantities, stress is commonly known to dramatically decrease human performance [1]. A recent study by Yale has shown that, in severe cases of high stress, the constant heavy strain placed upon the brain leads to reduction in brain mass, particularly those concerning emotional functioning [5]. Accordingly, stress is also heavily associated with more severe conditions such as depression, drug abuse, and social withdrawal [3]. Approximately 38% of college dropouts cite stress as a major reason for their withdrawal from school [6]. More specifically, Georgia Tech itself is oftentimes ranked as a highly stressful school [7]. This stems largely from the heavy prevalence of students majoring in “hard” science

and engineering disciplines [8]. As of such, we feel that Georgia Tech would serve as an appropriate starting point for the larger issue of student stress among Millennials.

The Solution:

Goal:

1. To lower the rates of depression/stress through administration of more resources aimed at increasing resilience against stress and forming a supportive community.
2. To implement an awareness campaign to dispel stigma and mistruths surrounding stress and depression while also informing students of the various resources already available such as the counselling center, Women's Resource Center and ADAPTS.

Solution description:

We gave and will be giving recommendations on additions to various programs on campus, namely GT1000, Counseling Center Outreach, FASET, and freshman experience program. These recommendation aim to bring about a structural change in these programs to give students better awareness of resources and battle stigma surrounding seeking help for mental health issues. Our recommendation for a housing based check-in program will also go towards attaining our 1st goal. We will be working with some organizations towards implementing these recommendations. A summary of our recommendations is listed below.

List of recommendations

1. GT1000 flag building tour (Status : Recommended to various parties and actively working with them to implement this)
 - a. Show a GT1000 class the locations of the Counseling Center, ADAPTS program and Women's Resource Center
 - b. Have a short 15-20 minute talk by a Counseling Center Representative on what the counseling center can be used for and information about various resources on campus for mental health related issues.
 - c. Designed to be carried out during 1 class period
2. FASET recommendations (Status : Recommended to various parties)
 - a. A talk solely about counseling center specific information
 - b. A tour of the counseling center during FASET
3. Housing 3rd week check in (Status : Recommended to various parties)
 - a. Check-in on freshmen by counseling center staff for every floor in the freshman dorms.
 - b. Intended to start on the 3rd week for an undecided length.

Other aspects of our solution include organizing a suicide awareness campaign during suicide awareness week during fall 2014 in line with 2nd goal. We have also initiated a weekly meeting with other sophomore undergraduate students to learn and discuss about issues regarding mental health of students. This is an essential platform in learning about various problems facing the

student body, getting ideas on solutions to these problems, and roping in students to help tackle these issues.

Objectives and status update:

Our first objective was to improve the freshman programs to increase awareness of mental health and promote good tactics to combat mental health issues. The first task for this objective was to work with the Freshman Experience program to increase awareness of mental health and various resources available to students around campus. We have met with Dan Morrison and discussed various changes made to PL discussions and training to help identify early warning signs of mental distress among students. However, we plan to pursue this task further in the future by collaborating with Dan Morrison and the counseling center to implement a 'Third Week Check-in' that will bring in counselors to check-in and talk with the students about signs of distress, ways to combat stress and available resources on campus. The final deliverable of this task will be a formal report of changes successfully made through collaboration with Dan Morrison and the Counseling Center. Overall this task is incomplete.

The second task associated with improve freshman programs was implementation of a class plan for different GT1000 classes. So far, we have met with Dr. Trivedi and submitted a rough draft of a possible plan for one class of GT1000; this plan includes:

1. Going to the Flag building to see the various resources available to students, such as ADAPTS, Dean of Students, OSI, etc.
2. A visit to the counseling center that would involve a talk by one of the counselors there.

This plan would hope to familiarize students with the Flag building, more specifically the counseling center, and the various resources available. This plan still needs some logistics figured out, such as establishing communication between professors and the counseling center to ensure that a counselor is available to talk during the assigned class time. The future plan for GT1000 is to hold a joint meeting with Dr. Trivedi and Dr. Hughes-Troutman to cement the class plan and figure out the remaining logistics. The final deliverable for this task would be implementation of the class plan into GT1000 and making sure the class plan is being used among professors. Overall this task is still incomplete.

The final task associated with improving freshman programs is improving communication between FASET and the counseling center. So far, we have met with Dr. Cloud (FASET director) and Dr. Hughes-Troutman (Counseling center outreach coordinator); and both are enthusiastic about working together. We have proposed to implement a new session during FASET that talks purely about the counseling center along with proposing a tour of the counseling center itself during the general FASET tour. Dr. Cloud has taken these ideas into consideration and working on them currently. For the future, we plan to keep up communication between both the counseling center and FASET to ensure the ideas do not lose steam and both coordinators continue talking to each other. The final deliverable for this project is seeing the new ideas being implemented into FASET. Overall, this task is in the hands of the two coordinators, but we still need to keep communication up.

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James Dee, Andrew Greenhill, Caty McAfee,
Ramprasath Rajagopal, Jake Sebring, Emily Takagi

Our second task was to respond to the initiatives of the Mental Health Task force by working with established focus groups to implement institutional responses and by creating a new student group to create a lasting response to improve mental health from the student perspective. The results of the institute task forces were to be measured based on the Institute president's acceptance of the resulting report recommendations. The results of the student task force were to be measured based on viewership and response of the student population to the actions executed by the sophomore task force (as determined by survey).

The first set of task forces were in collaboration with Dr. Perez of the Counseling Center and Jerome Stevens of the Office of Leadership and Civic Engagement. The goal was to participate in all discussions by those groups and then help to draft the report of specific direction that must be taken to best address the Mental Health Task Force Recommendations. Jake participated in the focus group of Dr. Stevens, and Caty and Emily participated in the focus group of Dr. Perez. Both groups have drafted their recommendations, and all that remains is to wait for President Peterson's response to determine the success of said endeavors.

The second task force was created to implement a student-based response to the Mental Health Task Force Recommendations. James and Emily, along with sophomore class representative Alex Berry, created a group of approximately 15 students who were interested in first discussing the Recommendations and then create a response of their own. The group had gotten as far as discussion of the Recommendations and proposing that they develop a YouTube video series addressing student stress, but the group was unable to create the video series. As a result of the group being created in the middle of the semester, the majority of the group members were unable to meet beyond more than two meetings, and so, interest quickly died out. The Grand Challenges team has decided that it this task is worth reattempting early in the fall, as students will be less busy in that time frame. Accordingly, the status of this task is as a postponed task for the fall.

Our final objective was to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health on campus as measured by a survey created by the team. The first task surrounding this objective was the creation of a suicide walk in collaboration with Counseling Center. The walk was to take place on April 12th, and it was originally a partnership with the organization Campus Walks. It would have allowed for increased visibility of suicide as an issue on Tech's campus. However, the Counseling Center had decided that it was too late to fulfill all of the requirements to work with Campus Walks, and so, the event was then planned separately from Campus Walks. Furthermore, it was decided that the date of April 12th was deemed too busy, as "Hell Week" was the week afterwards. The end result is that the event has been postponed to the week of Suicide Prevention Day (September 10th). This leaves more time for planning, which serves as a future direction for the project.

The next task under this reducing stigma objective was to improve awareness of mental health issues around campus through placement of posters and other visual media. This task bears the same status as the Suicide Awareness Walk task. It has been postponed to the fall to allow for better planning and to coincide with the Counseling Center's belief that it will be more effective due to that period being the initial adjustment period for freshman students. Little has been done regarding this task beyond planning as a result of this postponement.

The last task for this final objective was to work with the office of New Student and Sophomore Programs to implement ideas formulated during the Sophomore Leadership Forum. During the forum, ideas were drafted addressing the idea of barriers to mental health at Tech.

However, no progress has been made regarding this task due to the team feeling that its energy could be better focused addressing the other tasks and objectives. Ultimately, this task is unaddressed and will continue to be unaddressed for that reason.

How has your project changed over time?

Originally, we wanted to combat distress giving students a supportive community in the form of LLCs. We found that there were too many bureaucratic obstacles to implement LLCs because of all the resources needed to maintain one. Instead, we decided to focus on making changes to the Freshman Experience program to implement this sense of community and other programs. Another program we wanted to implement was a peer counseling program. After meeting with Housing and the Counseling Center, however, we learned that the Georgia Board of Regents has liability policies in place that prevent students from counseling other students. We are still figuring out what we want to do in lieu of this program, but right now are focusing on the third week check-in. Another part of our project was implementing a suicide awareness walk. Due to timing, though, we were not able to be sponsored by Campus Walks, and have moved the walk to the fall instead. Finally, we wanted to implement similar programs in FASET and GT 1000. Dr. Cloud, however, has his own ideas and ways he wants to do things. So we decided to focus on getting FASET in contact with the Counseling Center.

The Future:

In the future, plans have been made to focus on implementation of an awareness campaign on campus during the fall of 2014. Planning for this awareness campaign, whose main purpose is to increase the knowledge of students regarding mental health issues and resources on campus, will occur during the summer of 2014. Important steps that need to be taken in order to prepare for this campaign include: development of logistics and event planning, creation of advertising through social media and flyers, and development of partnerships with other student organizations to help power the success of this outreach campaign. A significant event in this future awareness campaign is the suicide awareness walk, which will occur in September of 2014. Similar preparations will occur during the summer for this event, including working out the logistics and organizing for guest speakers to be contacted in regards to their interest in participating in this awareness walk. Dr. Currie, a postdoctoral fellow of the Georgia Tech Counseling Center who focuses on suicide prevention, has been identified as a future collaborator for the suicide awareness walk.

Another future focus of this project is the further development of a student-run mental health task force. In order for this task force to be successful, better organization and preparation for meetings must occur prior to the startup of the task force in the beginning of the fall semester. This includes establishing a structure, time, and location for each meeting to occur. Finally, another next step of this project includes completing detailed plans of a tour of the Flag Building for GT1000 classes. This must include a comprehensive schedule of the "Mental Health" class period and incentives for instructor participation.

References

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