2016

Time for Your Check Up

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Mental health issues have become larger and more visible beacons on our radars in recent years, increasing not only in prominence, but also in acknowledgment. Our society has begun to realize that conditions such as depression and anxiety are real and rampant, especially in a collegiate culture that is centered on academic pressures.

Over the past few years, there has been a national increase in the number of students that report to health centers for help with mental health issues such as depression and social anxiety, according to a 2016 Huffington Post article. This increase can be attributed to many factors, such as increasing accessibility to universities among a more diverse demographic of students because of financial aid. According to the article, many of these students had not previously had access to mental healthcare.

Experts are uncertain as to whether this increase is attributable to an academic and social culture in college life that is becoming increasingly demanding, or if simply more people are seeking help. It seems as though it has become more socially acceptable to identify and treat mental illnesses, and many people go to counseling to talk through normal anxieties. “The good news is that students are more willing than ever before to see mental health services as an acceptable option, in large part due to reduced stigma, and highly value CAPS (Counseling and Psychological Services) services,” Dr. Peter LeViness, the director of CAPS, said. But professors are expecting more from students, and graduate schools are becoming more competitive. Free time is no longer for fun and relaxation, but factors into resume building for future endeavors. Few students perceive extracurriculars to be optional, and mediocrity is socially discouraged. Therefore, it would not be surprising if mental health problems were becoming more common, since they could be triggered in more individuals by the stresses of undergraduate life.

On our own campus, we have seen this increase in mental health issues manifested in the long waiting list for a CAPS appointment. The website promises an appointment within a few days of the request, unless CAPS is experiencing a waiting list. The problem is that CAPS is always experiencing a waiting list, and that leaves many people who have taken the initiative to seek help waiting long amounts of time to be seen. Currently, the number of people on the waiting list is hovering around 30.

Steps have been taken to solve this problem. The website states that funding has been provided to increase clinical hours, but the demand has increased by 33 percent this year and a waiting period is unavoidable. The three independent counselors that work with CAPS also have begun taking appointments earlier than they previously had. Information sheets about the waiting list have been made and are distributed to students seeking help. CAPS is also in the process of interviewing other independent counselors to increase resources.

The website does provide links and instructions on how to seek help from an outside source, and the overall effect is that if someone is in need of urgent help, there will be a way to get it. They recommend that in order to get an appointment as soon as possible, the student must be willing to miss any activity on their schedule except for academic classes or be willing to meet with the first available CAPS counselor.

Ultimately, the demand for CAPS is substantial. According to LeViness, CAPS saw a total of 576 students during the 2015 fall semester. All but seven of the 138 people who were on the waiting list last semester were seen. In a series of anonymous evaluations, 91.6 percent of individuals agreed that the counseling helped them “function better,” and 100 percent agreed that they would “recommend CAPS to a friend, if needed.” Each afternoon is reserved for crisis coverage to take care of students who have problems that are urgent, such as those who have suicidal thoughts, LeViness said. There were 111 of these crisis appointments last semester. CAPS also provides access for an emergency dispatch service, which can be reached at 804-289-8911. The coming years will provide more insight into the demand increase for mental health assistance, and the impact on universities across the country as they adjust to manage it.

30 YEAR TREND: The above graph shows data collected by Counseling and Physiological Services (CAPS) tracing the number of clients seeking appointments yearly since 1986.