

Targeting Student Stress in a College Setting: A Research-Based Strategic Planning Process

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Why target “stress”?

Nationwide college students completing ACHA-NCHA health surveys consistently rank “stress” as the top impediment to academic performance.

A higher percent of USD students list “stress” as an academic barrier compared to national figures; yet its meaning and underlying causes are unclear.

“Stress” as top impediment to college academic performance

(American College Health Association National College Health Assessment)

Percentage of students who received a lower grade on an exam, project or course, or an incomplete or dropped a course due to “stress” (Fall 2008)

USD ACHA-NCHA	32.2%
Nationwide ACHA-NCHA	27.2%

University Context

- Private
- Suburban
- Faith-based
- Medium-sized
- Multidisciplinary task force

Student Stress...

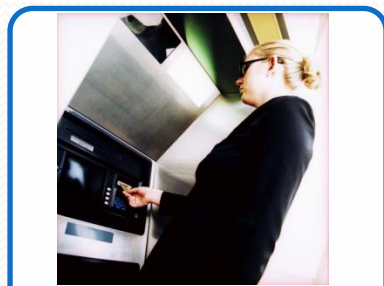
...In Their Own Words

“I was encouraged... to come here because I had a great chance of receiving a decent financial package since I was a first generation low income student. Unfortunately, I have found myself caught up in constant worry... I wake up worrying about the large amount of money that I will have in debt after graduation.”

“One of my main stresses at this campus is figuring out... how am I going to pay for this next semester.”

“I have to work just to pay the basic bills so I always feel working [takes] away from either my study time or being able to get involved in different things.”

Foci of Student Stress Study



Stressors



Consequences
of Stress



Ways of
Coping



Resources



STEP 1

**Collaborate from the start
with stakeholders**

Collaborative Planning Process

- Identify & define the problem
- Use multiple methods of data collection
- Analyze, prioritize, synthesize findings
- Identify, develop, & implement strategies
- Evaluate & modify strategic plan annually

Stress Task Force Formation

Composition

- Stakeholders
- Representatives of target groups
- Multidisciplinary, varied skills, resources

Structure

- Formal assignment to TF by Deans, VPs
- 2-year commitment
- Report to university-wide group

Stress Task Force Roles

Conduct focus groups

- Recruited 100 students for 12 focus groups
- Facilitated focus groups
- Took notes & helped with transcription of audio tapes

Interpret findings

- Identified themes from coded transcripts
- Identified key underlying issues at individual, group, and institutional levels

Assess & prioritize potential strategies

- Reviewed “best practices”
- Proposed comprehensive set of strategies to address key underlying issues
- Set priorities to target high-risk cohorts & achieve sustained change

STEP 2

**Integrate qualitative &
quantitative research**

Qualitative Data & Analysis

Photovoice

- Student-generated photos solicited to illustrate the 4 foci of study
- Photos selected for 4 photo boards to guide focus group discussion

Focus Groups

- Students identified stressors, consequences, ways of coping & resources prompted by photos
- Descriptions/stories give meaning & context to terms used & issues raised
- Transcripts are coded & participant characteristics analyzed to discover patterns in responses & between groups

Quantitative Data & Analysis

Student Stress Survey

- Students completed online Stress Survey (Miller & Mart)
- Statistical analysis of:
 - Stressors
 - Consequences of stress
 - Coping methods & resources
 - Characteristics of survey participants

ACHA National College Health Assessment

- Students completed online survey
- Statistical analysis of:
 - Issues students report as difficult to handle, barriers to academics, etc.
 - Health-related behaviors
 - Student demographics

Triangulation: Multidimensional Views of Student Stress

Research Method	Focus Groups	Student Stress Survey	ACHA-NCHA Survey
Sample size (N)	12 focus groups; N=98	N=2012	N=2161
Examples of Questions	What stressors do students like you experience?	How often have you experienced stress due to finances in the past month?	Did you find finances difficult to handle in last 12 months?
Examples of Findings	<p>Issues underlying financial stress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unrealistic expectations • Lack of personal finance management knowledge & skills • Lack of efficient & clear financial aid processes • Insufficient funds for daily 'needs' • High costs & limited financial aid • Post-university debt burden 	<p>20% of students report stress due to finances on most days in past month. Significantly more stress due to finances related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More hours of work for pay • Lower levels of parental education • Lower overall health • Less confidence in dealing with stress • More interest in stress management skills 	<p>Significantly higher rates reported by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Females • Students of color • Students with disabilities • Students living with parents

STEP 3

**Follow-through on strategies
based on multidisciplinary
analysis**

From Strategies to Action...

Key Stress Issue	Proposed Strategies	Actions Undertaken
Lack of clear & efficient financial aid processes	Streamlined processes & clear instructions for financial aid, designed with input & feedback from students	Addition of 'tab' to the university portal for easy access to financial aid information (FAQs, forms, etc.)
	Accessible, efficient services & processes to reduce errors & delays in financial aid awards, registration, recidivism	Program review of the Financial Aid Office
		Development of online e-forms to help reduce lost forms
		Use of web server to interface registration with financial aid so students' status is up-to-date

Results & Implications

COLLABORATION

- Studied factors underlying stress from multiple perspectives
- Proposed comprehensive interventions based on data, and knowledge of the campus that target individual, group, and institution levels
- Followed-through on proposed strategies, turning them into action

TRIANGULATION

- Used quantitative methods from surveys to verify patterns suggested in focus groups (qualitative research)
- Used qualitative methods to derive meaning and context of stress from the perspective of students which otherwise would be missed by surveys (quantitative research)

Lessons Learned

For strategic planning & health promotion:

- College health promotion issues need to be defined with participation of local stakeholders
- Integration of qualitative and quantitative data sources and analysis is time-consuming but fruitful
- Campus-based assessment can be successfully used to guide/tailor health promotion efforts
- Early task force involvement leads to long-term commitment to implementation of strategies