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Linking Extracurricular Involvement and Mental Health

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Abstract

The purpose of my study is to determine the effect that extracurricular involvement has on those who identify as mentally unhealthy at the University of San Diego. Extracurricular activities consist of those pursued in addition to the normal course of study (music, intramural sports, drama, etc.). Several studies have shown a rise in mental health issues on college campuses today. Using Astin's Theory of Involvement, I would like to determine at what levels of involvement do students find their mental health positively changing, and how in my position as the Graduate Assistant for Student Activities and Involvement can I best utilize this information. I hope that my research will result in the development of a method to improve student's mental health through a suggested level of involvement and engagement outside of the classroom.

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Introduction

I have always been an advocate for positive mental health. Especially as a former undergraduate student myself, I am well aware of the challenges throughout the collegiate journey that can be presented if mentally healthy practices go by the wayside. Part of the reason I am entering the field of student affairs is to help those struggling with their mental health similar to myself as an undergraduate student.

I noticed a possible route of assistance, which would connect my passion for mental health to something else I am passionate about as well. This is the idea of extra-curricular involvement. At the start of this research, I held the position of Graduate Assistant for Student Activities and Involvement (SAI) at the University of San Diego (USD). I know for me personally overall, my extracurricular involvements really helped me to cope with mentally stressful situations including anxiety and depression. I can also attest that sometimes my extracurricular involvements only added to my poor handling of my mental health. It is in this realm where I believe I can be of assistance. The students I advise often share with me their struggles with stress, anxiety, and even depression among other mental illnesses. I wish to conduct this research to help them find the correct balance of extracurricular involvement.

I was passionate about my position and about those I would like to help. I feel this is a unique opportunity to combine the two. There are obstacles to doing this, such as overcoming social stigma on mental health, and convincing the students that need help to seek it. These are challenges I wished to rise to the occasion to overcome and perhaps make a real difference. The Covid-19 Pandemic began in the midst of this research, having a severe impact on its outcomes

and methods, but I believe some valuable knowledge was uncovered thanks to dedicated participants and a desire to learn.

I hope to answer a few questions with this research. What is the relationship between mental health and involvement? Can a model be developed for mentally unhealthy students to use to improve their mental health and overall collegiate experience? My personal experiences with mental health and involvement give me hope for a positive relationship between the two, coupled with a caution of the possibility of overextending oneself. I believe involvement and engagement can be used as a positive tool in the coping of mental illnesses for students who feel these effects on their lives. This model may look different on a student-to-student basis, but I believe it is worth the exploration.

Literary Review and Background

Poor mental health in Universities in general is on the rise and has been for some time now. Some students today are filling their plates more and more to try and edge out the competition, while others feel hopeless and choose to involve themselves in nothing at all. According to the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) 2017 Annual Report, every year from 2010 to 2017 the number of self-identified students with depression, anxiety (social and general) and academic distress have increased (p. 15). According to another study, in a test group of around 750 people, 37% of students reported a mental illness diagnosis (Nobiling, 2017, p. 312). Several of these instances result in substance abuse (Pedrelli, 2014). Lastly, according to another study, a large number of students are not even aware of mental health services on college

campuses, while the population of students who are aware of them, few actually have used them (Yorgason, 2008).

There are several relations between the mental health of a student and their performance in other aspects of the collegiate experience. A study found no negative correlations between positive mental health and academic success (Carini, 2006). This same study found modest statistical connections between positive mental health and student engagement. Another useful tool this study provides is the variable of pre collegiate career. It shows that the GRE test scores taken for this study positively correlate to the SAT scores of the same participants. This eliminates the possible notion of outside influences when transitioning from high school to college, in this particular study. Another study found "results suggest that the relationship between academic and cocurricular involvement is linear" (Huang, 2004, p. 399). A third study finds the changing lifestyle of a first-year student to be stress inducing, leading to mental health issues and effects on academic performance (Wyatt, 2017). It is my intention to figure out where what I believe is the third point of this triangle, mental health fits in. I believe it is possible to find a student with a 4.0 GPA, who holds executive positions in multiple clubs, and yet suffers from chronic depression or anxiety. Indirectly, mental health can affect retention and transfer rates as well, given that some of the main factors in dropping out and transferring from schools are academic performance and social connectedness (Allen, 2008). Also, it has been proven that resilience in dealing with mental health can be greatly affected by social integration at the University level (Hartley, 2011). Finally, it has been proven that even in adolescence, children who engage regularly in extracurricular activities including sports and community programs see a more positive mental health than those who do not (Oberle, 2020).

I am the former Graduate Assistant for Student Activities and Involvement at the University of San Diego. I was very passionate about this position and the work I did for the University. I am also someone who has dealt with mental health issues in the past and realize what a detriment they can be to not only the career of college students but their well-being as well. It is for these two reasons that I have decided to focus on this specific topic. I would like to see if there is a way to use extracurricular involvement as a means of improving a student's mental health. As stated previously, one study noticed a possible positive correlation between engagement and mental healthiness. Also, several studies mention taking responsibility for their own mental health by exercising, building community and "organizing and evaluating use of time" (Kadison, 2004 p. 58).

It is important to define some key terms for my study. The terms I would like to define are involvement and engagement. Involvement is the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to his/her academic experience (Astin, 1984). Engagement is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success (Wolf-Wendel, 2006). I wish to explore this possible connection further using Astin's Theory of Involvement. This theory actively seeks to understand involvement from not only a quantitative stance, but a qualitative one as well. It also notes the effect of involvement on academics but makes a point to note the differences based on engagement from student to student. Simply put, different students contribute different amounts of psychosocial and physical energy to their involvements. There are three key stages in this theory. These three stages are: inputs, environment, and outputs. Inputs refers to those contributions as mentioned above. The environment refers to outside factors which influence the subject as well as their inputs. Finally, outputs refer to the tangible and intangible benefits and

repercussions their contributions will ultimately have. As a student affairs professional, I would be able to help influence the environment. The desire is to do so in such a way to where an output would be positive mental health. The environment I worked in specifically is that of involvement. I think the mentally unhealthy students of the University of San Diego could benefit from an involvement model that can improve their mental state.

Some action research projects have already taken a look at systems at the University of San Diego, in the realm of involvement as well as others. Sabano (2018) for example intends to look at the experiences of those identified as uninvolved at the University. She uses a line of qualitative questioning in her research intended to relate involvement with community. I see it very possible to use a similar line of questioning, replacing the idea of community with that of a healthy mental state. Another graduate of USD, Shivers (2018) looks specifically at the University of San Diego Student Success Coaching Program. It is briefly mentioned that mental health is a factor in a student's success, but overall examines training methods to help student leaders help other students succeed academically.

One consideration of this process that may be an obstacle is the stigma of mental health. A study focusing on Canadian Colleges with mental health stigmas points out eloquently "the stigma of mental illness on campus can force students to stay silent about their hardships" (Giamos, 2017, p. 122). It will be a unique challenge attempting to help mentally ill students at the University of San Diego overcome this stigma, but it is a challenge I am willing to take on. I believe exploring these hardships can help with coping with them, and finding outlets such as extracurricular involvement (hopefully as a result of this research) can improve their mental state going forward.

Context of the Research

The journey I took to receive an undergraduate education left me with many lessons. Most importantly, it taught me what I was passionate about in the world of higher education. The two topics that came out on top in that exploration were the importance of mental health, and the benefits of extracurricular involvement. It seemed fitting for my Action Research project that the two were not unrelated.

I was highly involved at my undergraduate institution of Bryant University. I took part in four different music groups, as well as club/intramural sports, campus radio, and philanthropy groups. I enjoyed all of these endeavors, but they definitely took up a large portion of my time. I also find that I was a serious mental health advocate. I spent three semesters as a Resident Assistant, running programs and dealing with real-life mental health crises. I even ran a program as an orientation leader to help parents to be of good use if their student should need help improving their mental health. I myself went through some mental health scares, which in retrospect probably prompted me to be such an advocate. My involvements have personally helped me to get through these difficult times, and I feel with proper research, they could do the same for others.

The University of San Diego is a small catholic private school in southern California. Within the University exists the Student Life Pavilion which houses several student-based offices. My former role as stated above is that of a Graduate Assistant for Student Activities and Involvement. I and two other graduate assistants worked under a Director and Assistant Director for this area. Together we personally advised and oversaw the Torero Program Board who

provided large-scale events for the student body, the Associated Student Government, and all student-run organizations.

I have access to those involved; however, I do not have specific access to those identified as mentally unhealthy, which is the population of students I hope to work with. A challenge was finding those students willing to disclose that information to me. With stigma and the desire not to face one's mental health, this proved to be difficult. I was however able to find a subject willing to disclose this information to me.

Some important context to note for this research was the unique and unnatural timing of this research. Two environmental occurrences had major impacts on this research. One of these was enacted on me personally, and the other affected the country as a whole. This research took place in March of 2020, right at the start of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Organized gatherings were no longer allowed, thus making it impossible for me to attend any kind of in person meetings with student organizations. At this point in the pandemic, it was even impossible to be able to conduct interviews in person, so these had to be done over the phone. The other important contextual factor to note is where I was working at this time. Due to poor leadership in the Office of Student Activities and Involvement, as well as Student Affairs at the University of San Diego in general, I found myself attempting to adjust to a new position in the Office of Residential Life which began in late February. These extenuating circumstances certainly created limitations as well as the need to adjust my research plan accordingly.

Needs Assessment

As stated several times thus far, I have personal experience as to the need that this research topic attempts to solve. From the beginning of my time in my graduate assistant position, I had seen all the good that involvement has done for people, but also some of the stress and anxiety that is caused if the qualitative level of engagement is left unchecked. I directly advised students who were involved too much, and some that were not involved enough. All of them had stories from both sides of that coin. Their commitment to a club can exceed their capacity when combined with their other responsibilities and result in a negative effect on their mental health. Others found a lack of purpose in their time spent when their entire college career surrounds academics.

I aimed to gather participants at varying levels of new involvement who also identify as mentally unhealthy. This meant that they would just be starting at a new organization/club. Using this method, I was able to see how this new involvement affected their mental health over time. I used two varying methods, one of which was kept confidential, due to the stigmatic nature of this topic and the knowledge that this may have been sensitive information for those involved. I would like to have used focus groups for those participants willing to discuss their experience openly and compare this to confidential surveys.

It was important in the procedure to keep in mind my own personal biases surrounding the topics of the research. I have a past of heavy involvement dating back to my days in elementary school, and only committing more time as I grew older. Therefore, I have a great deal of experience that would contribute to a large bias of what it means to be involved. It was important to stick to the literature and Astin's definitions of involvement and engagement. As

previously stated, I also identify who has suffered from severe mental health complications. From these experiences, a large bias could have emerged when it came to the experiences of others. I tend to succeed when it comes to keeping myself in check about removing my personal bias when appropriate. I find myself in a unique situation that for the first time, my bias may have been an important part in the results of this research. My supervisor Jennifer Lee who was the current director for Student Activities and Involvement at the University of San Diego at the time of this research was to serve as an extra method of support when trying to tackle this new issue. She had been working in this role for five years at the time of the research and was very familiar with methods of getting students involved, as well as the language and methods most effective when communicating with involved students.

Methodology I

Astin's Theory of Involvement was used on a large scale with this research project. One of the key parts of Astin's theory states that involvement by nature can be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. For this reason, it seems there was no other way but to use both qualitative and quantitative measures for this research project. To collect qualitative data, I used methods of multimedia accounts, as well as subjective ones. Most importantly, this research was change-oriented, as "change-oriented research is more about a distinct set of goals than a unique approach to research or even a particular paradigmatic positioning" (O'Leary, 2004, p. 133).

My epistemological assumptions regarding subjective research were that even though each answer may be different, categories that ultimately achieve the same outcome can be created. I believed subjective answers could work in tandem with fact-based statistics and data. I

employed O'Leary's cycles of research over time to gather this subjective and factual data. According to O'Leary, this method seeks to make actual change to situations through evaluative research. This is the final step in each cycle and allows for one to make adjustments to future cycles. This method of research is distinctively different to that of normal research as, according to O'Leary, the subject (myself) is a main piece of the research. It is from here that I had to incorporate my own experiences with mental health and involvement, so that perhaps in a focus group type setting I may have been able to see first-hand whether or not change was taking place in this context. As the literature suggests, action research does not aim to find statistical and large-scale issues. This is something that as a person who has participated in the gathering of research before, I needed to try to overcome. It was against my nature to put myself in the middle of the research for fear of contamination. O'Leary does explain the purpose of this research well in defining it as a solution to practical problems. These are problems that the finding of large-scale data may not have supported and could have made a difference in the lives of those involved, if not for students on a larger scale. However, it was important to keep in mind the idea of quantitative data as a support to this research as statistical data given that hours of involvement may have proven to be the difference (O'Leary, 2004).

Action research as defined by O'Leary is relevant to this issue due to all of the many factors that influence a person's mental health. It was certainly difficult to find the effects of involvement on mental health given a diverse population. Other factors could have included family life, academics, or any sort of large significant change in their life. This is why the practical problem of poor mental health and what involvement can do for it wass very well set up for action research according to O'Leary.

Finally, it was important to keep in mind some issues that O'Leary points out with this cyclical sort of research. The first thing that I definitely had to overcome with my preconceived idea of research is that I did not have control on the direction the research decides to go. O'Leary (2004) states that "decisions made about the direction of the research and the probable outcomes should be collective" (p. 140). Another potential obstacle was the lack of control I had in the behaviors of subjects after I had chosen them. Therefore, according to O'Leary (2004), "facilitating collaboration is not always easy. Overbearing, powerful (sometimes obnoxious) individuals can usurp democratic procedures" (p. 141). I have encountered this as a part of groups in general and it was important to stay aware of it throughout the process.

Methodology II

I used a mixed method of both qualitative and quantitative measures of gathering information. Specifically, I employed surveys as a means to gather quantitative data, and a mix of one-on-one recorded interviews and focus groups to obtain qualitative information.

This mixture helped me offset the changes in qualitative data (such as mental health improvement or decline) with the changes in quantitative data (such as total number of hours dedicated to a particular involvement). This directly reflects Astin's theory. One may be involved in more hours of involvement but be committing less energy than someone else and having a different mental health effect. I gained willing participants through two means. The first was accessing the information I have readily available, of those students who are involved on this campus at varying degrees. Reaching out to them for voluntary assistance in this research was the first step. Next, I planned to reach out to the counseling center, and hope to find a way

for them to convince students visiting for mental health reasons to volunteer. One of these ways

could have been through the focus groups that the counseling center regularly hosts.

Cycle Descriptions

Cycle 1: Conducting Surveys

This cycle was important to gather quantitative data. From this survey I had hoped to gain

knowledge such as the number of hours per week that a particular involvement requires of that

student. This would have included general body meetings, events, etc. I also would like to make

note of the number of hours a student spends outside of the club that are actually dedicated to the

club. This could have meant the organization of meetings, and executive homework or planning,

and things of that nature. I also hoped to use a Likert scale to have them identify their mental

health at different times. Specific times I was interested in were before and after they have

interactions such as meetings or events with their involvement. I would have liked to know their

overall mental health at the beginning and end of the week. This would have served as the base

knowledge of my participants.

Cycle 2: Focus Groups

This cycle was important for the influence of participants. I hoped to bring together

participants who may find varying results in how they are involved or how they engage. I would

have liked to lead the group in discussing how their involvement affects their mental health.

What works, and what doesn't? These would have hopefully shown change in participants who

adapt the more successful methods of their peers.

Cycle 3: Recorded Interviews

For those who were willing, I wanted more qualitative expanded responses to survey

questions asked in cycle one. The purpose of recording was to maintain an accurate record of a

student's answers. The main purpose of these interviews was to get the feelings and a better sense of their engagement in these organizations. How do they feel about the number of hours required of them? Do they feel they have an adequate amount of time to complete their other responsibilities?

Anticipated Outcomes

Speaking ambitiously, I had hoped to develop a method for the improvement of mental health that can be implemented in counseling centers or student involvement centers. Realistically I had hoped to help the lives of those who volunteer to be involved in the survey, so that they may take a genuine analysis of their extracurricular involvement and find the right level for their mental health situation.

Since this was action research, I hoped to learn something about myself. Not only did I hope this research would help those who participated and even further, but I hoped to develop my skills as a student affairs professional and create a new tool to help students with. Hopefully in the future when a student comes to my office speaking of depressive or anxious symptoms, I will have this research to reference and a suggestion that will aid them.

Astin's Theory of Involvement outlines three steps in a student's journey in involvement. Those steps are inputs, environment, and outputs. I believe this research can give student affairs professionals the ability to influence the inputs that students give to their involvements. This would be done in such a way that would have a positive impact on their mental health, which is a proven way to have a more successful college career in general.

An important quality of this research is that it takes place over time. This creates a valuable method of testing the validity of the results. The participants were able to define their own mental health. A comparison from the beginning of the cycles and the very end showed a change in mental health, thus proving or disproving the knowledge basis and assumptions I have for this research.

Cycles

Cycle 1: Survey

I decided to use a survey as not only a way to search for participants for future cycles, but I also wanted to gauge the mental health and level of involvement of the students at the University of San Diego, without necessarily suggesting that they could be related. The first goal of the survey was to have the student list a new involvement that they recently joined, as well as any formal positions they hold within that involvement. I Also asked for their quantitative level of involvement in the number of hours they spend in this involvement per week. This would be to get a rough idea of the level of Involvement as defined by Astin. I also asked for the quantitative hours they committed to this involvement outside of formal meetings. Assuming that this extra work outside of formal requirement indicates a desire to put forth emotional investment to this organization as well, making it a suitable measurement for what Astin defines as Engagement.

The second goal of this survey was to get a gauge of the level of mental health in my survey participants. WhatsmyM3.com offers a very thorough survey and generates a number known as an M3 score, relating to the level of mental healthiness in the survey. It is said that if

the M3 score is 33 or higher, then the participant most likely has a treatable mental health

disorder such as depression or anxiety. However, if the number reaches certain heights, M3 itself

will recommend immediate professional help and diagnosis for more serious mental health

conditions. I asked my participants to take this three-minute assessment and report their scores to

me for possible further analysis.

After sending the survey to students working in the Office of Student Activities and

Involvement, I was able to get five students to participate in my survey, and two students were

willing and able to continue on to the following cycles. Four participants were seniors, and one

was a junior. Three participants were male, and two were female. All were involved to various

levels. The survey itself can be found in Appendix A. The results of the survey can be found in

Appendix B.

Cycle 2: Focus Group Intervention Activity

As a former Graduate Assistant for Student Activities Involvement, I was instrumental in

the planning and implementation of the semesterly Alcala Bazaar. At the University of San

Diego, the Alcala Bazaar is the student organization fair. It is a chance for student organizations

who fall under the umbrella of Student Activities and Involvement to set up a table and try to

recruit new members, promote their events, or simply get the word of their existence out to the

collegiate public. For reasons stated in the context of this research, I was unable to attend the

actual Spring Alcala Bazaar with the subjects. As an attempt to pivot, I created a smaller

simulated Alcala Bazaar for my subjects to participate in. I had three participants in this focus

group, including myself, as I partook in this activity as well. The two other participants consisted

of undergraduate students who partook in Cycle One and were willing to continue on to Cycles

Two and Three.

This simulated Alcala Bazaar took all of the registered student organizations who were present at the actual student organization fair, and put them on a list, along with descriptions of what their organization is about. This description was taken directly from their page at toreros.org, where all valid student organizations who receive funding from the University of San Diego are kept and recorded.

I asked each participant in this focus group to then take a few steps. After reading through the list of organizations the participant was asked to list ten and only ten organizations that they would consider joining. No influence was given as to what they could choose or why. The only condition was that the list of potential organizations again be narrowed down to ten. They were then asked to rank their ten choices from 10 down to one: 10 being the least likely to join, and 1 being the most likely to join.

The second step I asked my participants to take involves Crimson Education's *Top 8 Benefits of Extracurricular Activities for High School Students.* These benefits fit very closely with why I personally would choose extracurricular activities in college. I removed the eighth benefit given that was exclusive to high schoolers applying to college, but the other seven are briefly paraphrased below:

- Improved Academic Performance

    Participating in activities you are passionate about can increase your brain function, help you concentrate and manage your time better, all of which contribute to higher grades. High endurance sports, for example, will train you to focus and build stamina in the face of intense difficulty. This gives you an advantage when it comes to studying and taking exams.

- Explore Interests and Create Broader Perspectives

    When you participate in multiple different activities, you'll get the opportunity to explore a range of interests and unlock passions you never knew you had. Plus, diversifying your interests subsequently broadens your world view.

- Higher Self-esteem

    The more you achieve success through activities you're passionate about, the more your self-confidence will improve.

- Social Opportunities

    Each extracurricular you engage in provides you with another opportunity to expand your social network, which will also come in handy when you're looking for a job. Plus, if you make friends in your extracurricular activities, you'll be more likely to get more deeply involved.

- Productive Breaks

    Extracurricular activities give you something fun to do aside from school. It also gives you the chance to explore your passions to discover things you may be interested beyond academics while taking some time off hitting the book

- Essential Life Skills

On top of all of the benefits of extracurricular activities we already talked about, one of the greatest advantages extracurricular activities give you are "real world" skills.

- Resumes

Without much previous work experience, one of the only ways hiring managers can assess your ability and work ethic is through your extracurricular activities.

After explaining and going over these concepts with the focus group, I asked each participant to pick their number one reason of the seven for keeping an organization, as well as their number two reason. The results of this focus group activity can be found in Appendix C.

Cycle 3: Follow-Up Interviews

After participating in the focus group with me, I wanted individual experiences and reactions based on their thought processes in choosing organizations, ranking them, and following up with a deep thought about the reasoning why they chose what they chose. The interview guidelines can be found in Appendix D. A common theme that came from the activity was the desire to prioritize social benefits over those like resume-building or increased academic performance. These types of choices were important at the time. However, in the follow-up interviews of cycle three, I found that both participants in reality would want activities that give them different benefits from class and the normal curriculum, but would still choose academic-based clubs or resume-building opportunities based on an external pressure to put their future success over their current happiness. Both participants had M3 scores higher than 33, which again is the standard for M3 to diagnose a participant with a treatable mental health condition. I asked if the students took into account their mental health when choosing organizations to join.

The common theme again was that they had, though it was not their first priority. They saw possible improved mental health as a secondary benefit. In other words, one of the students wanted to join the Law and Business Mediation Caucus to improve their performance in their business classes. Their secondary reason was to be productive during their breaks from academic life. The pressure to always be productive and always be improving their academic performance came before their thought if this use of their time would benefit their own mental health status. Overall, this follow-up interview led to some interesting conclusions and recommendations.

Limitations of the Research

If someone were to take a random sampling of research papers conducted in the year of 2020, it is very likely that all of them would list the Covid-19 pandemic as a limitation. This paper is certainly no exception. However, other limitations such as a small sample size of research subjects, and the less than optimal conditions created by the poor leadership at the University of San Diego Office of Student Affairs certainly created unforeseen limitations at the inception of this research paper.

Covid-19 shut down the campus at the University of San Diego. In-person meetings of student organizations were cancelled, and students were actually moved off campus. My position in Student Activities and Involvement was removed and my access to research subjects was certainly limited. Further research on this subject would benefit from a larger pool of subjects across a greater diversity of class and involvement. It was also due to the pandemic that I was unable to succeed in partnering with the counseling center. I see counseling centers as essential resources on university campuses and they are certainly a benefit to any study seeking to improve mental health. If this study should ever be built upon, the counseling center would offer

great resources and techniques that can help to normalize the discussion of mental health and mental health issues overall.

Lastly, mental healthiness is composed of several different environmental factors. This includes natural bodily chemicals, as well as things such as financial status, familial status, and many more. While there seems to be a correlation between high intensity involvement and poor mental health in my research subjects, further research would need to take into account environmental effects as well.

<div align="center">**Conclusion**</div>

Major Findings and Themes

There were several themes, all relative to each other, that I found while conducting this research. The first major theme was the agreement on a cultural influence surrounding involvement. All subjects agreed that they believed the number one reason for involvement is to improve one's resume or put oneself above the "competition" in the future job or furthering education search. Reflecting on my own experience, I realized that when I was in the shoes of my students I felt the same thing. I joined clubs that I enjoyed like Club Tennis and the Jazz Ensemble, but I took leadership positions in those organizations with reluctance in an attempt to build a resume with significant leadership experience. There were even times when I would forgo involvement in extracurriculars I considered to be for leisure or enjoyment, in favor of those that I thought would get me one step further in life.

This leads to the second theme, which puts an emphasis on involvement over engagement as defined by Astin. Due to this cultural pressure, students are more likely to join involvements with little interest in actually putting forth the required level of engagement to benefit them beyond the pages of their resume. This leads to the third major point which is the fact that

students are less likely to engage in what I call "low-yield" involvement. This means that the involvement is less likely to help them with future employers or even their future at the University of San Diego. A low-yield involvement could mean for example club soccer for someone who wants to be an engineer but loves to play soccer. These points are proven through the surveys, and the fourth major finding, which is that high investment of time and leadership positions in involvements taken for these cultural reasons and pressure to perform lead to higher M3 mental health scores. I again noticed parallels between my undergraduate experience and that of the participants in this research. I suffered from chronic depression during my undergraduate experience. While a bevy of factors influenced that mental health situation, I often found that participation in the involvements designed to improve my resume did not help the situation. There were even times where my work for those organizations fell through, as I was not in a positive mental state to focus on that work. Therefore, I can conclude that in these situations, both the group and the participant suffer. In essence, if a student solely chooses an involvement or leadership position in an attempt to see a high yield reward from that experience, it will likely cause or inflate negative mental health conditions.

The final theme is possibly the most important when leading to my conclusions. The final theme is the emphasis that was put on finding community. Every subject, while not having it as a priority, mentioned the importance of extracurricular involvement in finding community and friendship. If this emphasis can be given to those involving themselves in extracurriculars purely for resume-building, or those not involving themselves beyond the classroom at all, then I believe extracurricular involvement can help improve the mental health of college students. I also was able to find this in my own undergraduate experience, as well as my graduate experience during this research. I was highly involved at my undergraduate institution,

participating in several music groups, club sports, employment, and philanthropic groups. After the transition to graduate school, that way of living reversed itself, as I only focused on school and work. During this research I was able to notice a stark contrast in the feelings of community I felt between the two institutions. Bryant University felt much more like a home and I felt surrounded by friends throughout my four years of Bachelor studies. Whereas the University of San Diego never felt like a comfortable place to be. After conducting this research, it is certainly possible that part of this feeling could come from the serious drop off in extracurricular community involvement that I had experienced.

Recommendations

I have four recommendations as to how this research could improve the lives and mental health of the students at the University of San Diego, and possibly other educational institutions across the country. Some of these would require a large-scale shift at the University of San Diego, while others are very feasible and potentially beneficial.

The first recommendation is a cultural shift. The University of San Diego, as well as the United States in general should put as much importance on those working hard at something that they are passionate about as they do on working hard at extracurriculars that they deem important. A person who becomes Vice President of the origami club and puts in long hours to improve this club's events and membership should be seen as equally or even more impressive as someone who joins a business fraternity with no real interest. This is of course easier said than done, but it is actually something I have always believed even before conducting this research. However I found in this research and my employment that the students involved appreciated my willingness to openly discuss mental health issues. Therefore, this shift can start in the professional staff members at universities. If the students start to see their mentor, supervisors,

professors, etc., speaking openly and destigmatizing mental health issues, then the culture can begin to shift.

The second and third recommendations would directly benefit the University of San Diego. During my time as a Graduate Assistant for Student Activities and Involvement, I was able to observe student employees known as Involvement Consultants up close in their daily work. Involvement Consultants are students who work in the Office of Student Activities and Involvement and work directly with students who are seeking to get involved in student organizations or are currently involved in them. They help new students explore options of clubs, as well as act as a liaison between the club presidents and the students. I believe these students receiving mental health training, similar to Resident Assistants, would allow them to apply that knowledge to their interactions with these students. For example, exploration of mental health with newly involved students could be the difference between joining a club that would drain them, and one that would excite and energize them. Next, during the semesterly Alcala Bazaar, I believe a mental health information station can be set up to accomplish this same thing. The Involvement Consultants could work the station, and hand out information discovered in this research, explaining what low yield involvements are, and detailing Astin's theory, so that students can make informed extracurricular decisions. Given that this event brings together every student on campus looking to broaden their horizons in the extracurriculars, this station could put mental health consideration at the forefront.

Finally, the last recommendation would be for further research. A post Covid Pandemic world in Higher Education may have shown a cultural shift in many ways. The very way that institutions handle extracurricular involvement may have changed. Less limitation on this kind of research could truly discover benefits and techniques that arise when the lines between

extracurricular involvement and mental health are drawn a little more clearly, just as they are for

the connection to academic performance.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Linking Extracurricular Involvement and Mental Health (Basic Questionnaire)

Year in School

Gender

Extracurricular Involvement

　　　Please list one new involvement you have joined in the 2019-2020 academic year. Please exclude all jobs not relating to the University or academic-based meetings/sessions.

　　　Do you hold any formal roles or leadership positions in this involvement? If so, what are they?

　　　On average, how long do you spend in formal meetings/events for this involvement per week?

　　　On average, how long do you spend in formal meetings/events for all involvements per week?

　　　On average, how long do you spend informally doing work or dedicating time for this involvement per week?

　　　On average, how long do you spend informally doing work or dedicating time for all involvements per week?

Mental Health

　　　Please take three minutes to fill out this M3 Mental Health Assessment by copying this link into a new window: https://whatsmym3.com/ .Once completed, please record your score below.

Appendix B

Year in School	Gender	Please list one new involvement you have joined in the 2019-2020 academic year. Please exclude all jobs not relating to the University or academic-based meetings/sessions.	Do you hold any formal roles or leadership positions in this involvement? If so, what are they?	On average, how long do you spend in formal meetings/events for this involvement per week?	On average, how long do you spend in formal meetings/events for all involvements per week?	On average, how long do you spend informally doing work or dedicating time for this involvement per week?	On average, how long do you spend informally doing work or dedicating time for all involvements per week?	Please take three minutes to fill out this M3 Mental Health Assessment by copying this link into a new window: https://whatsmym3.com/ .Once completed, please record your score below.
Senior	Male	Beta alpha psi - accounting society	No	0 - 1 hours	0 - 1 hours	0 - 1 hours	0 - 1 hours	17
Senior	Female	USD Bull Pit	Treasury	1.5 - 2 hours	More than 5 hours	1.5 - 2 hours	More than 5 hours	44
Senior	Male	STEM Outreach	N/A	1 - 1.5 hours	2 - 3 hours	2 - 3 hours	3 - 4 hours	20
Senior	Male	Tpb	Event coordinator	More than 3 hours	3 - 4 hours	More than 3 hours	More than 5 hours	13
Junior	Female	Torero Program Board	Vice Chair	More than 3 hours	4 - 5 hours	More than 3 hours	More than 5 hours	33

Appendix C

Person	Rank	Club	Reason 1	Reason 2
Nicholas Twohig	10	Funky Bot	2	5
	9	Students for Life	5	6
	8	USD Student Media	2	7
	7	Club Volleyball	2	4
	6	Make a Wish	7	3
	5	USD College Republicans	6	4
	4	A Capella	2	4
	3	Club Soccer	3	4
	2	USD Film Society	5	3
	1	Club Tennis	3	4
Student A	10	The Bull Pit	5	4
	9	International Business Club	7	4
	8	Entrepreneurship Club	7	6
	7	Greek Life	4	2
	6	Supply Chain	7	1
	5	Alliance of Disability Advocates	2	6
	4	American Cancer Society	2	6
	3	Cars, Motorcycles and Offroading	4	3
	2	Men's Rugby	5	4
	1	Everthinkers: Philosophy Club	1	6
Student B	10	Club Climbing Team	2	5
	9	Saturdays with Seniors	5	7
	8	Scholastic Assistants	7	2
	7	Women in STEM	3	1
	6	Greek Life	4	2
	5	Cool Kids Club	5	7
	4	MEChA	4	3
	3	First Generation Student Association	4	1

	2	Law and Business Mediation Caucus	1	5
	1	Torero Program Board	7	6
Totals		Reason 1	2	3
		Reason 2	6	3
		Reason 3	3	5
		Reason 4	5	8
		Reason 5	5	3
		Reason 6	2	5
		Reason 7	5	2