

A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF MENTAL HEALTH
SYMPTOMS AND AWARENESS IN THE COLLEGE STUDENT POPULATION

by

Stephanie Ann (Hare) Wallace

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

Alexandra Barnett, EdD, Committee Chair

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand mental health concerns and the services provided within the college population located at an on-ground campus in the United States. The theories guiding this study were Schlossberg's transition theory and self-efficacy theory, which play a major role in understanding the concerns and heightened symptoms students faced when transitioning into the college setting. The transcendental phenomenological study focused on gathering data from sophomore students enrolled at Rose College who have recently faced the transition from high school or undergraduate settings. The setting took place virtually due to restrictions and limitations of COVID-19. Student samples were collected by reaching out to students via an institutional research marketing platform where this researcher's marketing flyer was posted throughout Liberty University's campus. In addition, two rounds of marking e-mails were sent to students to request participation from sophomore students who endorsed the criteria for experiencing various mental health symptoms while enrolled in the higher education setting, such as: depression, anxiety, and general adjustment symptoms. The data collection process consisted of individual interviews with ($N=10$) student participants, a student artifact collection questionnaire, a student letter to self, and a final focus group that allowed a space for all students willing to share their lived experiences regarding their transition into higher education. Research findings indicated students who utilized various support systems and artifacts as an added source of coping, benefitted from successfully finishing their first year of college.

Keywords: mental health, anxiety, depression, higher education, adjustment, transition, support, services

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, including my parents, husband, and my children. Mom and Dad, you have provided me with so much encouragement and support in a variety of ways throughout this past decade of schooling. Without your love and support I wouldn't have been able to get to this point in my educational career. Thank you for helping me by taking care of your grandchildren during the long days and nights of writing and interviewing and giving me the motivation to keep going on days where I couldn't find the motivation myself. Thank you both for always believing in me and teaching me to never give up on my dreams. To my husband, the man who encouraged me to keep going, for supporting my dreams and being super-dad on days where I needed a little extra concentration. To my children, you have given me the most encouragement. This process was difficult to say the least, but I did it for you all! I pursued schooling because I knew one day I would be blessed with a family who would be looking at the adult examples before them. I chose this path to show you all to never give up on what your goals are. I hope your mother's pursuit of knowledge shows you that there are no limits to what you can do. If you fail, get back up and try again, and if you put forth great effort, you will all be able to achieve amazing things in this life! Always keep going, have faith, and do your best!

Acknowledgments

I would like to take a moment to thank and commend my committee chair, Dr. Alexandra Barnett, who helped encourage and guide me throughout this dissertation process. It was not only a pleasure having you as a former professor throughout my doctoral journey, it was an honor having you serve as my committee chair! Your passion for the field of education is unwavering, as much as your commitment to the students you mentor and instruct along the way. Your prayers and guidance throughout this doctoral dissertation process are beyond appreciated and praised! I would also like to acknowledge my committee member, Dr. Lucinda Spaulding, who also had a significant influence throughout my dissertation writing process. Your expertise within qualitative research is incredible and I am honored to have been able to work with you throughout this significant education milestone!

Lastly, I would like to thank every student who has been brave and bold enough to take on a doctoral level program. This is no simple feat and I commend every single person who has taken their commitment to learning to this intense level. To my fellow colleagues from previous programs, Dr. Agnello, Dr. Brewton, and soon to be Dr. Di Nardi, I appreciate your dedication to the field of mental health and for providing expertise in all of your areas of specialty. I cannot thank you all enough for your support and guidance throughout this doctoral process!

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List of Abbreviations

American Counseling Association (ACA)

Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

American Psychological Association (APA)

Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD)

College of Applied Studies and Academic Success (CASAS)

Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19/COVID)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Resident Assistant (RA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

There is minimal research available that describes the experiences of college students with mental health concerns and the resources available to this population while they are enrolled in a higher education setting. Furthermore, research currently available that expands on academic outcomes for students struggling with mental health symptoms is also limited. Rising trends demonstrate the potential lack of adequate mental health services in the college setting, as evidenced by increased suicide rates, mass shootings, drug overdoses, and lack of degree attainment, and thus must be further examined. The higher education setting, including staff, faculty, and administration, must re-evaluate the quality and availability of treatment offered in order to assist students in attaining mental health stabilization that will result in academic and life success.

A qualitative research study was conducted in order to understand the implications of this topic within the higher education discipline. Chapter One discusses the background of the subject area, including mental health within the college student populations, as well as the evolution of addressing these issues within the higher education system through time. The background section highlights the historical, social, and theoretical contexts of seeking mental health services within college student populations. In addition, the background section discusses the current limitations and lack of support within this area of research due to the lack of updated literature within this field of study. Once the background information is described comprehensively, the contextual nature of this study is explained. Additionally, a section including situation to self, describes the philosophical context in which this research is rooted. This transcendental phenomenological study focused on individual students' lived experiences within the higher education setting,

which was recorded and addressed. The problem statement discusses the current concerns regarding mental health in the college setting, and leads into the purpose statement that focuses on what I intended to add to the most recent literature. The first chapter is dedicated to discussing the historical context of mental health concerns found within the higher education system, as well as how these concerns were addressed up until recent years. In addition, the first chapter consists of the theoretical, empirical, and practical significances of mental health wellness within the college population. Following the significance of this study section, I listed research questions that were described and addressed within this transcendental phenomenological study. Additionally, vocabulary has been defined and described to provide readers with a baseline of focused research concepts, followed by the summary of the chapter.

Background

Students enter the higher education system with hopes of finding their future passions, which often lead to promising careers. However, students are often met with adversity, stress, and uncertainty in their college journey, which may impede their ability to pursue their passion. Burke et al. (2017) stated, “College should be challenging, not overwhelming” (p. 128). Instead of focusing on this paramount transition, students struggling with mental health concerns oftentimes take a leave of absence or permanently leave an institution. Students further report a primary reason for making the decision to leave was due to a lack of support found within their institution (Story et al., 2019). According to Roberts (2018), the number of college students diagnosed with a mental health disorder is at a significantly elevated rate compared to previous years. While mental health disorders have increased within this setting, there have also been limited resources and education provided to this student population who struggle with mental illness (Roberts, 2018, p. 370). The most predominant mental health disorders found within the

higher education setting include “anxiety, depression, alcohol misuse, sleep disorders, suicidal ideation, and eating disorders” (Roberts, 2018, p. 371). Cimini and Rivero (2018) discussed how various mental health symptoms such as stress, anxiety, trauma, and depression can influence students’ substance use. If mental health symptoms are ignored, the level of substance abuse may increase exponentially due to students self-medicating in order to cope with these aforementioned reported symptoms (Cimini & Rivero, 2018).

Historical Context

While mental health programs did not expand until the 1960’s, there were a few programs that led the way in providing general health services to college populations such as West Point Military Academy, beginning in 1830 (Christmas, 2011). Additionally, in 1861 Amherst College began examining how to provide mental health services to their college population (Kraft, 2011). However, during this time of treatment psychiatrists focused on students with “neurotic” symptoms and provided “moral treatment” for these reported symptoms (Kraft, 2011, p. 477). Transforming the field of psychological treatment in 1910, Princeton University began studying and providing services for “personality development” (Kraft, 2011, p. 478). Based on these early programs, several major national organizations were developed to bring awareness to students’ mental hygiene and counseling needs to include the American Psychological Association (APA) and the American Counseling Association (ACA).

After World War II there was an influx of services for individuals using the GI bill, which transformed into the decades of developing best practices, therapeutic techniques, and diagnoses for individuals with mental illness (Kraft, 2011). President Kennedy began the initiative for community mental health treatment in 1963, which subsequently provided treatment and medication to those in need in the community (Kraft, 2011, p. 477). With President

Kennedy's initiative emerged the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders*, which would aid in further identifying various symptoms found within individuals with a mental health diagnosis (Kraft, 2011).

Social Context

Mental health within the college setting did not become a pronounced social concern until it surfaced as a public safety concern. For example, school shootings became a reoccurring issue in the United States, including "Virginia Tech University and, more recently, the University of California, Santa Barbara" (Prince, 2015, p. 5). These acts of violence were perpetrated by students with unaddressed mental health issues. In addition, the fatal shootings sparked interest and aid to mental health counseling centers within universities across the United States, in order to further address these heightened instances of violence within the college setting.

Students entering the higher education system are found to go through a time of tremendous transition to include lifestyle changes, academic performance, exposure to substance use, as well as overall wellness challenges due to new environments (Roberts, 2018). Ooms (2018) discussed the impact of traditionally-aged students transitioning from a high school environment to a college institution, and the difficult nature of managing a new environment, newly found independence, institutional expectations, as well as the stressors to gain new friendships and a sense of community. These mounting pressures can cause an influx of stress and other mental health symptoms (Ooms, 2018). However, if students are met with effective therapeutic intervention services, as well as an environment centered on student wellness, students will not only have the ability to effectively cope with their symptoms, but they will also flourish in the academic setting they are attending (Ooms, 2018).

Although students may become willing to participate in therapeutic intervention, they are often met with barriers that may prevent them from continuing treatment. There are several reported barriers to receiving treatment, to include “stigmatization of psychological disorders, lack of perceived urgency, unknown or high cost of treatment, lack of time and availability of treatment, cultural differences, and skepticism of treatment efficacy” (Roberts, 2018, p. 371).

In order to address the barrier of availability and cost, Roberts (2018) provided additional research that suggested the benefits of offering mental health services to students online, utilizing a telehealth platform. This online-based service is reported to be effective for the student population due to providing therapy in the convenience of one’s home, as well as the low-cost nature of treatment (Roberts, 2018, p. 371). Dunbar et al. (2018) found students who utilized online counseling services, frequently attended 60% (Dunbar et al., 2018, p. 597) of the time, which did not account for students seeking additional in-person services prior to utilizing online treatment platforms.

Reupert (2019) found effectiveness when utilizing trauma informed care in attempts to view and treat students with reported mental health concerns. Payton et al. (2018) discussed another system for integrating intervention services, including the National Alliance on Mental Illness. The National Alliance on Mental Illness manages specific services and support structures that aid the college student population. Payton et al. also found utilizing the following services aided students in the reduction of their reported symptoms: the disability resources center (DRC), attending individual and group counseling sessions at the university, making use of the counseling staff, as well as turning to college peers who are trained in handling mental health concerns. Additional researchers focused on implementing models of care in order to address student symptoms. Cimini and Rivero (2018) utilized the Comprehensive Prevention Spectrum

Model, which incorporated the use of various treatment options for college students to include focusing on providing specialized interventions, early intervention, and promoting wellness within the student populations by normalizing mental health symptoms with community wide educational programs and resources (p. xvii). In addition to the utilization of programs and services specifically focused on mental health, Vidourek and Burbage (2019) found certain daily routines and actions that contribute to students improved mental health: “staying active, being occupied, and surrounding oneself with good people” and “being conscious of emotions and reactions, learning new coping skills” (p. 3).

Theoretical Context

The theory informing this research is Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory. Schlossberg (1981) originally defined three factors of consideration when in a transitional state: “(1) the characteristics of the particular transition, (2) the characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environments, and (3) the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition” (p. 3). Schlossberg (2011) in later works expanded these findings to the 4 S’s: “situation, self, support, strategies” (p.160). While all four areas may be considered an asset and a liability, it is important to note what factors may be working for or against the college student population when entering a new phase and most likely geographical setting (Anderson et al., 2012). Furthermore, Anderson et al. discussed additional factors students may also experience, such as diversity and multicultural considerations. These added considerations may also either support or diminish a student’s well-being and effective transition into a college setting. The current study utilized Schlossberg’s focus on previous influences of individual students having transitioned into their freshman year at Rose College (pseudonym).

Situation to Self

With almost 11 years of higher education experience as a student, I have witnessed firsthand the adversity that comes with students attempting to achieve their goal of obtaining a higher education degree. As an undergraduate student, I pursued a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology and served as a Resident Assistant (RA) for two years, working with the freshman student population. Throughout my time as a RA, I had to intervene in various crisis situations with the freshman resident population, including aiding students in creating safety plans, helping them de-escalate from panic attacks due to being academically overwhelmed, and calling for medical reinforcements from alcohol toxicity. I never thought my skills as a RA would also help me become a better clinician. I was in the most vulnerable moments with these residents and would not be aware of what profound impacts I would later have on this group of individuals I once called my peers. Having the opportunity to be trained as a RA better prepared me to face initial crisis situations without the educational background to aid students in mental health counseling.

Since completing my bachelor of arts degree, I have completed two Master of Arts degrees in the field of forensic psychology and clinical psychology. These advanced degrees provided me with the opportunity to serve higher education student populations in mental health counseling and also granted me the honor of being able to teach at the college level. There have been different types of institutions at which I have worked over the past several years that have varied in size and demographic diversity. It has been my personal observation that smaller institutions tend to offer fewer mental health services for their student population. In addition, there has been limited to nonexistent psychoeducation and training offered to students to aid them in identifying potential triggers or stress induced instances that may occur throughout their

higher education career. The limited support for the higher education student population is alarming and continues to trend in a negative direction. According to Story et al. (2019), these concerns were reported by 11 individuals experiencing these symptoms, and affected the student population needing to take a leave of absence, as well as the institutions they frequented. These concerns can influence student enrollment, as well as student success once they are able to reintegrate into the higher education setting (Story et al., 2019).

The motivation for this study stems from my personal experiences as a higher education student and instructor. As an instructor and researcher, I have observed several students struggle with mental health symptoms and personal traumas that have significantly impacted their performance within their higher education career. Furthermore, the lack of resources available for the variety of college students I have served has made it more difficult for students to receive the adequate resources they need in order to be successful.

There are four philosophical assumptions that guide all research: “ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified), axiology (the role of values in research), and methodology (the process of research)” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20). Given my epistemological assumption that knowledge is co-constructed, I selected a phenomenological study that relied heavily on personal interviews, and the findings include quotes of students’ lived experiences transitioning into their freshman year at Rose College (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Having been a freshman student living at my undergraduate institution, I can personally relate to their transition process, but also have the opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge of students’ experiences at Rose College.

The nature of my axiological assumptions went hand-in-hand with my epistemological assumptions, as I personally related to the students’ lived experiences transitioning into college,

and the values that have shaped the assumptions I have as the researcher motivated me to conduct this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The methodological assumption focused on describing the study in detail and continuously keeping an open mind and open dialogue with the students willing to participate in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

My choice to conduct a qualitative study was largely based on the nature of my ontological assumptions addressing the question “What is the nature of reality?” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20). I selected a qualitative design for this research because I hold the ontological assumption that understanding multiple perspectives and therefore multiple realities is essential to understanding the essence of the lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This inclusion of multiple realities is key to a qualitative study in the fact that it is not only gathering information from the participants in the research process, but it is also about making a meaningful conclusion about the students’ experiences that influenced their transition into the college setting.

Furthermore, the interpretive framework that guided this research was social constructivism, which addresses how “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). The social constructivism framework served as a lens to make meaning of the experiences of each individual student and to understand how each individual interpreted the world around them. Chen et al. (2017) found “Students' perceptions of a constructivist learning environment were significantly linked to their life satisfaction and positive and negative affect” (p. 226). In addition, researchers. Chen et al. (2017) often noted that students who had a clear purpose and goal within their educational journey were found to have a positive perception and affect in regard to their experience in their institution. While it is beneficial to gain evidence regarding students’ personal experiences within the higher education system, there is limited information found within the literature within the past five years that

focuses on mental health service utilization found within the college setting (Bourdon et al., 2020). In sum, approaching this research through a social constructivist lens allowed me to determine how students' individual understanding, meaning, and personal and social history shaped their lived experiences with mental health while enrolled in a college setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

It is important to note that given my selection of a transcendental approach to phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), I intentionally minimized the effects and natural biases stemming from my own lived experiences by intentionally bracketing “preconceptions that may taint the research process” (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 80). To do this, I kept reflective notes throughout data collection and analysis and purposefully and systematically acknowledged the assumptions, biases, and values that influenced my methodological decisions.

Problem Statement

The problem is first year students transitioning into higher education have difficulties managing mental health symptoms exacerbated by this new setting, while potentially lacking sufficient mental health supports (Hurd et al., 2018; Iorga et al., 2018; Karyotaki et al., 2020; Mortier et al., 2018). Karyotaki et al. found 93.7% of first-year students noted some level of stress found within six areas of functioning: “financial situation, health, love life, relationships with family, relationships at work/school, problems experienced by loved ones” (p. 1). Furthermore, according to The Healthy Minds Network and the American College Health Association (2020), “Sixty percent of college students say the pandemic has made it harder to access mental health care” (The Healthy Minds Network & American College Health Association, 2020, p. 2), making it more difficult to provide proper mental health services to students in need.

Stress causes various mental health symptoms within the college population in the following mental health disorder categories: “major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, alcohol use disorder, drug use disorder” (Karyotaki et al., 2020, p. 1). Research within this field of study has continuously showcased concerns of students reporting mental health symptoms, specifically alarming rates were reported by Auerbach et al. (2018) to span from October 2014 to February 2017, where 35% of college students across the world reported mental health symptoms while enrolled at their institutions, specifically mentioning major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder (Auerbach et al., 2018). Furthermore, researchers Lipson et al. (2018) previously found over one third of students reported having a diagnosable mental illness within the 2016-2017 academic year. These statistics, year after year, demonstrate an increase in students reporting symptoms of mental health concerns, which further imposes the need to attend and address these concerns within the higher education setting.

Examples of continued distress found in higher education settings include recent data from Rudick and Dannels (2018), who reported at their institution a 10% increase in students expressing suicidal ideations at the student mental health center. Smith and Applegate (2018) reported the common mental health concerns plaguing the higher education student population include “depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and self-injury” (p. 383). Smith and Applegate (2018) found 32% of the student population noted the aforementioned mental health symptoms and concerns. Researchers Dunbar et al. (2018) also reported in their findings an increasing trend of students endorsing mental health symptoms, with 17% of the college population openly reporting mental health concerns. Furthermore, Hurd et al. (2018) reported students who attended a school with a majority Caucasian ethnicity were apt to become more vulnerable to

psychological harm and lack of self-worth while transitioning into the college setting. While varied authors found different levels of statistical significance in the increased mental health issue trend, all researchers have noted that the trend continues to increase with respect to students experiencing mental health symptoms while enrolled in their academic institutions.

Murphy (2017) discussed two additional areas of concern found within 22 higher education institutions across Ireland. These areas of concern included student rates of mental health concerns being unmatched by the supports offered at college institutions, as well as the stigma found within the student population when students had to disclose information to gain mental health services. Furthermore, Rudick and Dannels (2018) reported the stigma attached to mental health services is so severe that students prefer to “suffer in silence” (p. 405).

Due to the increased rates of students expressing perceived stigma when attempting to gain therapeutic services, there has been an increased trend of students taking a medical leave of absence in order to receive treatment for ongoing mental health symptoms outside of their institutional setting (Story, et al., 2019). Students reported various reasons for taking a medical leave of absence, including heightened demands within the college setting, increased stress levels, and lack of therapeutic interventions (Story et al., 2019). If students are having to take a medical leave of absence due to the inability to manage mental health symptoms in the college setting, it is also often met with medical intervention and treatment. The Center for College Mental Health (2013) reported “One-third of college student participants had taken a prescription medication for a mental health concern; 10% had been hospitalized for a mental health concern; and 23% injured themselves with intent to kill themselves” (Prince, 2015, p. 7).

The literature underscores the continued struggles of higher education students seeking mental health services. Previous publications discussed the need for increased utilization of

online counseling services and a focus on reducing stigmatization of seeking therapeutic intervention.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of students with mental health issues entering the higher education setting and the perception of the therapeutic support offered at the institution. For this study, mental illness was defined as “changes in emotion, thinking or behavior. Mental illnesses are associated with distress and/or problems functioning in social, work or family activities” (American Psychiatric Association, 2019, para. 1).

A transcendental phenomenological study was conducted in order to gain first-hand knowledge of students’ lived experiences through their higher education experience (Moustakas, 1994). Particularly, with regard to the transcendental phenomenological qualitative research design, it was my aim to be able to identify perceptions found within the sophomore college student population, who reported struggles with adjustment concerns as they arose when transitioning into their freshman year of college.

The theory guiding this study was Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory, which served as a useful framework to examine the experiences of students transitioning into a new experience and setting, and also identifies the current gap in the literature, which speaks to the influence of mental health on students who are in varied stages of their educational journey. Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory is derived from student development theory that analyzes human responses to “the individual’s perception of the transition, characteristics of the pretransition and post-transition environments, and characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 213).

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies within its positive impact within the higher education system overall. If researchers are better informed on how to effectively aid students when they first report mental health symptoms, the more positive influence we will have in therapeutic resources to the student population. This information will further aid in the reduction of student symptomology, medical leave of absences, and academic failure.

By being able to collect individual students' lived experiences, I will enlighten college institutions with a better understanding of what services are currently ineffective for the student body, as well as express what resources have been found to be beneficial to the student population. This phenomenological study will be able to aid the higher education system by highlighting areas in which institutions can assist in decreasing student symptomology and increasing academic performance.

Theoretical Significance

Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory was chosen as the focus of the study due to the fact this theory focuses on how mood, emotion, and overall human functioning can be influenced when placed in a state of transition. This theory will aid in providing a descriptive understanding and analysis within the areas of educating and providing mental health resources to students struggling with mental health symptoms in the higher education system.

Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory is the theoretical framework used to examine concerns students have reported experiencing throughout their transitional stage of adjustment into a higher education setting. Schlossberg's theory is described as an "examination of what constitutes a transition, different forms of transitions, the transition process, and factors that influence transitions" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 214). However, not all individuals encountering a

transitional process are able to successfully blend from one environment to the next. Schlossberg noted, "Individuals differ in their ability to adapt to change" (p. 2). Due to individuals having differing abilities for change, Schlossberg created the transition model for adults; however, it may be applied to an educational framework in order to best describe students' experiences in a new academic environment. In addition, other factors that may impact the transition process can include students experiencing "transfer shock" (Ivins et al., 2017, p. 248), who may transfer from a previous institution into a new institution. The transition theoretical context that will be the focus of this research will include students transitioning from a previous environment into an independent higher education setting. Schlossberg's transition process is described as individuals who move "from a preoccupation with the transition to an integration of the transition" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 216). This process is described as an action theory in which an individual is actively choosing to make a difference within their current known environment into a new transition setting. There are four factors described that may influence how one copes with a new transition setting: "situation, self, support, and strategies" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 216). These factors help predict how individuals will process the transitional state they are in and expand on if they believe the transition process has been beneficial or harmful to their overall wellbeing. Evans et al. (2010) also described an additional counseling model originally developed by Cormier and Hackney (1993), which was utilized to further expand on best supportive measures for individuals in a transitional period of life. This study will aid the body of knowledge by providing additional information regarding what effective strategies, mental health services, and higher education best practices are available to students currently transitioned into a higher education setting.

Empirical Significance

There is currently a gap in the literature that expands on what mental health services are available to the first-year college student population. Mortier et al. (2018a) found college students have alarming rates of suicide, making it a leading cause of death in their age group. Mortier et al. noted that within the freshman student sample, “64.9% report a last occurrence of this death wish more than 12 months prior to the survey. For ideation, plan, and attempt, this was 60.4%, 48.8%, and 84.7%, respectively” (p. 6). Almost 65% of freshman students sampled reported a suicidal ideation during their enrollment in a higher education institution. This statistic showcases the heightened need to address student concerns found within the college setting. Carr et al. (2013) discussed the negative psychological symptoms found within students transitioning into higher education to include depression and loneliness, but did not provide further explanation of other mental health symptoms that have been reported in recent literature.

According to DeAngelis (2019) with the American Psychological Association (APA), rates of college students gaining a mental health diagnosis have increased from 22% in 2007 to 36% in 2019. Mental health has become a focus for college presidents serving these populations by an alarming 80% (DeAngelis, 2019); however, the needs of students are still going unaddressed. These trending statistics demonstrate the drastic impact of students experiencing mental health symptoms for the first time while they are enrolled in a college institution. It is the responsibility of the educators and the higher education system overall to aid the students who begin to experience such symptoms and provide them with adequate resources to cope with such symptoms.

Furthermore, the current literature does not provide a description of how higher education institutions are helping students engage in available resources in order to reduce their reported

mental health symptoms. These gaps in the literature need to be addressed in order to form a cohesive understanding of how a range of mental health symptoms may be enhanced with a transition into a higher education system, which can further impact students' ability to gain effective services and maintain a successful level of academic functioning. With current concerns surrounding the most recent Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic, college counseling centers continue to struggle with adequate numbers of mental health professional staff available to serve the student population adequately (CDC, 2020). In addition, institutions are now faced with added concerns regarding deficient resources and staff available to college institutions, as they are experiencing major financial deficits due to lower enrollment numbers with a reduction in overall enrollment as high as 15% to 25% (Dennis, 2020), based on COVID concerns (Abrams, 2020). Due to this ongoing altered state of higher education, the inability to adequately aid students with symptoms such as "suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and non-suicidal self-injury – as well as depression, anxiety, social anxiety, and traumatic experiences" (Abrams, 2020, p. 1) is a growing concern regarding how institutions will be able to adequately serve the incoming first-year student population.

Practical Significance

The practical significance of this study will provide college institutions with a valuable framework of what mental health services and supports are reported to be effective for students currently enrolled in a higher education setting. In order to better serve the college population, it is vital to address the stigma attached to students willing to seek services. Shapiro et al. (2019) discussed findings that support the positive impacts of reducing stigma when students receive services at their institution. In addition, the positive impacts of individuals gaining mental health services over the past several years were addressed when discussing students' reduction in

depression symptoms. Roberts (2018) discussed the influence of online counseling platforms, which has been found to be valuable with an increasing trend for students in the current online counseling climate and provides students with an opportunity to seek intervention immediately, versus waiting for symptoms to become exacerbated to the point of hospitalization (Cuijpers et al., 2019; Roberts 2018). The findings from this study may be used to a wider scale by examining the impact of all higher education institutions, as well as what services they have available for their current students. Additionally, this study may also aid in furthering the understanding of how meaningful and impactful wellness centers and mental health counseling services have been found to be helpful for students who begin to experience symptoms. If symptoms can be identified within the first year of college and treated as an early intervention strategy, the rates of student success, both academically and personally, can remain stabilized (Cuijpers et al., 2019).

Research Questions

This section includes key research questions that focused on a deeper understanding of how students are transitioning and functioning within a higher education setting. The application for phenomenological research would include utilizing questions that “give a direction and focus to meaning, and in themes that sustain an inquiry, awaken further interest and concern, and account for our passionate involvement” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59). Student mental health rates are reported to continue trending upward while mental health services are going unutilized (Roberts, 2018). The central question is focused on the transitional aspect of students being enrolled in a higher education institution and the stressors that come with this new transition. I developed four subsequent questions in order to address the following key aspects that need to be further understood: student onset of symptoms, student knowledge of available campus

resources, and areas of needed improvement as related through individual student testimony.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of students who report symptoms of a mental health disorder while in their first year of college?

One of Schlossberg's (1981) transition frameworks focuses on the *situation* in which individuals find themselves as they transition from one experience to the next (Anderson et al., 2012). This question focuses on understanding the situation where students are transitioning into their first year of college and begin to experience mental health symptoms due to the imbalance taking place within this transition. This transition may have stemmed from the other transition frameworks that will be addressed within the sub questions of this research study. With a "perfect storm" brewing, Morris et al. (2019) discussed how growing mental health concerns have strongly influenced student performance, in conjunction with universities grappling with creating and providing adequate resources for students to gain the services needed to be successful in the college arena. Recent areas of key research focused on the influence of students endorsing adverse childhood experiences, which suggests an added barrier to transitioning into a college environment (Karatekin, 2018). There have been a growing number of mental health research trends reported, including students endorsing symptoms of anxiety, depression, mood dysregulation, and suicidal ideations while enrolled in undergraduate institutions across the United States (Cleary et al., 2011; Lipson et al., 2018; Papadatou-Pastou et al., 2019; Shapiro et al., 2019).

In addition, students continue to engage in high-risk behaviors such as self-medicating when they begin experiencing mental health symptoms. These self-medicated practices can include but are not limited to utilizing various substances such as alcohol and marijuana (Cimini

& Rivero, 2019). Cimini and Rivero found the number of students self-medicating with various substances has become increasingly prevalent; however, when students begin to utilize substances in order to cope with prevalent mental health symptoms, these behaviors may result in negative side-effects within student academic performance and functioning.

Sub-Question One

What supports aid students with mental health symptoms transitioning into the college setting successfully?

When transitioning into a new education environment, students often need additional *support* in order to successfully grasp their new surroundings. Anderson et al. (2012) provided additional detail regarding the support variable found in Schlossberg's transition theory to include viewing the positive or negative implications of a support system for individuals undergoing a transition in their life. Hatch and Garcia (2017) examined the influence of student support systems within students transitioning into their first few weeks of entering a community college setting. While several factors influence the student transition process, Hatch and Garcia found "Advising activities and other engagement factors are related to new community college students' earliest persistence intentions but in limited and nuanced ways" (p. 378). Hatch and Garcia also reported the individual processes leading up to students beginning to interact and attend college courses, beginning with admissions communications, financial aid, and student services, all play a role in students feeling connected to their college institution. In addition, Hatch and Garcia reported the effectiveness of students having a strong support system while undergoing the transition into the college setting.

Sub-Question Two

What are first year students' experiences with mental health services as they transition into the college setting?

Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory focuses on the *self* as an area of evaluation within the transition framework (Anderson et al., 2012). This question is focused on the freshman student participants' personal views and individual experiences as they transitioned into the college setting. This question provided students with an opportunity to speak openly regarding their lived experience of experiencing mental health symptoms as they attempted to cope with a new transitional state. While college institutions may offer services to students transitioning into the college setting, often these services go unutilized by the college population (Lipson et al., 2016). Dunbar et al. (2018) noted similar findings regarding the underutilization of therapeutic services in college students due to the perception and attitude towards mental health. The institutions throughout the United States that have dedicated their time to decreasing the stigma of utilizing mental health services have noted an increase in student acceptance of mental health treatment overall (Shapiro et al., 2019). In addition, by utilizing various approaches such as Andersen's Behavioral Model of Health Services can aid students in understanding the power of gaining mental health treatment, as it is readily available (Pilar et al., 2019). With innovative technologies being developed there is an opportunity for college institutions to utilize varied therapeutic interventions, including online-based support for students who are entering their institutions with mental health concerns (Cuijpers et al., 2019; Davies, Morriss, & Glazebrook, 2014; Kleinpeter et al., 2015; Roberts, 2018).

Sub-Question Three

What types of mental health services do students believe helped them transition to college successfully?

Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory also notes the importance of focusing on the strategies variable that discusses the factors associated with effective coping strategies utilized by individuals to successfully move past the transition stage (Anderson et al., 2012). This question aids this research study by addressing what strategies were found most effective for students to engage in, in order to effectively cope with the college transition, such as gaining supports offered at the school. Schwitzer et al. (2018) reported only 10% of college students were actively seeking counseling services offered at their prospective institutions. This rate showcases the concern of students not utilizing services within their institution. This small percentage of students willing to receive mental health services in the college setting has been further impacted by recent medical concerns and college reopening policies surrounding COVID-19.

During the COVID-19 transition and first-year students experiencing a different way of entering the higher education setting, the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD;2020) created a reopening policy limiting in-person counseling contact. Mitchell (2020), provided reopening protocols including mainly telemental health services with limited in-person sessions in order to prevent and limit the spread of COVID-19. However, this new protocol for counseling, particularly with new student populations, may deter students from seeking assistance due to the impersonal nature of telemental health services.

Sub-Question Four

What barriers to mental health treatment are expressed by first-year students transitioning into the college setting?

Lastly, Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory was utilized to conclude the research question portion of the study by once again reviewing the transition framework of the *self*, in order to provide an additional outlet for students to provide their personal interpretation and insight into why addressing some personal concerns were considered challenging to them during the transitional state (Schlossberg, 1981).

Andrade et al. (2014) noted several barriers for individuals who were seeking therapeutic intervention for reported mental health symptoms. These barriers included availability to therapeutic services, financial stressors, transportation difficulties, the inconvenient nature of attending in-person sessions, as well as self-biases to include feeling they could treat their mental health concerns privately and by themselves. Dunbar et al. (2018) also found an underutilization of students willing to seek mental health treatment even when it was offered in an online format. While 76% of students were willing to seek mental health treatment, Dunbar et al. found the level of student bias with regards to seeking services superseded their willingness to gain effective treatment. Ebert et al. (2019) had similar findings in the respect that students felt they could either manage treating their own symptoms or preferred to gain emotional support from family and friends versus a qualified mental health professional.

Definitions

The definitions provided aid the reader in understanding the applicable mental health terminology combined with the terms related to the theoretical orientation of this study.

1. *Anxiety*- “an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure” (American Psychological Association, 2019).
2. *Traditional College Student*- “a student who is between the ages of 18 and 22, who lives on or near campus, is a full-time student, and receives financial support from parents” (IGI Global, 2022).
3. *Depression*- “causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities once enjoyed” (American Psychological Association, 2019).
4. *Leave of Absence*- “a period of time when a student is not enrolled in classes but typically intends to reenroll” (Mental Health America, 2019).
5. *Mental Health*- “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes her or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life” (White & LaBelle, 2018, p.133).
6. *Mental Illness*- a mental health condition that “changes in emotion, thinking or behavior. Mental illnesses are associated with distress and/or problems functioning in social, work or family activities” (American Psychiatric Association, 2019, para. 1).
7. *Transition*- “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 33).

Summary

This chapter provided a synopsis of recent study findings that suggest an increase in mental health symptoms found within the college student population, along with a lack of effective therapeutic intervention services available for students to utilize as they transition into the college setting. The problem of focus for this dissertation included students’ mental health being a priority when they transition into the higher education setting. Students attending college

for the first time may have difficulty adjusting to their new environments, schedules, and freedoms (Baker, 2004). With this new adjustment comes additional concerns of students experiencing mental health symptoms for the first time, which may influence students feeling a sense of encouragement by faculty members to request additional academic support. Bohon et al. (2016) found if students were encouraged by their institutional leadership and family support system, they would be more likely to seek therapeutic support offered at their institution.

In addition, this chapter discussed reported barriers for students gaining effective therapeutic intervention services based on the overwhelming stigma of seeking mental health treatment (Andrade et al., 2014). Furthermore, students report they prefer to handle their symptoms personally or turn to a close friend or relative for symptom management (Ebert et al., 2019). However, when students choose to treat themselves, additional concerns soon surface to include self-medicating with alcohol or other illicit substances to reduce their experienced mental health symptoms (Cimini & Rivero, 2019; Roberts, 2018). The continued stigma of receiving mental health services needs to be addressed by college institutions across the United States in order to normalize the growing percentage of students struggling with various mental illnesses, included but not limited to: depression, anxiety, low self-efficacy, suicidal ideations, and substance abuse (Bandura 1977; Carr et al., 2013; Duchatelet & Donche, 2019; Lipson et al., 2018; Papadatou-Pastou et al., 2019; Shapiro et al., 2019; White & LaBelle, 2018). In order to address students reported mental health symptoms, there needs to be a focus on what services college institutions are offering their students in order to maintain their mental wellness. The utilizations of college counseling centers and peer support groups are reported to be alternative options for students before they feel the need for taking a medical leave of absence (Ebert et al., 2019; Story et al., 2019).

This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study provided a basis for college students to openly express their lived experiences within the higher education system. In addition, students had the opportunity to discuss their current symptomology and academic performance, as well as the available therapeutic interventions offered within their institution. Students also had the opportunity to discuss the areas of needed exploration higher education institutions should take in order to better support students with reported mental health symptoms plaguing the college student population. Researchers must continue to re-examine the needs of the college population in order gain better insight into how we can aid students in a time of crisis.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A review of the literature was completed to describe the current higher education practices and recommended resources for higher education students struggling with mental health concerns. The selected theories focused within this chapter include Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory and Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory. The first section of this literature review is focused on transition and self-efficacy theories, which will further illustrate where students have difficulty transitioning and navigating individual development in the college environment. In addition, related literature will focus on how students have struggled with certain areas of development socially, academically, and psychologically. Areas addressed within this review include academic performance, learning strategies, mental health symptoms, and student achievement concerns. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the current gap in the literature, which will provide an opportunity to expand on future areas of reducing mental health stigma, along with expanding on college mental health issue prevention and continued treatment services.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that will be discussed moving forward will include a focus on the student population's behavioral patterns, mood, and thought content, as well as any additional factors that may impact their performance within the higher education setting. The college community oftentimes encounters concerns with students' growth and development during times of new transition. This transition into a new academic setting may cause situational stressors, adjustment concerns, and gradually become a concern that evolves into students failing coursework or being forced to be removed from the institution for personal reflection and growth

(Baker, 2004). In addition, students can view others' behaviors and alter their behavior accordingly in order to be successful in future academic situations.

Transition Theory

Schlossberg (1981) defined the term transition as “an event or non-event that results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships” (p. 2). Schlossberg described three main factors that would potentially influence an individual transitioning, which may include:

the characteristics of the transition itself...the characteristics of the pre- and post-transition supports and physical settings... and the characteristics of the individual including psychosocial competence. (p. 15)

These factors are also found within student populations enrolled in a college institution.

Students may present differently both physically and psychologically before entering a college institution. Once enrolled in an institution, given the new environment, new stressors, and new setting, these students may showcase great difficulty within this new and possibly first-time transition. Transition theory further contributed to the understanding of students' reported symptoms, while having undergone the transition of enrolling and actively having participated in coursework at the college level. These symptoms are often brought on by new stressors students have yet to experience, along with a new academic, living, and social environment. If mental health symptoms are left unchecked, students often begin to experience increased symptomology along with a decline in academic performance (Baker, 2004). Schlossberg (1981) discussed the need to examine how each student balances the resources of their individual situation including the new transition into their institution, support system, physical setting, and peer group, as well

as their own demographic characteristics. Once individuals enter into a transitional state, they will be forced to either grow or decline.

Students not only struggle with transitioning into their role as college students, but this major life shift may also hinder other areas of their functioning. As described by Schlossberg (1981), there are several variables that contribute to an individual's transition: "role change, affect, source, timing, onset, duration, and degree of stress" (p. 8). These variables aid in gaining a better sense of how one may struggle or successfully integrate into a college transitional state based on these factors. For example, students often transition into college within a student and child role. Once integrated into a college setting, they are considered a more responsible self-governed student, as well as fulfilling an independent adult role. This can be an extremely difficult transition for most students due to their need to take charge of their lives and not have a pre-structured living environment.

Affect can impact students within this setting if students are experiencing stress, depression, and anxiety. Students may have a more difficult time focusing on their school studies or developing their own structured routine to help them become successful in a college setting. *Source* may be an easier transition for most students because many have chosen to relocate to their desired college institution. However, if students lack knowledge of their new location, they may still struggle with their choice to live in a more independent and less supportive environment. *Timing* may also influence an individual's transition into college, as the beginning of college experience can happen at any point in adulthood, due to the fact students may begin their college experience as a traditional student or as an adult learner. Timing may vary for individuals due to students' personal life circumstances or lack of financial assistance. Timing

may impact how students interact or build social and professional relationships within this setting.

Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory was applied by Killam and Degges-White (2017), who reported the effectiveness of adding Schlossberg's transition theory into the implementation of new student programming used at student orientation. The researchers felt that this transition guide would aid in providing information regarding particular concerns that may arise within the first year in the college setting, as well as serve as a resource for new students. Furthermore, the duration of time students spend in college may differ due to their level of dedication. If they are strongly pursuing their studies they may have a shorter duration at the institution, versus other students who may feel they need to change direction with their major or experience difficulty in classes, causing them to prolong their educational pursuits.

Lastly, the level of stress can play a major role in how students' transition. Specifically, if students are experiencing high levels of stress, their level of concentration as well their mental wellness may cause additional difficulty for students transitioning into this new phase of their lives. Schlossberg (1981) described how stress can vary based on one's ability to gain additional supports during the time in transition and should be taken into consideration when focusing on the level of stress found within the individual. In addition, Rall (2016) expanded on Schlossberg's considerations of individual characteristics to include: "race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), and previous experience with a transition of a similar nature" (p. 467). Schlossberg's transition theory guided the current study by focusing on the implications of students transitioning into higher education, while also discussing how students may struggle with transitioning into their first year within a college setting. Furthermore, this study provides

higher education institutions with up to date signs and symptoms as reported by students in order to aid in early intervention efforts for those individuals endorsing mental health symptoms.

Self-efficacy Theory

Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory discussed the ability to focus on one's image and utilize it throughout one's daily life. If one's self-efficacy is uncertain due to one's development or previous circumstances, the low level of self-efficacy will also hinder one's performance within a higher education environment. Conyers et al. (1998) expanded on self-efficacy theory and related it to higher education student populations with disabilities. Conyers et al. focused specifically on how students adjust to the social isolation that can come from a new location and new type of school environment with added independence. Furthermore, these new adjustment factors have been found to impact self-efficacy in regard to students having a low level of self-efficacy and also needing additional assistance with academic accommodations.

Van Dinther et al. (2011) expanded on the concept of self-efficacy and the importance student perception has on student success. Van Dinther et al. found educational programs can enhance self-efficacy by utilizing social cognitive theory and providing students with simulated tasks in order to have them build upon skills needed to approach educational requirements with confidence and success. Researchers found those who have low self-efficacy would benefit from additional assistance; however, they were less likely to actually request the academic services they needed "thereby jeopardizing their academic performance" (Conyers et al., 1998, p. 27). However, if students have a good sense of self-efficacy, they will inherently seek the level of motivation needed to be successful.

It is necessary to focus on Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory in order to further understand how educators can provide the positive reinforcement needed for students to

successfully complete their academic tasks. Students' sense of self-efficacy may also be influenced based on students' personality type and their willingness to engage in extroverted or introverted practices. If educators are able to note the areas in which students are struggling or beginning to show deficits, we can utilize this theory to aid students by increasing their self-worth, motivation, and by providing a goal-directed orientation for students upon which to focus and be successful in their academic pursuits moving forward. I focused on these areas of consideration in this study, while also examining which practices were found to be effective in previous college settings.

Related Literature

The literature within this review focuses on common transition concerns found within the higher education setting, as well as on self-efficacy. This chapter discusses the model utilized for analyzing human adaptation within the individual's transition state. It is vital to note which common mental health symptoms are being reported and which mental health diagnoses are found to be prevalent within the college student population. The implications of student self-efficacy and personality on their level of successful integration into the college setting is another key consideration, as additional mental health symptoms may be reported within the student college population as they initially transition into the college environment.

Mental health symptoms may become exacerbated and also influence the student's ability to cope with utilizing spiritual, peer, academic, and family supports. Students' personality types may also influence the success of their initial transition into the college setting. The related literature addresses the long-term impacts of students perceiving chronic symptoms without treatment. Treatment may be perceived as a deterrent to some student populations due to the necessity of being completely honest, willing to work on oneself, and being able to listen and

incorporate constructive feedback in their lives. Furthermore, students may engage in vicarious learning strategies in order to ensure they are utilizing appropriate behaviors in order to remain successful in their academic setting. This may include additional student mentorship support to ensure students successfully transition within individual institutions as well as their individual class level. Lastly, this review of the literature examines the treatment approaches found to be most successful within the student population, including psychopharmacological treatment, mental health counseling, and early intervention services found within each individual institution to include support within academic, professional, and peer arenas.

Mental Health Concerns Found in College Settings

There is limited information and research regarding how colleges across the United States are addressing concerns of students' mental wellness within higher education research, while students transition into these academic institutions. Furthermore, Tirpak and Schlosser (2015) noted, "College may be the first time that students have access to, or are aware of, counseling and/or career centers" (p. 219). Harrer et al. (2018) elaborated on mental health concerns found within the college population and concluded mental illness not only influenced academic functioning, it also caused physical concerns for students' health, including developing eating disorders while undergoing stressful transitions into higher education. Doré et al. (2020) reviewed the implications of mental health symptoms within the student population. Doré et al. found "Relative to participants whose mental health was stable flourishing, those who declined to not flourishing and those whose mental health was stable not flourishing were more likely to have a probable anxiety and depressive disorders" (p. 45). They concluded those who were reported to be mentally stable while enrolled in their institution succeeded academically, while those who were not stable and not able to succeed academically were reported to have

heightened symptoms of anxiety and depression. Additional areas of key research focus should include the outline of human adaptation being altered within a transitional period of college admittance and enrollment. A description of a transitional state includes first perceiving one's individual transition along with characteristics found within the transitional environment, followed by characteristics within the individual experiencing the transition (Schlossberg, 1981).

Perceptions of a transition begin with a role change of the individual (Schlossberg, 1981). Students entering the college setting are often enrolled from high school settings. This initial role-change of coming from a familiar setting is often difficult to initially transition out of. Students' attitudes towards the new academic situation can also bring additional positive or negative outlooks regarding the transitional state amongst other factors to include "source, timing, onset and duration" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). Additional areas to consider with the model of human adaptation to transition includes characteristics of the individual's environment when entering the college setting, including, "internal support systems, institutional supports, and physical setting" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). These support systems can positively influence students' transitions into higher education. Furthermore, Schlossberg discussed the characteristics that may be influenced by the individual completing the transition to include demographic findings, socioeconomic status, psychosocial competence, and their perception and value of the transitional experience. For example, Conley et al. (2017) examined the deficits and areas of concern found within high school students transitioning into the college setting, and described negative influences found to impede students' performance and hinder the well-being of students prior to transitioning into a higher education setting. Conley et al. elaborated on the growing rate of higher education students suffering from a mental illness and found that areas

such as “depression, anxiety, or interpersonal difficulties” (p. 121) are symptoms that can be found beginning in high school student populations.

In addition, researchers Downs et al. (2016) found three key areas where student mental health can be impacted: biological, psychological and social contexts. Downs et al. discussed each factor in detail, and noted the influences of student performance based on each factor deficit, which involves influencing one’s immune function, circadian rhythms, and substance use. The researchers also explored the psychological and social implications of student mental health functioning at the college level and noted the psychological considerations included “separation from home and performance demands” (p. 958). The social implications included the level of student activity within the college setting.

Downs et al. (2016) expanded on how each factor can create a positive and negative influence. They found within the biological factor of student functioning, positive influences that would benefit students can include creating a positive sleep routine that is aided by regular exercise, reducing or eliminating illicit substance use or overuse of alcohol, as well as utilizing campus supports and services to reduce risk of mental or physical illness. Downs et al. noted that negative influences of biological factors may include over-exposure to peer contact including social events, substance accessibility, and exposure to community viruses and stress-induced sickness. The researchers determined there were positive influences within the psychological factor to include opportunities of increased self-esteem and sufficiency. Areas in which the psychological factor may be negatively impacted include lack or loss of support within their family, social, and academic relationships. Furthermore, the researchers noted social influences that can aid students include positive social and cultural additions available in the new school

environment; however, social influences that can negatively influence student success include financial strain and stressful campus housing and peer situations.

When students are transitioning, if these three factors within daily living are negatively impacted, a student's level of mental health symptoms may increase as a result of these considerations (Downs et al., 2016). The level of treatment varies from student to student, to include psychopharmacological and non-medication seeking strategies. Non-medication seeking strategies incorporate mental health counseling, lifestyle adjustments, and other psychological testing options to determine a student's recommended level of intervention. Downs et al. explored the psychopharmacological effects on students utilizing medical treatment to enhance their academic functioning overall. While the researchers found benefits from psychopharmacological treatment for students who experienced heightened symptoms of mental health diagnoses such as Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), there are also an equal amount of negative side effects experienced by each individual student. These side effects include but are not limited to increased risk of suicidal ideation, weight change, cognitive functioning deficits, and sexual dysfunction (Downs et al., 2016).

Nelson and Gregg (2012) also noted that students with ADHD, dyslexia, or a comorbidity of both diagnoses reported symptoms of depression and anxiety. Nelson and Gregg noted, "Students with dyslexia indicate that college underclassmen reported more symptoms of depression and anxiety than did transitioning high school students" (p. 251).

Researchers found that by implementing early prevention methods upon enrollment into a higher education setting, students have a greater opportunity to obtain proper coping techniques and effective strategies for successful completion of a higher education program (Conley et al., 2015). Conley et al. (2015) expanded on this idea by focusing on skill-training within the areas

of mental health in order to prevent further concerns and symptoms within the higher education population. In addition, Artime et al. (2018) expressed the importance of early-intervention also benefitting college students who have experienced traumatic events prior to entering the college environment. Artime et al. found that students who were exposed to trauma prior to admission utilized mental health services at a higher rate; however, they were underutilizing mental health services provided on-campus.

Self-efficacy and Student Success

Tirpak and Schlosser (2015) discussed the relationship between self-efficacy and attitudes of students seeking counseling services within their first year of college. Tirpak and Schlosser reported that students who attend college career centers often present with comorbid symptoms of depression and anxiety when attempting to consider their major or future career. The researchers noted that college students new to the college environment found the negative impacts of reduced self-efficacy negatively impacted students' attitudes towards counseling services. This finding also resulted in students reported avoidant behavior when attempting to seek help for their experienced symptoms. Tirpak and Schlosser found lack of confidence to be the common denominator with students' level of self-efficacy. Furthermore, they noted the demographic implications where women were more likely to seek assistance for reported symptoms of low self-efficacy compared to their male counterparts.

Tirpak and Schlosser (2015) provided suggestions regarding ways to increase awareness and reduce stigma in utilizing counseling services by offering a physical presence when freshman are moving into their college dorms. In addition, Tirpak and Schlosser suggested that additional times when counseling centers can showcase their presence would be during freshman

orientation and parents' weekend. In addition, counseling centers can offer an open house to students and their families, along with publicizing the assistance available.

Thompson and Verdino (2019) were able to add to existing research regarding self-efficacy found within the community college student population, and included additional demographic information on first-generation and immigrant student populations. The researchers did not find any statistical significance within the first-year immigrant student population compared to the traditional college student population; however, they stressed the importance of providing a sense of community support to this particular set of college students and found that increasing a sense of community would positively influence academic success. Carmeli et al. (2021) also noted the significance of social support within students' levels of academic achievement and vitality, specifically within the lower social self-efficacy (SSE) student group.

Baier et al. (2017) researched the positive influence of mentorship and level of self-efficacy among first semester college students. They found that the level of success may be impacted due to students feeling more comfortable reaching out to their peers versus the faculty members. However, students who were a part of learning communities were found to have higher a GPA their first semester of college compared to their peers who were in non-learning communities. Baier et al. also found having mentorship programs increased students' levels of self-efficacy and improved student outcomes, increased opportunity for career success, and reduced student drop-out rates overall.

Holt and Fifer (2018) discussed the effectiveness of peer-mentorship among first-year students transitioning into higher education. Holt and Fifer examined peer mentorship programs available at college institutions in order to focus on increasing students' self-efficacy and academic success. They discussed the implications of students' attachment styles found in their

personal family history and how this attachment style may benefit or negate their experiences in the college setting. The researchers discussed opportunities available to first-year students including a seminar class that aided the students in increasing their writing skills, problem-solving skills, and communication skills. Holt and Fifer found mentors who had anxious-ambivalent or avoidant attachment styles were less likely to benefit their mentees in increasing self-efficacy in the college setting. In addition, they noted that mentors who had higher reports of self-efficacy aided their mentees in feeling more supported. Holt and Fifer ultimately found the benefits of peer mentoring support included:

- (a) assisting students with academic, social, and personal challenges, (b) serving as a role model, (c) discussing their own academic and social experiences and challenges, (d) connecting students to campus resources, and (e) helping mentees to develop academic skills that allow them to function more autonomously in college. (p. 85)

These support systems available to students are crucial when transitioning from the traditional lifestyle of high school and family support to a new school environment, both academically and environmentally. If students are granted the opportunity to immerse themselves in their new college environments with added peer support, they will be more likely to achieve academic success and experience a more positive transition.

Transitioning into College and Emotional Distress

Students entering college settings oftentimes experience difficulty when initially transitioning from their childhood living arrangements to a new and independent setting. Warwick et al. (2008) reported relevant findings regarding rates of college students being diagnosed with a mental health disorder. Warwick et al. found “200 students (aged 19 and under) as having declared a mental health problem” (p. 5), which oftentimes included students being

diagnosed prior to admission to their chosen institution. This showcases the importance of providing services to students upon being enrolled in a higher education institution. In addition, Reid et al. (2016) found the level of influence within first-year students transitioning to college with a history of being bullied also creates an added layer of mental health diagnoses. Reid et al. reported that students who had a history of mental illness and bullying were more likely to feel adjusted in their later years of their four-year institution, due to having had time to establish positive relationships at the school setting, as well as utilizing positive family and peer support during times when students reported symptoms of anxiety. Hirsch et al. (2019) expanded on the concerns of stigma regarding students who attempt to exhibit symptoms of depression and suicidal behaviors.

Hutchins et al. (2019) discussed the initial concerns found among high school students who have graduated high school and are contemplating entering a four-year institution. Hutchins et al. noted several factors that impacted their decision-making process to successfully attend a four-year institution: financial stressors, family hardships, and lack of support from school faculty and staff. These factors are also noted within studies that target students who successfully transitioned into the college environment and later influenced their level of success in their program.

Rall (2016) utilized Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory to understand the implications of the "summer melt" (p. 462) within the recently graduated Los Angeles high school population. Rall explained that the summer melt creates a shift of students who have been recently accepted and enrolled in a college institution and then drop out prior to attending their first semester of college. Rall also reported individual characteristics that may influence students' transition phase from high school to college, such as "college academic readiness, low-income status, race,

gender, and interpersonal support” (p. 466). Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory was utilized within Rall’s study to examine anticipated and unanticipated transition experiences among students leaving high school and entering the college setting. Rall found students who experienced the transition of high school completion “find themselves without guidance from high school or college personnel – a shift they did not predict” (p. 470). Guidance and support were key factors in students successfully transitioning into college within this sample group (Rall, 2016). This is a major point to address within the literature regarding the importance of providing initial support prior to entering the college setting in order for traditional college students to be successful in their first year.

Diehl et al. (2018) described the increasing trend of students feeling a sense of loneliness once they initially transition into a college setting. While traditional students varied in their level of connectedness with U.S. universities, first-time college students will also encounter difficulty transitioning from their high school environment to their chosen higher education institution (Diehl et al., 2018). These expressed feelings of loneliness were reported by high school students to transform into “feelings of depression and anxiety” (Diehl et al., 2018, p. 1). Brandy et al. (2018) also reported students’ increased level of distress in the freshman student populations due to students not having a positive attachment and support system found within their new school setting. Kim et al. (2015) reported that the influence of mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviors varied for students who experienced various levels of depressive symptoms. Additionally, researchers found immigrant and transfer student populations were reported to experience mental health distress and disconnect from their academic institutions (Diehl et al., 2018; Nuñez et al., 2017). Specifically, transfer students experienced emotional distress such as neglect within their individual institution when transferring from one academic institution to

another (Nuñez et al., 2017). Students reported this sense of neglect led to individuals having a lack of identity and unity within newly chosen academic settings (Nuñez et al., 2017). This mutual feeling within transfer student populations caused transfer students to utilize technological aids such as institutional websites in order to gain a better sense of community and resources offered within their new institution (Nuñez et al., 2017).

French and Oreopoulos (2017) discussed the importance of changing the enrollment process within higher education and the implications of student outlooks when entering the college setting due to behavioral barriers found for high school students transitioning into this new level of education. French and Oreopoulos focused on key areas regarding student functioning when students transitioning into the college setting. These included financial obligations, meeting expectations of college enrollment paperwork, housing, and coursework preparedness. In addition, French and Oreopoulos examined the matching process for students feeling adequately placed within their selected institution. Factors impacting the successful matching process include lack of counseling support, heavy influence on standardized testing results, and lack of financial support. These considerations further influence high school students being able to successfully transition from high school to college.

Hatch and Garcia (2017) discussed the persistence of students transitioning into the community college setting. Hatch and Garcia reviewed the three most utilized frameworks for successfully engaging students within the college environment, including engagement of advising services, involvement within the campus environment, and integrating into the environment successfully. Hatch and Garcia reported:

higher levels of engagement are positively associated with greater persistence, but that evidence does not distinguish types of advising activities among many other kinds of student-institutional interactions. (p. 359)

While Hatch and Garcia found the weighted importance of exceptional student advising aiding students' success in the college setting, what is also important to note is that the students' individual goals they set for themselves and their level of persistence places a significant amount of weight into the equation of students finding long term support and success at the college level. Baber (2018) expanded on the concept of support by focusing on the efforts other college students took to role model positive experiences and behaviors, which provided new students transitioning into the program an ideal candidate to emulate, while also learning what skills are helpful for prospering in the college environment.

Due to recent events in society, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused college institutions to change the way they provide services to incoming freshman populations. Kwan (2021) reported institutions created The Archway program (p. 2), which was developed to provide new students with the benefits of on-ground education, from a safe and social distance perspective. McMaster University found that by investing heavily into student mental health and well-being, it would provide them with opportunities to gain assistance during a time of uncertainty.

Furthermore, Sato et al. (2016) described concerns found within students transitioning into graduate/master's level coursework. Students reported experiencing "difficulty in academic transition to a graduate program, relationships with program faculty, and experiential learning" (p. 626). While undergraduate institutions may have offered limited opportunities for students to build a strong sense of community with their institutions, it is paramount for students in graduate level programs to gain a deeper connection with faculty and their learning process. With this new

academic environment comes a need to build appropriate coping mechanisms in order to successfully transition from an undergraduate program into a graduate level program. This transition is often met with difficulty.

Sato et al. 2016 reported graduate students also experienced “academic shock, social isolation, and adjustment to a new academic culture” (p. 632). These concerns were reported to have negatively impacted students’ level of graduate student functioning and Sato et al. stressed that they should be considered when addressing higher education institutional services for all levels of academic learning. These considerations make it clear that students of varied backgrounds and transitional stages of life all endorse similar needs and expectations within their chosen institutions including: a sense of belonging, structure, and beneficial assistance (Diehl et al., 2018). While a strong sense of belonging is often desired by those entering a new transitional state of college life, students have also often reported varied levels of expressed loneliness and disconnect, which can directly influence students’ overall mental health (Diehl et al., 2018; Sato et al., 2016).

Whether a student is taking a traditional path to entering college from a high school setting, or transferring from another institution, individuals often encounter a sense of loneliness or isolation, which if unaddressed can influence academic success (Bourdon et al., 2020). Rall (2016) focused on student populations transitioning from the high school population to their first year of college, and the implications “summer melt” (p. 464) may have on underrepresented student populations. Rall (2016) described *summer melters* as students who have key demographic features: “low-income, urban, non-White, or first-generation college students” (p. 464). In addition, Rall (2016) defined a summer melter as “students who have met the

requirements of at least one institution of higher education as evidenced by a letter of acceptance) from the path to college in the period between high school and college” (p. 462). These considerations may also serve as key concerns when attempting to address students’ successful transition into the college setting, as well as accounting for various types of stressors that may prevent students from attending a traditional four-year institution, post high school graduation (Rall, 2016).

Another area of consideration for students transitioning into the college setting is the transition they may experience with their faith. Wortmann et al. (2012) reported that the natural progression of students initially struggling in the college setting will also oftentimes impact their faith base. In addition, the type of denomination with which students previously identified made a difference in their individual struggles with transition, particularly those who came from a Catholic faith-based tradition. Other considerations Wortmann et al. discussed were the types of mental health considerations that influenced students’ levels of spiritual loss, including symptoms of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Researchers found students who related to symptoms of depression and PTSD were less likely to feel positively adjusted within their faith practice.

Implications of Personality Types in College Students

Raynor and Levine (2009) discussed the influence of students’ personality traits on their ability to succeed in a college setting based on their habits and healthy strategies, such as the consuming alcohol and other substances, engaging in healthy eating and sleeping habits, and engaging in safe sexual practices. Those individuals who were reported to be more extroverted were found to engage in less safe practices in the college setting compared to their introverted peers. Medaille and Usinger (2019) also found that students who were considered to be quiet

were usually perceived to be less engaged and lower achieving than their extroverted peers; however, the researchers noted that students who were introverted thrived in school settings if they were given tasks that reflected their personality. For instance, Medaille and Usinger (2019) found:

Quiet students often appreciate the opportunity to have time to reflect, to communicate through writing, to ask questions of professors in one-one- situations, to work with smaller groups, to have the opportunity to work alone, and to work in structured group learning situations with clear expectations. (p. 136)

In contrast, Thiele et al. (2018) found students who are extraverted are oftentimes motivated to succeed due to their peer groups and success in their social setting. Students were found to have higher academic achievement based on being considered to be popular by their classmates. Smith et al. (2021) found students' levels of motivation were influenced during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. The level of motivation is reported to be influenced by the student's level of extraversion or introversion. Smith et al. (2021) found students who were isolated due to COVID-19 restrictions, once integrated back into the school setting, began to experience school in a positive and stable way, and increased their interest in educational opportunities. This was particularly true for extroverted students.

Longitudinal Impacts of Persistent Mental Health Symptoms

Several longitudinal studies have been completed in order to focus on the long-term impact of mental health concerns found within higher education students. Previous research has focused on the stressors found within academia while illustrating the impacts of students struggling with mental health concerns (Sharp & Theiler, 2018). Symptoms to be addressed within college counseling settings included: "individual (i.e. physical, cognitive and emotional

health), interpersonal (i.e. involvement in social activities), and institutional” (p. 203). The researchers noted that all areas of life functioning were found to influence student success within the college setting. In addition, Xiao et al. (2017) found, over a six-year timespan, the number of students seeking mental health services has shown a gradual increase. Xiao et al. found the key areas of concern within the student population included:

significantly increasing trends for self-reported distress in generalized anxiety, depression, social anxiety, family distress, and academic distress, with the largest effect sizes observed for generalized anxiety, depression, and social anxiety. (p. 407)

Areas of mental illness in college settings identified throughout recent literature include: major depressive disorder, anxiety, depression, and generalized anxiety disorder (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2013; Sharp & Theiler, 2018; Winzer et al., 2018). Students with these reported symptoms who did not receive mental health intervention were found to have reduced academic performance including diminished classroom performance and heightened levels of stress (Baker, 2004; Sharp & Theiler, 2018;). These reported symptoms may cause major distress within student populations and need to be addressed in order to offer appropriate intervention and prevention services (Ryan et al., 2010). Furthermore, Fox et al. (2018) found there was a direct relationship, and stressed, “anticipated stigma and use of mental health treatment is mediated by internalized stigma of seeking treatment” (p. 18).

Social Learning Strategies

Peer learning strategies have been found to positively influence students throughout times of difficulty and mental instability (Conyers et al., 1998; Duchatelet & Donche, 2019). This educational strategy utilizes mentors with similar experiences during entrance to college in order to better relate to new students experiencing these symptoms (Conyers et al., 1998).

Conyers et al. noted peer groups also demonstrated characteristics such as understanding, empathy, and provided insight into their lived experiences and stressors. In order to address the social isolation component of this transitional period, researchers reported using peer groups to expand on vicarious experiences, while also discussing how “anxiety-reducing techniques (systematic desensitization or biofeedback training)” (Conyers et al., 1998, p. 29) may be used to aid in the reduction of reported student symptoms such as emotional distress and anxiety. Peer supports provide an initial level of intervention that is viewed by students as a social support, which may also reduce the general stigma attached to seeking assistance for reported symptomology.

In addition, students who are offered additional supports within the classroom by their faculty have been found to positively influence their performance overall (Duchatelet & Donche, 2019). By utilizing a student-centered approach to learning, students became an active and instrumental part of their own learning experience, thus creating a more meaningful connection within the institution they attended (Duchatelet & Donche, 2019). In addition, faculty members who took additional interest in students’ professional development also created a greater sense of student development, well-being, and self-efficacy (Eun, 2019; Schwitzer et al., 2018).

Academic leaders who further aided their student populations during times of transition and development contributed to a reported positive transition of student development and success (Lipson et al., 2019). In addition, Thombs et al. (2015) added the importance of training resident assistants to be knowledgeable in student mental health first aid and substance use in order to serve as an added source of support. However, it is important to note students who were able to overcome initial transitional discomforts were also students who possessed key concepts

of “knowledge, motivation, and self-regulation” (VanderStoep et al., 1996, p. 348), which gave them a basic level of functioning upon which to build. If students were reported to possess these key traits, they were also able to utilize self-regulated learning strategies in a successful manner in order to aid academic performance and enhance specific academic skills that would make them more successful as they progressed each year throughout their academic program (Baker, 2004).

Treatment and Resources for Students Seeking Assistance

Seeking mental health treatment can be considered a delicate, discriminatory, and stigmatizing process (Lyndon et al., 2019). If students have a personal perspective that they will be stigmatized for seeking mental health intervention, they will be less likely to come forward and gain services that could benefit their well-being (Dunbar et al., 2018). De Luca et al. (2020) reported, “Suicide is the second leading cause of death among emerging adults, yet little is known regarding their online help-seeking” (p. 250). Wu et al. (2017) found 18.2% of their sample utilized mental health services in the past; however, during the present time, there was a greater need perceived in mental health services than the percentage of students willing to utilize this treatment option. Wu et al. reported these findings targeted the “Low Self, Low Public Stigma” group within their study, and the “Average Self, High Public Stigma” group was found to be more likely to seek services than those in the “High Self, High Public Stigma” group (p. 498). In addition, Wu et al. found demographic significance within the Asian/Asian American population, as they were less likely to seek mental health treatment compared to their European American peers. In addition, the female sample was reported to be more likely to seek intervention services compared to their male counterparts (p. 498).

Killum and Degges-White (2017) reported the drawbacks of student counseling centers, among which was limiting “the number of times a student can be seen in a semester” (p. 4) due to the high number of student support demands. However, Dunbar et al. (2018) stressed that if students were provided with an option to gain adequate services from the comfort of their own homes, this concern of discrimination would be eliminated. Researchers have described the positive impact of virtual and web-based mental health interventions provided to college students, and have found students were more willing to engage in this type of treatment process. They have also noted the effective results for reducing reported mental health symptoms (Davies et al., 2014; Dunbar et al., 2018; Harrer et al., 2018).

Hadler et al. (2021) had an opportunity to explore the revolutionary design of telemental health services within the college setting. Telemental health services have become a utilized service out of necessity due to recent COVID-19 impacts. With necessary quarantine guidelines and major shutdowns across the world, the utilization of telemental health services has benefitted the college population, since a large population of students have been mandated to remain in their homes due to increased rates of COVID-19 spreading throughout college campuses nationwide. Telemental health services provide several noteworthy advantages, such as being “convenient and flexible” (Hadler et al., 2021, p. 4). In addition, Hadler et al. discussed the benefits of students being able to “avoid the stigma of seeking mental health treatment” (p. 4).

While benefits of telemental health services have surfaced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, students continue to report disadvantages, such as: “citing feelings of discomfort or unfamiliarity with TMH, privacy concerns, and lack personalization as drawbacks” (Hadler et al., 2021, p. 5). Due to this type of therapeutic service expanding exponentially within 2020-2021, there have been multiple considerations for privacy and ability to provide a comfortable,

safe place for students to express their concerns. In addition, Hadler et al. noted the telemental health platform offers additional opportunity for minority students to utilize services, while decreasing stigma. Hadler et al. also noted, “Patients with more severe mental health symptoms, including higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, were more willing to use TMH than those with less severe symptoms” (p. 5).

Lueck and Poe (2020) examined the effectiveness of resources such as help-lines available to college student populations when individuals are in crisis situations. The population for their study included students with depressive symptoms that showcased “behavioral avoidance motivation” (Lueck & Poe, 2020, p. 5). Students reported that if they utilized supportive agents within their new institutions, they found there was an increase in positive interactions within that institution (Nuñez et al., 2017). These support systems included encouraging faculty and deans, as well as an institutional sense of belonging and inclusion (Nuñez et al., 2017).

However, depending on the size of their institution, students may have experienced varied levels of support and positive adjustment. Transfer students who expressed positive inclusion were individuals transitioning into a smaller institution who had the opportunity to experience an increased amount of faculty involvement, as well as student centers to aid in their overall adjustment. Additional areas of assistance noted for students attempting to effectively transition within their institutions were reported to involve supportive factors such as being physically active, having support systems, and having financial security (Nuñez et al., 2017). Furthermore, students reported to have these positive factors in place experienced fewer symptoms of loneliness, depression, and anxiety. In addition, Hurd et al. (2018) reported the importance of mentorship programs available for underrepresented college populations, and

found a reduction in psychological stress and an increase in self-worth due to having this added support.

While interventions are made available to students, not all services are created equal. Researchers found students experiencing depressive symptoms did not receive adequate care for their symptoms, thus significantly disrupting their college success (Eisenberg & Chung, 2012). However, the overall rates were low due to students' lack of engagement in the services available to them (Dunbar et al., 2018). Researchers have also found low utilization of mental health treatment in college populations (Nobiling & Maykrantz, 2017; Schwitzer et al., 2018). Kalkbrenner et al. (2019) examined the views of faculty members on student mental health. College faculty are the frontline workers who personally observe and witness student interactions and behaviors. Kalkbrenner et al. discussed the important role faculty members play in referring students to mental health counseling services based on their observations. Kalkbrenner et al. noted five major themes from their findings:

knowledge of MHD definition, knowledge of warning signs, comfort and willingness to recognize and refer (subtheme: stigma in the college environment), limited knowledge about resources for mental health issues (subthemes: disorganization of campus resources and lack of unity and support from university leaders), and the faculty-student relationship. (p. 8)

Kalkbrenner et al. discussed at length the lived experiences of college faculty regarding the need to refer students who need specialized services to appropriately process their concerns. One faculty member reported an experience of a student struggling with serious depression and noted, "I instantly referred him out...one of the people that I talked to here at the university about it said to do nothing, and one of them told whatever you do, because the student was an athlete, don't

tell the athletic department” (Kalkbrenner et al., 2019, p. 10). This reported lived experience illustrates two key points: both the conflicted outlook students have for reporting mental health symptoms, and also the limitations faculty may experience when attempting to gain a student additional services, due to potentially impacting the image of a student or reputation of a college department.

Furthermore, Kalkbrenner et al. (2019) discussed the limitations regarding student and faculty knowledge of mental health resources available to the college student body. Kalkbrenner et al. reported there was “...a limited understanding of resources that might extend beyond counseling services” (p. 11). These limitations can greatly influence students’ willingness and understanding for gaining needed resources within their college community. In addition, the researchers noted the lack of training and informative sessions provided to college faculty regarding referral resources available to the student body, should they encounter or have concerns regarding the students they serve.

While students undergo this transitional state into the college arena, Kalkbrenner et al. (2019) stressed the importance of expanding the knowledge of resources and creating a culture of support and unity so that students feel comfortable and supported from the highest level of university leadership, down to the faculty seeing them on a daily basis, in order to provide needed mental health services. Various barriers have been identified that may impact why students choose to not utilize counseling services, including one’s belief system, socioeconomic status, gender, or ethnicity (Rosenthal & Wilson, 2016). However, long-term effects showcase the vital nature of attempting to provide services to the college population, regardless of utilization percentages due to the overall impacts of student effectiveness (Winzer et al., 2018).

Summary

Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory provides a helpful lens to examine the experiences of college students who report symptoms of mental health and reach out for guidance from their institutions. Further, influential theorists such as Bandura (1977) have prefaced a commonality and concern regarding low self-efficacy within the student population. Students with low self-efficacy have also reported experiencing various mental health symptoms (Conyers et al., 1998). These symptoms can be altered when focusing on social-learning theories or additional functioning within a new social environment (Bandura, 1977). In addition, self-efficacy can be positively or negatively impacted based on the community, institution, and individual level of mentorship and added support. Researchers found self-efficacy had a positive influence on student achievement based on student mentorship and institutional support (Baier et al., 2017; Thompson & Verdino, 2019; Tirpak & Schlosser, 2015).

Higher education students have continued to exhibit signs of mental health concerns while they are transitioning into a new educational environment (Baker, 2004). Researchers have focused on common types of mental health symptoms found within the college population to include depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Davies, Morriss, & Glazebrook, 2014; Diehl et al., 2018). Additional areas of mental health consideration include students who experience symptoms of ADHD and PTSD, as well as substance misuse (Downs et al., 2016; Nelson & Gregg, 2016; Wortmann et al., 2012).

Due to these continued concerns and reported symptomology, universities across the U.S. are continuing to track the rates of student attrition, leave of absence, and transfer rates due to these increased mental health symptoms (Schwitzer et al., 2018). If symptoms are left untreated, the results can strongly influence students overall functioning and performance within the higher

education setting (Duchatelet & Donche, 2019). Other factors to consider include the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on student performance (Hadler et al., 2021). In addition, students who have different types of personality traits, (i.e., being extroverted or introverted), influence their ability to succeed in the college setting.

Furthermore, as students are experiencing these noted mental health symptoms, it is important to note at what time within their transitional state of college entrance are these symptoms becoming unmanageable. Sato et al. (2016) provided additional insight into mental health concerns found among traditional students, but these mental health concerns may also influence graduate level students transitioning into a more academically demanding environment. In any given higher education context, mounting pressures have been noted to impact individuals on an interpersonal, individual, and institutional level (Sharp & Theiler, 2018). With the assistance of utilizing various social learning theories (Conyers et al., 1998), students have been reported to successfully transition into their educational environments with the support of other peer groups that have gone before them.

With the aid of passionate faculty, students are reported to excel in the classroom and become better adjusted with the direction and influence of faculty willing to aid in individual students' self-efficacy and self-determination (Lipson, Lattie, & Eisenberg, 2019). In addition, students who were able to benefit from gaining mental health services were reported to have a reduction in symptoms and experience better adaptability within their new school environment (Davies, Morriss & Glazebrook, 2014; Dunbar et al., 2018; Harrer et al., 2018). Tirpak and Schlosser (2015) discussed the implications of lack of confidence within student populations who experienced a low level of self-efficacy. Furthermore, in order to address self-efficacy, researcher have reported the importance of establishing a community base within the institution

and have a space for students to gain peer-mentorship, academic support, and a sense of belonging in order to increase self-efficacy and student academic achievement (Baier et al., 2017; Carmeli et al., 2021; Holt & Fifer, 2018; Thompson & Verdino, 2019). Holt and Fifer (2018) stressed the importance of positive peer support and mentorship and how the significance of attachment can alter students' course of success within their first year of transitioning into the college environment.

Higher education institutions continue to struggle with providing adequate resources to students in this transitional phase of their life. Recent literature has attempted to discuss and expand on previous practices utilized in the past within the academic environment, but what has yet to be addressed is how researchers and institutions are able to effectively reach the entire student body and provide varied resources to address the different needs of their college student population. Research expansion should include how the transitional process of students enrolling and attending academic institutions can strongly dictate how they successfully or unsuccessfully achieve acceptable student performance (Schlossberg, 1981). Self-efficacy theory aids in the understanding of what students need on a basic level to feel a sense of belonging, community, and success as they transition into the college setting, while Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory aids in the understanding of how students have difficulty transitioning into a new setting with new expectations, faculty, and peer supports.

I attempted to address the gaps found within this area of higher education literature regarding mental health and wellness during students' transition. I expanded on the specific mental health symptoms that are continuing to go unmet within the higher education institution. I also expanded on the vital points in students' individual transition of which faculty and institutional leadership should be cognizant when attempting to address students' reported

symptomology. In addition, with the growing trend of students needing online-based intervention services (Davies et al., 2014), my goal was to focus on providing an online platform for individual participants to engage in, as well as discuss the perceptions of gaining therapeutic interventions within this online modality.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of students with mental health issues entering the higher education setting and the perception of the therapeutic support offered at the institution. I gathered descriptive data from participants in order to gain meaning from their reported experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The content of this chapter begins with a description of the transcendental phenomenological design chosen for this research study. This chapter will provide a breakdown of how participants were sampled. In addition, this chapter demonstrates the key areas upon which I focused, which included mental health concerns students have experienced within their academic careers. A purposeful sample was examined in order to gain information specifically from students who were endorsing mental health symptoms. Once approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and college institution, virtual interviews were conducted with participants, ensuring both private and confidential communication. The results of the interviews were interpreted into themes in order to gain a deeper understanding of students' reported symptoms and coping techniques utilized to continue their coursework. Qualitative research questions were utilized to determine the perceived severity of the mental health/physical symptoms, in addition to assisting in the formulation of overarching themes reported by individual student interviews. I utilized previous research in order to gain a better understanding of these reported symptoms.

Research Design

The research design chosen for this dissertation was a transcendental phenomenological study with 10 college student participants. This student population was selected based on their willingness to discuss their interpretations and perceptions of the process of identifying and

utilizing mental healthcare within their individual institutions. This qualitative design provided me with an opportunity to describe themes found within student testimonies and allowed students the opportunity to discuss their personal reflections regarding seeking mental health intervention, as well as experiencing mental health symptoms during a new period of transition. Qualitative design allowed for the evaluation of themes found within student testimony and provided the opportunity for students' personal reflections regarding the symptoms experienced and interventions provided during transitional periods. In addition, the transcendental phenomenological design offered an opportunity to gain meaning from student participants' lived experiences within the higher education setting.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018) a phenomenological study describes the “common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 75). Phenomenological studies aim to “reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Furthermore, a transcendental phenomenological framework was the focus of this particular research study. Moustakas (1994) discussed the pioneer researcher Edmund Husserl, who created concepts based within transcendental phenomenology to include: “intentionality and intuition” (pp. 28-31). Moustakas described the concept of intentionality as an understanding of a lived experience, which can be imagined within the conscious mind or a real-life experience. These beliefs are reported to give better understanding to our lived experience and form a meaning from this experience. Intuition is described by Moustakas as “an awareness found within oneself that helps create a judgement from a lived experience” (p. 32). Moustakas also provided additional models to aid in interpreting individual experiences to include “horizontalizing” (p. 118), which gives meaning to what students are experiencing and reporting to the researcher.

Once this meaning is created, Moustakas continued building on the theory to include core processes of interpreting lived experiences. The core processes discussed within the transcendental phenomenology theory include “epoche, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation” (p. 32). These core processes aided in the interpretation and understanding of themes collected by student participants. Epoche is described as withholding judgment, which was utilized within this study when interpreting student responses (Moustakas, 1994). The second step in the core process entitled transcendental-phenomenological reduction, created an opportunity for those interpreting the information, to experience these instances through a singular, non-biased frame of view, in order to prevent skewing the meaning of a lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). When researchers attempt to describe lived experiences, they may also utilize textural and structural descriptions to provide a deeper understanding regarding these experiences. A textural description is a description of one’s conscious experience that includes one’s “thoughts, feelings, examples, ideas, situations that portray what comprises an experience” (p. 47). These key concepts aided in gaining a descriptive understanding of an event. Structural descriptions are described as “a picture of the conditions that precipitate an experience and connect with it” (p. 47). The structural description aids in understanding how the environment around individuals can prepare individuals for a future experience. Lastly, imaginative variation is used to “grasp the structural essences of experiences” (p. 34), which is said to create a synthesized understanding of an event. In order to fully understand the mental health concerns within the higher education system, a transcendental phenomenological approach was utilized to formulate themes that can further aid researchers and higher education staff in understanding how to best serve students who are experiencing reported symptoms.

The transcendental phenomenological qualitative design was most appropriate for this study due to the fact it provided a method for generating rich information regarding students' lived experiences and provided an additional outlet for students to express their ideas and lived experience, otherwise known as noema (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, students were able to express their perceptions or noesis and intentionality of how they perceived their transition within higher education (Moustakas, 1994). I had the opportunity to utilize bracketing procedures by keeping a journal in order to process personal thoughts or reactions from participant input and thus avoid misinterpreting students' responses. Furthermore, I set aside any prejudgments or epoche (Moustakas, 1994) and focused on the quality of the individual student's lived experiences as they experienced them, otherwise known as phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). The richness of transcendental phenomenological concepts provided an opportunity for me to focus solely on individual students' lived experiences versus focusing on a case study model that would portray students' perceived concerns and also incorporate institutional faculty perceptions regarding student symptomology and achievement.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of students who report symptoms of a mental health disorder while in their first year of college?

Sub-Question One

What supports aid students with mental health symptoms in transitioning into the college setting successfully?

Sub-Question Two

What are first year students' experiences with mental health services as they transition into the college setting?

Sub-Question Three

What types of mental health services do students believe helped them transition to college successfully?

Sub-Question Four

What barriers to mental health treatment are expressed by first-year students transitioning into the college setting?

Setting

The setting for this research study took place in virtual environments throughout the United States, where students were currently residing while enrolled at Rose College (pseudonym). Student participants replied to an e-mail sent by my initial research request inquiry, per Rose College's Marketing platform, to participate in this study and arranged to meet the student virtually, via Zoom. An interview was then conducted, utilizing student participants who currently resided at the university or neighboring area. This setting selection was chosen due to the convenient nature for student participants, as well as for the health and safety of all involved due to the current Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The video interviewing platform also offered a diverse selection of students, with a wide range of age, race, gender and socioeconomic status. Names of student participants were gathered by utilizing Rose College's Information Technology Department, which assisted in sending out two separate e-mails regarding the study's participation information. I also utilized the commuter service department at Rose College, which posted the research flyers across the campus and on their virtual commuter board through the university's commuter website.

Participants

This research study involved a purposeful sampling of students who were readily accessible via Rose College's freshman population pool, to gain participants actively enrolled in a higher education institution. I utilized purposeful sampling within Rose College's freshman student population (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth described purposeful sampling as a sampling procedure that utilizes a specific sample of individuals. This study specifically focused on gaining a college sample of students with fewer than 36 credit hours who reported experiencing mental health symptoms as they transitioned into a college setting.

The demographic information from student participants included traditional college students with ages ranging from 18 to 22 years. The final number of students who successfully completed all or the majority of the requirements for the research study included 10 participants in total, per Liberty University's IRB (2019) qualitative research guidelines. Nine students were eliminated from the study due to limitations of having an on-ground experience at the higher education institution, as well as not meeting the requirements of having completed one full year at Rose College prior to entering the research study. In addition, I utilized thematic saturation methods in order to find "discovery/identification/emergence of themes during the research process" (p. 195). This process of thematic saturation has reached its conclusion when there are no new themes found within the research (Lowe et al., 2018). Student participant demographics may be found in Table 1.

Table 1*Student Participants*

Student Participant	Student Grade Level	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Adjustment Concern Endorsement
Caimile	Sophomore	Female	African	18+ years old	Yes
Dominic	Sophomore	Female	African-American	18+ years old	Yes
Leighton	Sophomore	Female	Caucasian	18+ years old	Yes
Savannah	Sophomore	Female	Caucasian	18+ years old	Yes
Candace	Sophomore	Female	Caucasian	18+ years old	Yes
Natalie	Sophomore	Female	Caucasian	18+ years old	Yes
Declan	Sophomore	Male	Caucasian	18+ years old	Yes
Amanda	Sophomore	Female	Caucasian	18+ years old	Yes
Jia	Sophomore	Female	Asian	18+ years old	Yes
Patricia	Sophomore	Female	Caucasian	18+ years old	Yes

I was able to recruit the minimum of 10 students needed to conduct the research study effectively (Liberty University, 2019). Creswell and Poth (2018) also encouraged the use of a heterogenous group size of “3 to 4 individuals to 10 to 15” (p. 76). The number of students who successfully participated in the research study reported experiencing a range of symptoms, from some form of adjustment difficulty, to labeled and diagnosed mental health symptoms since enrolled in the college setting. Content validity is described by Liberty University (2019) as content that is measuring what it is expected to measure. I had a licensed clinical psychologist, Dr. Chacy Agnello, Psy.D, an expert in the field, who had completed several practicum placements, an internship, and post-doctoral fellowship at various college institutions including

Clemson University, review the questions I asked the students during the interview phase. Dr. Agnello found them acceptable and non-triggering to students experiencing mental health symptoms during the time of the interview. In addition, an IRB board member from Liberty University also reviewed the interview questions to ensure content validity and specificity of the research questions.

Content validity was reviewed by an expert in the school counseling field to determine validity within this subsection of the research study. Within the participant section of this study the demographic questions asked of the student population measured what was intended, including age, ethnicity, year in program, and gender. A screening procedure was utilized to determine student eligibility in order to participate in the transcendental phenomenological study. If students were able to endorse initial qualifying questions found on the researcher flyer in Appendix C: recruitment e-mail, they were eligible to continue with the study. I referred to previously conducted transcendental research studies that utilized mental health focused questions in order to identify key questions or concerns found within the student population.

Procedures

The procedures for this study began by approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Liberty University. After preliminary discussions with the IRB at Liberty University, members of the IRB reported to the academic chair the viability and approval of this study. The written proposal included the research plan, purpose, individual interview questions needed from each research participant, as well as the plan for gaining student participants. Once the correct documentation was submitted to the IRB, the researcher waited to gain approval before beginning research (please refer to Appendix B).

Once the IRB process was completed and approval was granted, I provided an e-mail discussing the proposed research to all potential parties (please refer to Appendix C). Consent forms were provided to the students willing to participate in the study (please refer to Appendix F). The consent form included a brief description regarding the confidentiality of the students who reported symptoms and current concerns. In addition, the consent form discussed the limitations of confidentiality regarding student safety and the precautions the researcher would need to take if the student reported any suicidal or homicidal ideations or plans. Students were provided with a list of free local resources to utilize once the study was conducted, if any concerns should arise throughout the process (please refer to Appendix E).

Each student began the study by being assigned a number to ensure confidentiality, which was then placed on the interview question sheet. Please see Appendix D for the interview questions. I recorded the interview with each individual student via audiotape and video recording through Zoom. Once the interview was concluded, I transcribed all interviews in their entirety, in order to interpret the information gathered from each student. I then examined all transcriptions to find similar themes found within student responses, in order to gather significant findings from the participants (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). Furthermore, I utilized two additional approaches of data collection, including having participants write a “letter to their freshman self,” along with the use of an artifact to understand the students’ lived experiences throughout their freshman year of college. This study included the gathering of data from student participants, a review of the audio recordings from the student participants, and my research journaling, as well as the added feature of those students who were able to complete the focus group and discuss their individual feedback regarding their lived experiences.

Researcher's Role

My role in this study was to provide the students willing to participate in the study, general knowledge and background information involving the topic of this dissertation. Additional information included a more in-depth understanding of the symptoms or concerns the students were currently reporting. I also provided available resources to students who may need additional support during and after the study. In addition, students who had completed the initial questionnaires and transcendental phenomenological interviews would be protected with designated pseudonyms in order to protect the students' privacy.

I did not have any connection with the individual students involved in this study, thus remained a neutral and unbiased interpreter of their reported lived experiences. In addition, I used individual student lenses that validated individual student interviews, which included corroborating the research evidence by utilizing previous sources that focused on this area of concern within the higher education system (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I utilized central themes to triangulate the information gained from the student interviews to validate their testimonies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I took into consideration the negative case analyses that arose; therefore, it was imperative I clarified any negative analysis and reported any bias that came from participant interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I am currently a school based mental health counselor, who serves a range of student populations, from middle school to college students. This position provided me with a deeper professional and research understanding of how mental health can strongly influence student academic performance. As an individual who has served as a counselor in the mental health discipline throughout the past 10 years, I viewed the information gathered from the student participants seriously and with a mental health framework in mind, which may have impacted

how I analyzed participant themes. However, my role was to interpret themes in a professional manner and utilize transcendental phenomenological concepts (i.e., epoche and bracketing) to remove previous experiences or potential biases in order to minimize the influence of personal experience in the analysis and representation of students' lived experiences.

Data Collection Plan

The data collection utilized within this transcendental phenomenological study primarily contained individual interviews, students' individual letters to self, artifact review including a collage created by the individual participants, and a focus group that I facilitated. I asked a set number of questions to the students in order to gain their current mental health status.

Furthermore, I examined recent literature that examined the same area of concern found within the higher education institution. The interviews were the first line of consideration due to the fact I utilized a transcendental phenomenological approach, where individual interviews are standard procedure (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Qualifying Questions

Individual students interested in participating in this research study had to answer yes to the following four questions:

1. Are you a sophomore and full-time student?
2. Are you 18 years of age or older?
3. Have you experienced any distress while enrolled in college?
4. Do you believe the supports offered at your institution are adequate to address any distress you have experienced during your transition to college?

Interviews

Individual interviews for this study were conducted virtually, in the privacy of the

students' living quarters or in a private setting on campus, to include their dormitory, off-campus housing location, library room, or study area. I conducted the same practice in a private location in my home. The data were recorded via a hand-held audio-recorder and through the Zoom video application. Both devices are protected by password and were locked. The information collected on this audio-recorder is password protected on a USB drive to ensure confidentiality. I focused on utilizing Schlossberg's (1981) four S's to include: situation, self, strategies, and support, in order to address and gather evidence of the students' lived experiences of transitioning in the higher education system. The interview questions included the following:

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions Created by the Researcher:

1. What has brought you to participate in this study today?
2. What factors played into you choosing Rose College as your institution of choice, when you transitioned into a higher education setting?
3. What symptoms, if any, did you experience when you first transitioned and attended Rose College?
4. Provide an example of a day where you felt overwhelmed by the continued stressors in which you are attempting to juggle a school, work, and life balance?
5. Describe what you did to maintain your current level of functioning in order to remain enrolled at this institution?
6. Were you aware mental health services are available at your current institution?
7. What other services are available at your institution that address students reporting difficulty in transitioning successfully into to the college environment (i.e., mental health counseling)?

8. What are the perceptions of parents whose children seeking counseling services at the collegiate level?
9. What types of religious groups or organizations are available on campus?
10. What is your perception of Christian views regarding seeking counseling services?
11. What perspectives do minority students experience when discussing seeking counseling services with their church and family members?
12. Expand on any experiences you have encountered where you felt stigmatized or judged by others when attempting to engage or utilize these services at your institution?
13. What services would you find most helpful, if any, for students transitioning into a collegiate setting?
14. If you were unable to successfully receive resources while enrolled at your college institution, was the counseling center at your institution able to provide you with community resources? What was the most difficult step within this process and why?
15. What period was most difficult for you throughout your freshman collegiate experience?

Creswell and Creswell (2018) reported the total number of questions within an interview protocol should consist between “5 and 10, although no precise number can be given” (p. 190).

The first question is initially focused within Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory, which illuminates what has transpired in the individual student’s life while transitioning into the college setting and why they believe they qualify to participate in this research study due to reported symptoms.

Question two was created with the consideration of Kosyluk et al. (2016), who examined mental illness amongst the college student population. These researchers not only examined the impact of students who were experiencing symptoms of mental illness, but they also examined

the impact of institutional support and willingness to obtain additional mental health counseling support.

Questions three through five expand on Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory in regard to what state of transition students were in when they reported experiencing mental health symptoms (Evans et al., 2010). Question four also incorporates Kosyluk et al. (2016), who discussed the specific mental health symptoms individual students are reporting while enrolled in their institution.

Questions six through 10 have a basic understanding derived from Morris, Feldpausch, Eshelman, and Bohle-Frankel (2019), who examined the impact of college students actively experiencing mental health symptoms which led to students seeking mental health services and community-based services. Question eight reviewed parental perceptions of their college child seeking mental health services. Digal and Gagnon (2020) found research was lacking within the area of reviewing parental perception of students seeking mental health services. Findings from Digal and Gagnon suggested parents are often the first-line of informal help-seeking individuals college students refer to for guidance on mental health concerns. The researchers found limited parental influence regarding students' willingness to engage in mental health treatment potentially due to students having more freedoms of medical privacy practices and independent living; however, they noted that students found more comfort in utilizing their support system versus seeking mental health services.

Specifically, questions nine and 10 examined the influence of faith and ethnicity regarding seeking mental health services. Eng and TenElshof (2020) explored the influences of church stigma on Asian Americans seeking mental health services. In addition, Avent et al. (2015) found African American pastors are often the first individual African American church

participants go to for assistance with mental health needs. Historically, Avent et al. noted that church participants traditionally found solutions and counseling within their individual churches without going outside to a mental health professional. In addition, pastors historically were selective in referring church members to outside resources, although the majority of the pastor participants found mental health services beneficial overall.

Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018) were utilized to understand the types of phenomenological questions that would be most pertinent to ask when attempting to gather rich data provided by individual student experiences. The last question is specifically rooted in Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, which discusses how students transition from difficult aspects in their college careers. This research is vital to expand upon in order to understand the symptoms that are prevalent within the student population during the time when they no longer felt effective services or interventions were offered within their individual institutions.

After reviewing the interview questions, I created for this study, I utilized my dissertation chair and methodologist to ensure the questions were relevant and meaningful to the research question. The IRB also reviewed the questions as part of the IRB process

Document Analysis

I utilized the use of an artifact, as applicable, to the students' personal experiences. Artifacts are described by Given (2008) as "things that societies and cultures make for their own use" (p. 25), which includes but is not limited to items Given (2008) described as: memorabilia, tools, buildings, toys, pottery, jewelry, clothing, weapons, gifts, paintings" (p. 25). Please see Appendix J for a list of items collected from individual participants. Students were asked to create a picture collage to include potential physical objects such as books, stuffed animals, religious memorabilia, etc., which aided the student in their transitional period, along with any

photos of the individual students' support system or positive memory captured throughout their first year of college and how these positive items or individuals aided their mental health symptoms overall. Please refer to Appendix E for a complete question guide.

Letter to Self

In addition, I requested students to complete a letter to self, which included students' accounts of what they wished their freshman year self knew throughout their first college year. Please refer to Appendix K for a full list of examples of students' letters to self. In addition, students were asked to write what supportive factors they had and hoped they had available during this time, to make the college transition better. Saks (2020) provided an insightful letter regarding his transition into college and how his mental illness of schizophrenia influenced his college experience. I utilized Saks' letter as a guide when I created the interview questions regarding students' transition experiences into higher education. Students were provided with an e-mail explaining the instructions for the collage and letter to self. Please refer to Appendix F for a complete instruction guide.

Focus Group

Powell and Single (1996) defined a focus group as "a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research" (p. 499). Additionally, Peoples (2021) described focus groups as a space where individuals can "challenge participants to reconsider or intensify personal views" (p. 56). I utilized a group forum where students joined a Zoom conference meeting and discussed their experiences within the higher education setting. Prior to the students entering the focus group Zoom session I sent specific instructions to all participants to ensure their cameras were off and that they changed the name that would appear on the group screen to the student's

assigned participant number. I was able to manually change the students' names once they joined the group if they experienced technical difficulties, and all student cameras remained off to ensure anonymity. I asked the students to discuss their views on individual institutional support and what improvements or recommendations would aid the student body as a whole. These questions were geared in a non-specific manner in order to keep individual experiences confidential. Additional themes developed and became relevant throughout the focus group exercise to include the lack of overall awareness of the comprehensive student services that were available at the institution. The focus group session lasted for one hour, and included introductions, participation in answering the focus group questions, as well as additional time to conclude the group discussion. Five students participated in the focus group.

The focus group questions asked are as follows (please refer to Appendix E):

1. What kind of services are provided at your institution for students experiencing mental health symptoms?
2. What can the university do to increase better access to mental health services?
3. What suggestions do you have for solving the gaps of service taking place at your institution?
4. What marketing strategies does your institution utilize to make students aware of the services provided at your institution?
5. What is your perception of the types of services provided at your institution?

Question one was created in consideration of Hudson et al.'s (2018) findings, which expanded on research focused on the influence of substance use negatively impairing individuals with reported mental health concerns. This question includes the need for both mental health and substance abuse services due to the growing comorbidity of mental health and substance abuse

found within the college environment. Questions two and three were developed based on the influence of Vallianatos et al. (2019), who examined mental health service options available to college students at a Canadian institution. Furthermore, Eisenber et al. (2007) focused on the unmet needs of mental health care found among college students. In addition, Gibbons (2019) surveyed students in regard to how higher education institutions could improve college counseling centered current practices and outreach efforts to engage students in these services.

Question four stems from the understanding of what positive publicity is found within institutional marketing of mental health services currently being offered. Champlin and Nisbett (2018) noted that if marketing strategies were found to promote positive change and growth, students were more willing to utilize this new experience based on a health promotional focus. The fifth question asked in the focus group stemmed from the findings of Bourdon et al. (2020), which discussed the utilization of services in college settings and mental health concerns reported in the higher education arena. This information was gathered in order to provide student feedback to service providers regarding the benefits of counseling resources or areas of needed improvement within the individual institution.

Data Synthesis

Creswell and Poth (2018) described the process of data analysis within the phenomenological perspective as a direct interpretation of the case findings gathered from each individual who participated in the study. This particular type of research study differs from other data analyses in other research arenas due to the fact the majority of the data comes from the participants themselves. It is the researcher's duty to ensure the participants report in entirety, and participation is taken into consideration and documented in order to fully decipher and interpret the students' and focus group members' reported information.

Moustakas (1994) described additional processes that aid in analyzing phenomenological research, including epoche, the process of phenomenological reduction, utilizing imaginative variation, and synthesizing textural and structural descriptions.

Epoche is described as “setting aside prejudgments and opening the research interview with an unbiased, receptive presence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 180). This may be difficult for many to complete successfully, but it is the researcher’s duty to put aside any preconceived notions of students’ mental health, including my years of experience working in the mental health field. In addition, bracketing was utilized by keeping an organized and thorough journal that discussed the personal experiences throughout the study, in order to set aside my experience, and gain a new perspective on students’ reported experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, I kept a personal journal document of the research experience to bracket personal perspectives and reflect back on at the conclusion of the study. Please refer to Appendix L for a complete list of personal thoughts collected when working with each individual student throughout the research study.

Phenomenological reduction is a process that is said to include bracketing questions that will be the primary focus of the research (Moustakas, 1994). This process also includes valuing all statements from participants equally by utilizing horizontalization, which aids in creating overall themes where students report significant experiences. These further expand into themes and are separated and described in both an individual and universal context (Moustakas, 1994).

Imaginative Variation provides meaning to students’ reported experiences and addresses the roles they play within the phenomenological perspective (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, focusing on free fantasy variations, creating a list of individual students’ experiences, and developing themes from these experiences aided me in creating individual and universal

descriptions of students' lived experiences in higher education institutions and synthesizing these findings fully (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1994) provided an outlined summary of how to interpret phenomenological research that relies on the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method that organizes phenomenological data by considering, synthesizing, and reflecting on individual statements provided by participants in order to “develop individual textural and structural descriptions; composite textural and composite structural descriptions, and a synthesis of textural and structural meaning and essences of the experiences” (pp. 181-182). Moustakas' interpretation of phenomenological research results include: identifying a phenomenon that shows areas to further build upon in order to add knowledge to an area of research. Moustakas noted that this process begins with investigating the area of need, finding participants to expand on the area of need, and discovering meaning behind these statements. I investigated mental health phenomena and examined the participants' responses to interview questions. Creswell and Poth (2018) discussed the use of the “data analysis spiral” when attempting to organize and interpret qualitative research (p. 185). The data analysis spiral is broken down into seven steps:

data collection, managing and organizing the data, reading and memoing emergent ideas, describing and classifying codes into themes, developing and assessing interpretations, representing and visualizing the data, and account findings. (p. 186)

Creswell and Poth (2018) discussed the importance of the memoing stage due to the audit trail it creates throughout the research study. Furthermore, when I coded similar shared experience themes within the sophomore student population, I created a codebook, further breaking down the themes into the final code. Please refer to Appendix M for a full list of codebook themes. I

focused on the four main themes developed within Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory: situation, self, strategies, and support.

Creswell and Poth (2018) provided further instruction regarding researcher responsibilities for evaluating student responses to generate meaningful and significant themes. From these themes I created a description of what the participants experienced throughout their college enrollment and drafted a structural description that discusses *how* the experiences happened for these students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, Creswell and Poth discussed the importance of utilizing the textural description method after coding the themes. The textural description aids in breaking down students' individual lived experiences with their personal testimonies. Lastly, I created a description of the students' main themes in order to label the phenomena discussed throughout the individual interviews and artifacts presented by students. I also analyzed the data collected from the focus group of mental health professionals and their reports based on their experience of working with students in the college setting. Creswell and Poth further discussed the benefits of documents, including documentation analysis. The documentation reviewed included public documents provided by Rose College's counseling center, as well as a research journal that included a process throughout the study, in order to provide research procedures for future researchers to utilize and potentially replicate in future studies. Furthermore, I utilized the NVivo qualitative research platform to input the information gathered from student testimonies, transcribed student interviews, and further utilized this platform to categorize themes gathered from student interviews, artifacts, letters to self, and the focus group responses.

Trustworthiness

This transcendental phenomenological study is based on the participants' individual experiences transitioning into the college environment and cannot be altered based on the type of data collection. Moustakas (1994) discussed transcendental phenomenology as a research perspective that is grounded in individuals' lived experiences. Furthermore, trustworthiness was factored into the study in order to ensure the credibility of the study and gain accurate and valuable information from students and mental health care providers at an institutional setting.

Credibility

The components of trustworthiness found in Creswell and Poth (2018) include dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability. A credible study is described by Yin (2015) as showcasing that one has "properly collected and interpreted the data, so that the findings and conclusions accurately reflect and represent the world that was studied" (p. 85). Furthermore, credibility can be found in the interpretation section of the study, to include techniques such as triangulation, trustworthiness, rival thinking, and validity (Yin, 2015). Credibility is found within this study because I utilized previous research that has been deemed acceptable through peer-reviewed research journal articles and qualitative textbooks. I utilized this previous research to examine ongoing topics of concern in the higher education system as well as to gain information firsthand from a sophomore student population and build upon these concerns by reporting general themes found throughout the research study. My main questions have been grounded in years of research literature and qualitative theory, including focusing on Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. Furthermore, Liberty Universities IRB ensured the guidelines of this research were followed and credible, in order to ensure the findings would enhance the expansion of vital research questions within the field of mental health and higher

education (Liberty University, 2019). Furthermore, prolonged engagement of student participation added to the richness of the data (Peoples, 2020). Additionally, triangulation was utilized to examine previous texts and build upon previous research and current students' responses, in order to formulate overarching themes found within this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Triangulation was specifically utilized within this research study by undergoing a review process and interpreting student individual interviews, letters to self, as well as analysis of an artifact from each participant pertinent to student success when they transitioned in their freshman year at Rose College.

Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined transferability as the ability to utilize findings within research and have the results be applicable within different contexts. The aim of this research was to be transferable to various institutions that offered student counseling services. Based on recommendations by Moustakas' (1994) approach of transcendental phenomenological qualitative research design, rich descriptions gathered from student testimonies further aided future researchers in utilizing updated information gathered from this study due to individuals' detailed responses gathered in the college setting. This information varied based on limited contact opportunities due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, which have yet to be targeted within most recent literature within this area of educational research.

Dependability and Confirmability

To increase the dependability of the study, triangulation procedures were utilized and reviewed within the data collection areas of the study including individual interviews, focus groups, and document analysis to include artifacts. In addition, confirmability was further addressed by providing thick, rich descriptions of the themes found throughout individual

student interviews. Furthermore, an audit trail was created and audited by my dissertation committee in order to demonstrate transparency in the management of data, as well as reflexivity with regard to the relationship I have within the discipline of mental health and how this practice will add to the description of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research study, I ensured all appropriate steps were taken to protect the identifying information of each individual participant. I took additional steps to secure a private locked room in my home, with no concerns of interviews being disrupted or information being heard. Once each interview was conducted, all written, audio, and visual documentation was saved on a password protected USB drive, as well as a password protected computer. During stage two of the research, I created individual folders through Google Drive and sent students individual links to gain access to their personal folders. This information could not be shared once options within Google Drive were chosen that prohibited sharing. . The setting of the study was conducted virtually, throughout the entire research protocol. Students must have privacy in order to have their information remain confidential. I utilized Zoom meetings in order to password protect the interviews. In order to protect and ensure student confidentiality and student information, I ensured all Rose College students were provided a pseudonym to replace their legal name on any research documentation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, when I conducted interviews with the students, I made sure I did not discuss the names of the participants unless I was utilizing a password protected flash-drive or audio-recording (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These steps created an additional safety measure for all participants involved. Once I secured the collection of data from the individual participant interviews, I placed all documentation in a locked filing cabinet to ensure documentation safety (Creswell & Poth,

2018). In addition, the findings were placed within an NVivo document and saved on a password protected computer and password protected USB drive. I met with each student individually so other students did not have the opportunity or ability to interfere or have knowledge of other participants' mental health circumstances (Creswell & Poth, 2018). HIPAA compliant video conferencing software, such as Zoom, aided in circumventing and addressing any interference concerns throughout the study and also added to the protection of individuals' private information. Creswell and Poth discussed the process of addressing any potential ethical concerns that may have arisen throughout the study, which included properly disclosing information in regards to the study, utilizing consent forms, having an unbiased view when participants discussed their lived experiences, avoidance of aligning oneself with participants throughout the study, respecting boundaries, only publishing valid information. and keeping students' information safeguarded. Additional ethical concerns included ensuring all students' perspectives were brought into the evaluation process when determining phenomenological themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There were no ethical concerns that needed to be addressed at the time of the study.

Summary

The study was conducted utilizing a transcendental phenomenological perspective of qualitative research. I utilize several research steps to ensure student participants were aware of their rights and that their confidentiality was protected. For additional safety, the researcher locked all paper documentation in a file cabinet and passwords were created for any audio and video recordings. I successfully gained participation from 10 full-time, freshmen students (Peoples, 2021). This particular sample of students ranged in age between 18 to 22 years due to the nature of onset of mental health symptoms and traditional college student age enrollment.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of students with mental health issues entering the higher education setting and the perception of the therapeutic support offered at the institution. The fourth chapter includes a review and process of the data analysis and themes found within all three parts of this research study. Themes are broken down into written content, along with quotes supporting these themes from student participants, as well as a visual chart that breaks down each theme. This chapter begins with discussing each participant and their individual background to include why they chose Rose College as their institution of choice, general information regarding from where each participant originates, as well as activities students participate in on campus and varied information regarding their family backgrounds and support systems. Furthermore, this chapter dissects each code created in NVivo, which assisted in each of the six themes developed, after having combined all three parts of the research and data collected from each of the 10 participants throughout these three sections of research. In addition, I discuss the research question findings and provide rich quotes from students who discussed their responses provided throughout the research study.

Participants

There were 10 participants total who attempted to participate in this qualitative research study, including 9 female students and one male student. One female participant identified as an African Native, one female participant identified as African-American, one female participant identified as Asian, one male participant identified as Caucasian, and the remaining six female participants identified as Caucasian. The next section described provides pseudonyms for each

participant that participated throughout the study fully, as well as participant numbers for all participants who attempted to participate. These numbers and names were provided to protect the confidential information of each student. Each description of the individual participants included a brief demographic description of each student, as well as additional insight into the client's decision-making skills utilized when choosing Rose College and other extra-curricular activities enrolled in while attending the college. In addition, it is noted what portions of the study each participant fully participated in.

Caimile

Caimile is a female, sophomore, born an African native, who came to the United States for education and chose Rose College as her school of choice due to its strong faith-based core values and services. This student has a history of previous athleticism but due to an injury that took place prior to beginning at Rose College, could not continue her athletic skills of weight lifting. This student has a strong relationship with her mother who has served as a major support system from afar. This student appeared eager and open to disclosing her first and ongoing second year experiences living on-campus at Rose College. This student completed all parts of the research process.

Dominic

Dominic is an out of state, African-American female sophomore status student who also came to Rose College for the faith-based services. This student had experienced a great deal of loss prior to attending the university but found utilizing her faith aided her in pressing onward and achieving passing grades. This student also appeared willing to participate in the study; however, did not complete all parts of the study.

Leighton

Leighton is a sophomore student is a Caucasian female who had previous connections to Rose College prior to attending, as she had a family member previously attending the university. This student appeared enthusiastic and excited to begin, open, and well-informed about various opportunities and services available at Rose College; however, this student also did not complete all parts of the research study. This student also had the opportunity to attend a weekend program inviting future students to visit and stay at Rose College, in order to gain a better understanding of what Rose College offers prior to attending the university. This student only completed the first portion of the research study.

Savannah

Savannah is a sophomore student, Caucasian female, who is a scholar of Rose College and admirer and attendee of the institution's various events since her middle school years. Her parents serve as missionaries and the entire immediate family have strong Christian ties to the community, in part due to her family upbringing. This participant appeared euthymic and open to discussing her experiences since being at Rose College. This participant only completed the first portion of the research study.

Candace

Candace is a Caucasian female, sophomore student, is an Oregon native who chose to attend Rose College with the aid and advice from a family friend who also attended Rose College and recommended the institution for its Christian centered values. This student's previous schooling came from a home-school environment and she comes from an intact family with both mother and father. This student also came to Rose College with acceptance of several scholarships and admittance into the honors program. The student also reported having family

members who had glowing reviews on the institution as a whole, which assisted her in making the decision to attend the university. This student also attended a prospective student visit prior to attending the university. In addition, the student reported the institution as a whole had excellent reviews and accreditations for the degree program she originally was pursuing in the STEM field. This participant appeared euthymic and actively willing to discuss her experiences at Rose College. This participant completed the first two portions of the research study but was unable to complete the focus group due to previously scheduled travel plans.

Natalie

Natalie, a Caucasian female, sophomore student chose Rose College based on its strong Christian values. This student is engaged in extracurricular activities to include participating in the school's marching band. This participant appeared lethargic but willing to discuss her experiences at Rose College. This participant completed all three portions of the research study.

Declan

Declan is a Caucasian male, sophomore status, bio-medical major, out-of-state, honors student, who chose to attend Rose College for its excellent academic programs and Christian values. This student is an active service military member and served in a leadership role during his short time at Rose College. This student comes from an intact family with a long line of medical providers and family members who have strong Christian values and connections to the participant's local church. This student appeared euthymic, willing to participate, and eager to provide all insights and experiences since attending Rose College. This student successfully completed all parts of the research study.

Amanda

Amanda is a Caucasian female, Virginia native, sophomore status student, who comes from an intact family who chose Rose College for its well-known programs for ASL and pre-med. This student participated in all three parts of the research study.

Jia

Jia is an Asian female, sophomore status, biology major student who chose Rose College for its strong Christian values. This student is a biology major who participates in the school's debate team. This participant has a strong support system with her mother and reported maintaining many healthy student relationships and study groups to help during her transition into the college setting. The student reported initially lethargic to the individual interview but maintained her willingness to complete the entire research study.

Patricia

Patricia is a Caucasian female, sophomore status, developmental psychology major student. This student chose Rose College not only for its focus on Christian values and culture, but also to gain skills in academics that would later translate to aiding in caretaking for her brother who has "mental and physical" diagnoses. This participant originally experienced living on campus her freshman year but now lives off-campus with other Rose College students. The participant appeared euthymic, open, and willing to participate in all three parts of the research study.

Each participant met research criteria to include being a sophomore student status, reported acknowledging and endorsing symptoms of adjustment while transitioning into the higher education setting, as well as having the opportunity to delve further into their symptoms, academic performance, and the support systems that aided them in successfully transitioning into

their sophomore year at Rose College. In addition, there were nine students who were ineligible to complete the study. These nine students were eliminated from the study during the initial interview due to several factors, to include being online students and never having lived on-campus at Rose College their freshman year, as well as being considered “sophomore status” yet had not experienced a full year at Rose College.

Results

The themes were derived from triangulating data across participants. Stage one included individual interviews; stage two included document analysis from the letters to self, the artifact questionnaires and focus group. The theme developments were utilized with the influence of Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory and review of the four S’s to include situation, self, support, and strategies. Codes found throughout the research study included coping strategies, mental health symptoms, self-efficacy, support services, transition information, and general recommendations that would positively impact students transitioning into the college setting. There were several additional sub-themes found throughout the main codes and themes to include mental health symptoms; more specifically, depression, anxiety, and general adjustment. Students reported a variety of support services utilized throughout their transition from the high school setting including community counseling, faith, family, friends, and school staff and services. In addition, students reported varied information regarding their initial transition into Rose College and more specifically discussed a common sub-theme to include a particular timeframe in their freshman year that was reported to be most difficult to transition successfully.

Theme Development

The themes developed throughout this research study were influenced by Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory and Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory. In addition, I utilized key

words originally discussed in the definitions section of Chapter One to aid in the development of labeling codes in NVivo to further group similar response styles found throughout all three parts of this research study. Table 2 showcases the breakdown of each main theme and sub-theme found throughout the research study, as well as quotes that support each theme.

Table 2

Overview of Themes

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Significant Statements Supporting Main Themes
Transition	1. Timeframe for difficulty transitioning	“Um, even now, I still sometimes struggle with having time management and I don’t have much of a social life either.” (Natalie, Individual Interview, 2021)
Mental Health Symptoms	1. Anxiety 2. Depression 3. General adjustment issues	“I wish that I could handle the situation much better. I know that I will experience anxiety, depression, stress, and more. But I did not expect I would be this bad, probably because I have so much on my plate.” (Jia, Letter to Self, 2021)
Self-efficacy	N/A	“Um, because another thing I was learning was despite, like, along with the rough transition, I saw within myself this I thought, I guess I felt like it was kind of like a level of inadequacy or inability to maintain or juggle all the responsibilities while maintaining mental health.” (Dominic, Individual Interview, 2021)

Support services	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Community Counseling 2. Faith 3. Family 4. Friends 5. School Staff and Services 	<p>“All the supports you needed were available at your fingertips, and there was nothing that you lacked. One key major tip from freshman year is to ALWAYS ASK FOR HELP!!! Overall, the events of freshman year have already happened, I cannot change some memories, but I can hold onto the happy ones, and learn from the difficult ones.” (Caimile, Letter to Self, 2021)</p>
Coping strategies	N/A	<p>“From home for support I brought some stuffed animals that’s reminded me of memories from life events and trips that I have gotten, I collected teddy bears for each big milestone.” (Patricia, Artifact Questionnaire, 2021)</p>
Recommendations	N/A	<p>“But the first year, I had no idea what to do. And I really would have appreciated somebody to like, walk next to me.” (Candace, Individual Interview, 2021)</p>

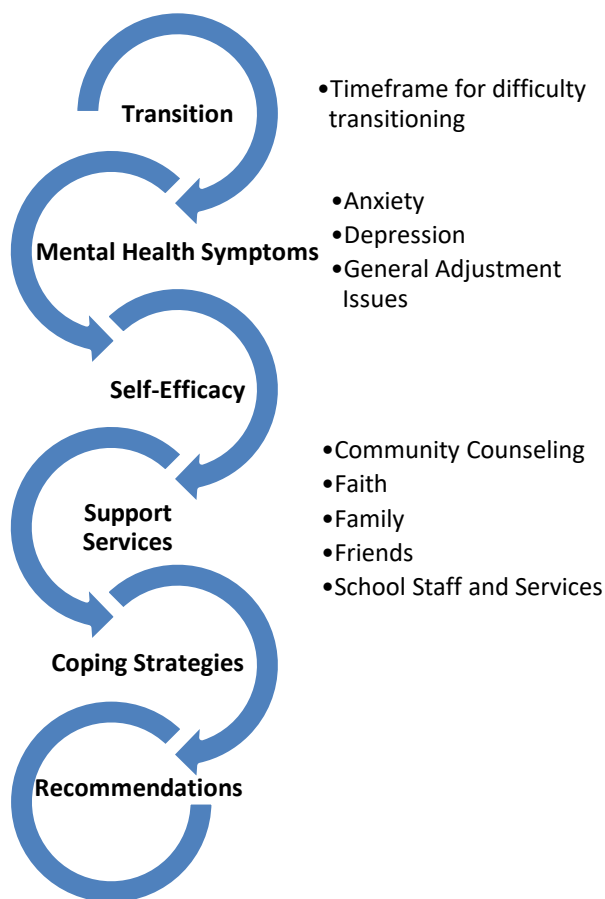
(*N* = 10)

The first theme found throughout the research study included students reporting difficulty transitioning into the school setting as well as a sub theme of students discussing a specific time frame in which they recall where they felt the most overwhelmed by their transition into the higher education setting. The second theme included students endorsing various mental health symptoms that were experienced throughout the students’ first year of attending Rose College. More specifically these students expressed key mental health symptoms to include anxiety, depression, and general adjustment issues. The third theme derived from the study was self-efficacy. Students were found to have resilience and faith within themselves and in their abilities to complete their first year of schooling. However, contradictory evidence also suggested several

students reported low self-esteem and self-worth, even after successfully completing their first year of schooling. The fourth theme centered on students utilizing support services to aid in successfully achieving their schooling. Sub-themes found within the support services theme included community counseling, faith, family, friends, and school staff and services found at the institution. The fifth theme derived from student responses included coping strategies that aided students in successfully completing coursework. Lastly, students described several recommendations they believed would benefit students at the institution moving forward throughout their college experience. Figure 1 showcases a simple graphic breaking down each of the six main themes and nine sub-themes found throughout the three-step research study.

Figure 1

Themes Found in Research Study



Transition

Students reported difficulty transitioning into the college setting during their individual interviews and within the focus group. Students described the stressors they experienced when transitioning into higher education within their letters to self and provided a graphic representation of what they utilized to help cope during the time of their transition within the artifact questionnaire and collage. Patricia provided an excellent summary of her experience when initially transitioning into the college environment in the individual interview portion of the research study:

And then like just navigating everything, like choosing classes, um figuring out that I signed up for the wrong classes (laughter), rearranging that, being worried, like, oh, my gosh, this is gonna affect my GPA, even though it's like, the first day, so it really doesn't mean anything (laughter). So a probably like my first few days, just trying to navigate everything. And then, um just like, making new friends. And then like, because a COVID, like, not having school for half a year (laughter), then coming back and being in college, that was probably stressful. But um, I would say for the most stressful time um at Liberty is I actually had to move out of my first off-campus living because I had roommate issues. (Patricia, Individual Interview, 2021)

This quote reflects the magnitude of stress and difficulty found with a student not only transitioning into the higher education setting for the first time, but also being the first student class to experience the implications of how COVID-19 impacted the transition of students going to campus and attending classes in-person during a global pandemic.

Another quote that supports the transition theme includes a statement from Leighton, who described her transition as:

Like trying to balance all of that. Like, I remember being in the library one time and just trying to get like some of my homework knocked out. And literally not being able to function because my brain was just thinking I – I can't do this. I physically can't do this. Like my brain could not take any more. (Leighton, Individual Interview, 2021)

This student demonstrated the true emotion and experience felt with students attempting to adjust in the college environment while also prioritizing the need to succeed in their coursework.

Savannah also provided an excellent quote that discussed her experiences with difficulty transitioning during her freshman year:

I remember just one day um okay, I've got an example. So it was I was um supposed to have a class at twelve o'clock one day, and I had been sitting in the library trying to study but just feeling kind of overwhelmed and I got an email from the post office that a package had come in. And so but my roommate generally walked me to this class because our class was like right down the hall. So she walked me to the class. I stood outside the classroom door, waited for her to leave and then went to the post office and pick up the shoes because I just needed a break from everything else that was going on it just needed to like step away from the situation and just kind of breathe. (Savannah, Individual Interview, 2021)

Savannah provided another aspect of transitioning into a new setting to include feeling overwhelmed to the point of needing to escape her daily routine and obligations of classes in order to take a moment to complete a less strenuous task of getting a package from the university's mail room.

In addition, Jia reported experiencing difficulty transitioning and stated, "It's like the workload it's like you cannot even like imagine, so I think that like, just to let um, the you know,

first the freshmen are like, students to know like it's intense" (Jia, Individual Interview, 2021).

This student further expressed her difficulty transitioning and stated: "I think it was at the whole semester" (Jia, Individual Interview, 2021).

Timeframe for Difficulty Transitioning

One area of added consideration that was addressed by several students throughout the study was a particular timeframe within their freshman year of college where they reported feeling the most difficult time to transition. While several students reported the first semester being one of the most difficult to get adjusted to in their new environment along with the course requirements, other students discussed the transitional timeframe lasting throughout the entirety of their freshman year. Jia aided in developing a subtheme found throughout the research to include students labeling specific moments throughout their freshman year, which was found to be considered their most vulnerable and difficult time transitioning into the college environment. Other students reported having difficulty transitioning throughout their freshman fall term to include participants Patricia, Natalie, Declan, Leighton, and Savannah. Natalie specifically stated, "Oh, oh yeah, the very first fall semester of school was definitely the most difficult because marching band is a big-time commitment. It's, after you're done with Band camp and classes start you have rehearsals three times a week for two hours" (Natalie, Participant 10, Individual Interview, 2021). Others reported the spring term of their freshman year as being the most difficult due to more intense demands with coursework to include Camilie, Amanda, and Candace. One student went into further detail and discussed the more long-term impacts of her difficult transition into her second term of college included needing to "drop two classes" (Amanda, Individual Interview, 2021), due to the added stressors of school demands. Overall, every student expressed some level of general difficulty adjusting to the college setting,

specifically addressing concerns with effectively juggling coursework requirements, as well as taking responsibility for having to utilize time management skills in order to successfully complete the coursework needed to achieve passing grades.

Mental Health Symptoms

While students transitioned into the college setting, all students reported experiencing some type of adjustment difficulties. From the most simplistic symptoms of general stress and feelings of being overwhelmed, to students experiencing more intense symptomology to include anxiety, depression, suicidal ideations, and being hospitalized for presentation concerns. From these symptoms, sub-themes were created to categorize students' reported symptoms to include general adjustment, anxiety, and depression.

General Adjustment Issues

At the most basic level, all students reported endorsing general level of adjustment issues when entering the higher education setting for the first time. Students ranged in their responses to their personally lived experiences from stating a general feeling of anxiety, being overwhelmed, and disorganized. In addition, students reported one main adjustment issue was moving into a new setting for the first time and adjusting to dormitory living arrangements, and sharing living quarters with other students. Natalie reported experiencing symptoms such as "fatigue" as well as "I regret isolating myself from people during that time" (Natalie, Letter to Self, 2021). In the individual interview portion of the study, Dominic reported mild symptoms to include: "I guess some symptoms would have definitely been um uncertainty." Natalie endorsed more in-depth adjustment issues such as: "Yeah, pretty much just stress and difficulty to be able to um, being able to manage my time. Um, my first semester of college last year, I was taking 16 credits as well as being part of the marching band" (Individual Interview, 2021). Several other students

(Leighton, Savannah, and Candace) also noted having heightened symptoms of stress. Jia reported experiencing additional adjustment symptoms: “I’ve been like constantly crying for no reason” (Jia, Individual Interview, 2021). These reported symptoms were in alignment with general adjustment issues that have been reported in previous research, when addressing college students transitioning into the higher education setting.

Anxiety

Several students reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety throughout their first year of schooling. For example, Jia reported, “I have been really shy and um I have a little bit of anxiety too” (Jia, Individual Interview, 2021). In addition, Savannah reported experiencing similar symptomology: “definitely some stress with being in a new environment. Um, mostly just stress and anxiety, I guess” (Savannah, Individual Interview, 2021). Candace also reported in her individual interview: “that was kind of like the clarifying semester. Like it kind of revealed to me how deep running my anxiety is” (Candace, Individual Interview, 2021). Declan experienced anxiety related symptoms, stating in his interview:

I certainly did not have the same issues as I did last fall. Last fall was – was really a violent rip yourself out of this self-deprecating. I have an extremely self-deprecating mindset. I had a very low opinion of myself. I had a very high stress level and zero rest whatsoever. And it was just a recipe for disaster (Declan, Individual Interview, 2021).

Anxiety was and stress symptoms were reported by eight out of 10 students, while others simply noted and acknowledged that the physiological symptoms they were experiencing were related to the symptom of anxiety.

Depression

The term depression often is considered to have a higher level of duress and comes with a deeper layer of judgment to most lay persons. When delving into deeper conversations with several students such as Jia, they also reported experiencing other symptoms to include “anxiety, depression, stress and more” (Jia, Letter to Self, 2021). Caimile divulged a need for hospitalization and further medical assistance due to the intense pressures and stressors of her college transition. Caimile stated, “So I ended up in the hospital. And that took a hit on my mental health. Like, never usually the word the two words mental health, were not really my vocabulary until then” (Caimile, Individual Interview, 2021). Furthermore, Natalie also reported experiencing depressive symptoms for the first time and stated, “There’s been times where I’ve gotten depressed, too. And also been times for also the beginning of my freshman year I also like wasn’t taking care of myself and I had fatigue” (Natalie, Individual Interview, 2021). Depression was a symptom noted by several students throughout the research study.

Self-efficacy

Bandura (1977) found individuals’ heightened levels of self-efficacy can have positive implications for those attempting to process various circumstances, to include transitional periods of time. Several students reported negative statements regarding their self-efficacy to include quotes such as: “Honestly, I have very little faith in myself” (Declan, Individual Interview, 2021), as well as “I guess I felt like it was kind of like a level of inadequacy or inability to maintain or juggle all the responsibilities while maintaining mental health” (Dominic, Individual Interview, 2021). In addition, one student noted a major barrier to attempting seek assistance: “...fear of just being stigmatized” (Amanda, Individual Interview, 2021). However, with these contradicting statements to the major theme of self-efficacy also emerged one

common theme that increased students' level of self-efficacy enough to pass their first year of college successfully, and thrive as they continue to complete their studies in their sophomore year. This common thread involved all students successfully reaching out to gain assistance with whatever particular area with which they were struggling.

Once students turned to various support systems, students began discussing one vital factor that aids in the increase of self-efficacy: instilling hope. Natalie reported in her letter to self, "You're not going to suffer from fatigue forever. It will go away eventually, and then you'll start to slowly be able to pick yourself back up. You're going to need help with that, as I think we both know we're not the best at disciplining ourselves" (Natalie, Letter to Self, 2021). Students such as Amanda demonstrated true optimism and positive regard for their efforts within the letter to self-assignment:

In terms of handling stress, start with easy assignments and work your way up. If you feel overwhelmed try and read your Bible about God's promises about your future. Remember, that one way or another, you will become a doctor who is fluent in ASL. Have faith (Amanda, Letter to Self, 2021).

In her letter to self, Patricia discussed the importance of forgiveness and positive regard, advising, "...to not take it so personally because everyone and everything is changing so I should give grace to myself and others" (Patricia, Letter to Self, 2021).

Conversely, other students showed great insight as to why they felt their self-efficacy was not increasing over time, which was also referenced in the student's letter to self as, "I would say I need to start supporting myself. Sometimes, I know everyone around me supports me but I keep putting myself down. That is also the reason why I am miserable" (Jia, Letter to Self, 2021).

Amanda reported valuable insight into her level of self-efficacy:

Some major takeaways from freshman year are to not focus on working. Yes, working lets me make some extra side money, but it's not worth it. I also encourage you to take advantage of mentorship programs Rose College offers. I know counseling is not really your preference (work on swallowing that pill), but at least take baby steps on getting mature advice (Amanda, Letter to Self, 2021).

Support Services

The fourth theme identified in this research study included an expansive support service utilization to further aid students in their transition into the college setting. The sub-themes found within the overarching support services theme included community counseling, faith, family, and school staff and services. All students within this study reported utilizing at least one support service when they began exhibiting symptoms of difficulty adjusting to their new school environments. The students who reported accessing more support services, self-reported thriving within their next year of schooling as well as being able to provide information to aid other students who also reported similar symptomology.

Community Counseling

Students reported the utilization of community counseling for two different purposes. First, the students utilized a built-in community counseling outlet such as their historical pastoral counseling offered at their home church or pastoral counseling utilized from a local off-campus church. Students Declan and Leighton reported benefiting from seeking community pastoral counseling services. In addition, Leighton reported utilizing the “crisis hotline” at one point and also reported receiving additional assistance from the Rose College Counseling Center who “referred me to an external counseling service in [REDACTED]” (Leighton, Individual Interview, 2021). Declan reported having awareness of the crisis hotline and stated, “There’s always the

National Suicide Hotline” (Declan, Focus Group, 2021); if this were an added measure, students needed to seek to gain need services. Savannah and Candace were also referred for external counseling and reported, “I was transferred over to the Rose medical group to a psychiatrist over there” (Savannah, Individual Interview, 2021) after she received counseling from the University’s counseling center the first semester. The student reported being transferred her second semester after she reached her maximum therapy sessions at the university. Candace also reported she was referred to the “psychiatrist’s office” (Candace, Individual Interview, 2021) after seeking guidance from the college’s counseling office.

Faith

All students reported finding faith-based practices to be helpful when attempting to gain additional support during times of difficulty. Faith-based practices included attending church, reading The Holy Bible, seeking additional outlets of prayer within Rose College’s Bible study groups, and pastoral counseling. For example, Caimile reported finding aid within “my church, I make sure they get involved quite a bit in there to kind of help me through the process. And also, we have a youth group that I attend and we talk about a lot of things: Bible reading, discipline, ah devotion, emotions, so those were kind of the groups that it would get, whenever, in my time” (Caimile, Individual Interview, 2021). Other students such as Declan reported, “Pretty much the only thing that’s keeping me from going internally mentally insane, is faith in Christ” (Declan, Individual Interview, 2021). Students Caimile, Amanda, Dominic, and Savannah found solace in utilizing services such as campus community groups, the prayer chapel, and the university’s Young Life group, while others simply utilized their religious beliefs to help cope during times of difficulty. Jia reported within her letter to self,

God has helped me a lot these days. At the end of the day, I just want to give it all to him but sometimes, I have a thought that I might be able to do it by myself. I know that I am wrong so that is why I am still working on it (Jia, Letter to Self, 2021).

Family

Another sub-theme found within the support system theme included utilizing family to help process daily stressors and gain added supports of which parents were aware and students were not. For example, Candace reported having a close relationship with her mother and utilized her for support, but when Candace needed additional assistance her mother reached out and found a “parent groups on Facebook. So they’re always talking you know back and forth about what the kids doing to get help to keep their grades up, whatever. So she figured out that they have counseling services available” (Candace, Individual Interview, 2021). This extended her ability to gain more assistance from Rose College families as well. Other students such as Declan, Caimile, and Jia, reported reaching out to their parents during times of stress and the strong need for moral support.

Friends

Friends were found to be a common sub-theme across several student responses, as well as the act of engaging in new friendships and conversations with other students on campus. Caimile reported finding support from other students who utilized the International Student Services Center on campus and stated she met “people who, you know, were going through the things I was going through, and I met a person who actually helped, like, a lot. I would actually contribute about thirty-five percent of me getting better to him” (Caimile, Individual Interview, 2021). Other students, such as Jia, also reported, “We have just talked to my friends, and they

just like really help me so” (Jia, Individual Interview, 2021). Jia also assembled peer study groups to help process academic stressors and school assignments. Other students, such as Savannah, reported attending “a weekly group that I met with that was helpful and then just having friends around who like, understood what I was going through and like the transitions and all that. That was nice” (Savannah, Individual Interview, 2021). In their letters to self and during their individual interviews, Patricia and Candace reported the benefits of gaining and utilizing friends as support systems.

School Staff and Services

Lastly, school staff and other services offered at Rose College were discussed by all participants, who noted they were beneficial to utilize during their transition and also during particular incidents of stress. Students recommended the use of several school services, including the Student Counseling Center, The College of Applied Studies and Academic Success (CASAS), Rose College’s social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram), Rose College Care, the Library, The Office of Military Affairs, The International Student Center, The Office of Equity and Inclusion, Rose College’s faculty members, The Career Center, Rose College’s Tutoring Services and Office of Disability Accommodation and Support, as well as the Rose College Spiritual Office. Several students reported benefitting from the guidance of student spiritual leaders and Resident Assistants (RAs) throughout their college experience. In her interview, Savannah noted, “If a student is having issues adjusting or coping, they can always go to student leadership or should be able to go to Student Leadership...Because the RA’s were administrative, they’re able to talk things out. They’re trained to talk things out with people.” Students reported a sense of ease when attempting to reach out for guidance from these spiritual leaders and reported, “They are easily accessible in their hall” (Dominic, Participant 2,

Individual Interview, 2021). Declan also reported positive experiences with this group of leadership and stated, “Getting to speak directly with my Resident Shepherd. That was something that was incredibly helpful” (Declan, Individual Interview, 2021).

There was one contradictory remark reported by Patricia that included an incident where residence life leadership did not assist a student who was reporting to be experiencing suicidal ideations. The residence life leader reported the concern to the suicidal student’s assigned residence life leadership instead of attempting to provide added resources to the student in need in that moment. Additional services that were reported to be beneficial to students before even beginning school at Rose College was the offered benefit of attending a weekend stay experience, which was described by students Leighton and Candace to be an opportunity to spend a weekend at Rose College prior to admission to gain first-hand experience on what the college offers.

Coping Strategies

Students reported several coping strategies utilized throughout their freshman year of college that aided them in reducing the mental health symptoms they were experiencing. Each student provided examples of different coping strategies throughout their individual interviews, artifact questionnaire and collage creations, letters to self, and the focus group. Student responses varied based on the what portion of the study was being conducted. Student responses from the focus group included several examples. Caimile reported utilizing the library’s free relaxation resources such as mindfulness-based activities and events hosted. Declan reported utilizing Rose College Care to gain further assistance with gaining access to effective coping strategies. The artifact questionnaire and collage exercise were the most beneficial aspects of data collection to gain knowledge of which coping strategies aided each student, to include “plush animals”

(Natalie, Artifact Questionnaire, 2021), which were also endorsed to be beneficial for students Declan and Patricia. Additional coping strategies found within the artifact questionnaire included using “my little pocket Bible” (Declan, Artifact Questionnaire, 2021), which also benefitted Amanda. Other coping strategies included utilizing various artifacts including: “letters from friends and photos helpful in my transition. As well as handmade ceramic ware as a nice keepsake during those times” (Dominic, Artifact Questionnaire, 2021); a “a locket, a t-shirt, and a pendant” (Candace, Artifact Questionnaire, 2021); “crochet projects” (Amanda, Artifact Questionnaire, 2021); and a ring Caimile utilized as a visual reminder of “success I have already achieved and the many more I will achieve” (Caimile, Artifact Questionnaire, 2021).

One additional coping strategy several students noted throughout their first year at Rose College was reflecting, adjusting, or reducing their academic course load, in order to better perform within their required first-year classes. Several students, including Caimile, Natalie, Leighton, Amanda, and Patricia, reported taking an overload of courses, consisting of being registered for over 16 credits or more throughout the fall or spring terms of their freshman year, which contributed to their increased mental health symptoms.

Recommendations

The last theme addressed recommendations for Rose College to further assist students seeking guidance and support during their time of transition. One major finding noted by all 10 participants included Rose College making more of an effort to spread the wealth of knowledge and resources offered that many students are not aware are readily available to them (Natalie, Declan, & Caimile, Focus Group, 2021). Suggestions for increasing awareness included having more public notifications of services available on campus during weekly university meetings, prayer groups, and residence life halls. In addition, students recommended utilizing the college’s

social media platforms and the school website to provide additional information and real-time chat opportunities with counselors and other mental health and spiritual resources.

In addition, several students noted they would benefit from Rose College creating a mentor program where incoming freshman students would be matched with upperclassmen in order to benefit from understanding time management skills, prioritizing school assignments over extra-curricular activities, as well as navigating student electronic resources (Candace, Jia, & Caimile, Focus Group, 2021). Other students reported the benefits of students utilizing programs to their maximum potential such as

You know, we meet twice a week, thousands of students go and even like, you know, right after worship, but you know, they can just have a sit-down conversation like, hey, we guys know that we you know, that mental health is really hurting our generation, like we just want to know that we are here for you. Even campus commons, you know, like where a lot of students go as well (Amanda, Focus Group, 2021).

Students recommended several new additions to the counseling center in order to make it more accessible, such as reassessing the six-session limit, and expanding the current services offered to include more expansive long-term counseling services. Patricia offered an insightful recommendation that could include reaching students on a broader level by adding a help chat line to the Rose College's main website. She explained, "I was thinking about this, I think it would be like beneficial if we had um, like, you know, on- where they'll have like little box like question, error thing. I think that would be like beneficial for it to be like a freshman, or like, like, have one for each um class. Where it's just like, you can have like a psychologist or

counselor on hand to like answer like simple little questions” (Patricia, Individual Interview, 2021).

Research Question Responses

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of students who report symptoms of a mental health disorder while in their first year of college? Students reported a variety of answers to the central research question to include general adjustment symptoms to more severe symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Declan reported,

I had a very high stress level and zero rest whatsoever. And it was just a recipe for disaster. I did not have the exact same difficulties this semester, but I certainly still experienced that wall of stress hit me, like you know from a freight train (Declan, Individual Interview, 2021).

However, with these symptoms came a discovery that “for the first time in my life. I had to realize that I got to slow down [laughter]” (Declan, Individual Interview, 2021), which later benefitted the student in maintaining all of his obligations with academics, extracurricular requirements, and job demands. Other students reported mental health symptoms impacted their student performance. For example, Candace stated,

You know, and I was having a hard time getting those done. So I produced some very poor grades that I’m still working to rectify. I managed to keep the main scholarship but I did have to appeal for it. So that’s also added to the stress (Candace, Individual Interview, 2021).

Overall, students reported endorsing a variety of mental health symptoms that were exacerbated in their first year at the university and were further addressed within the mental health theme found throughout the research study.

Sub-Question One

What supports aid students with mental health symptoms in transitioning into the college setting successfully? Caimile reported several support resources advertised throughout the institution to include:

All social media, and flyers all over school. And then there's also um like, televisions, with um news and things going on. So every time like, I'm on the line for lunch, I'll just, my eyes will just naturally gravitate towards that television (Caimile, Focus Group, 2021).

While several students mentioned support services and organizations offered on campus, many also reported finding support through their family and friend groups, local church, faculty members, and extracurricular organizations. Some students mentioned additional support aids, including sentimental items such as stuffed animals, the Holy Bible, other books, music, and prayer.

Sub-Question Two

What are first year students' experiences with mental health services as they transition into the college setting? Some students reported benefitting from the utilization of counseling services at Rose College, but also discussed the limitations of this one service. Dominic provided further insights into the benefits of utilizing counseling services:

So I sought therapy as a means of not only an outlet to get out feelings that I've been repressing, but also to understand myself better and to understand what were

things that I can implement in order to better juggle my responsibilities and learn how to, I guess, how could I communicate how therapy helped? It helped me open my mind to the reality that I was not alone in my struggles, and that there were ways that I could reach out to people and the resources that were offered to help me be able to balance the load and responsibility (Dominic, Individual Interview, 2021).

Declan expanded on concerns regarding the limitations to the therapy services located at Rose College: “Most of your help, and most of the a the healing and fixing your problems you’re going to do, does not come from [REDACTED] counseling services. You know, I’m only able to utilize it once a week” (Declan, Focus Group, 2021). The transition theme found throughout the findings suggested that students endorsed adjustment difficulty when initially transitioning in their first year of college. Students reported feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as a sense of confusion regarding where to initially turn for assistance when attempting to gain assistance with these symptoms. In addition, students reported a sense of frustration with the limited mental health services available in terms of availability of daily appointment times, length of service availability, and lack of crisis support utilizing additional technological services such as a text/chat or after-hours phone service.

Sub-Question Three

What types of mental health services do students believe helped them transition to college successfully? Several students mentioned the Rose College Counseling Center, pastoral counseling offered both on and off campus, as well as the Rose College’s office of spiritual guidance as outlets that aided them in gaining effective services for mental health symptoms. Dominic reported, “The [REDACTED] office where like a staff member of the [REDACTED] office was

someone who actually suggested to me that I should seek out counseling” (Dominic, Individual Interview, 2021). Leighton received guidance from the [REDACTED] office who assisted in transitioning her to several lines of support for her reported mental health symptoms. Leighton noted, “My roommate was a [REDACTED], I told her about it. She referred me to the [REDACTED] on my hall. They referred me to the care team, care to refer me to [REDACTED] counseling” (Leighton, Individual Interview, 2021). Other students, such as Candace, utilized student groups as a means of processing mental health symptoms. Candace stated, “Like my [REDACTED] likes to say what happens in the group stays in the community group. So we know better than to talk about other people’s problems outside. And that’s a really reassuring thing” (Candace, Individual Interview, 2021). Overall, all students who participated in the study found the spiritual guidance and counseling offered on campus and at local churches was extremely beneficial when attempting to gain assistance with mental health symptoms and reported concerns. In addition, students reported the counseling center was helpful in addressing initial mental health concerns, but was limited in how they could be addressed due to the counseling center’s policy of a maximum of six sessions.

Sub-Question Four

What barriers to mental health treatment are experienced by first-year students transitioning into the college setting? Students reported lacking an ability to reach out for mental health counseling resources due to lack of time. Amanda noted, “It’s something that you need to prepare for it. Like you don’t just go to a day of counseling, it’s constant checkup. And with my schedule, I felt as though like I just don’t have time” (Amanda, Individual Interview, 2021). Other students reported having concerns about being stigmatized if attempting to reach out for help. Patricia reported, “So I think there’s like a stigma. If you go to counseling, or you go to a

psychologist, it's because this is like your last chance" (Patricia, Individual Interview, 2021). Students also reported having limited means of transportation to attend off-campus mental health services once they had reached their maximum number of six sessions at the counseling center. They found it helpful to connect to spiritual groups on campus and local church organizations and groups to offset this lack of opportunity. In addition, students mentioned the limited number of sessions offered at the college counseling center, as well as insurance limitation issues as drawbacks to adequate access to university services.

Summary

This chapter discussed the themes identified from triangulating data across participants and data collection methods. Documented theorists aided in the development of the research questions, which were based on Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory and Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory. Each theory provided a general understanding and history of the symptoms and experiences students have experienced when going through a time of transition in their lives, as well as general mental health symptoms and self-efficacy concerns. Student demographics and details of their general upbringing and reasons for choosing Rose College were discussed prior to the discussion of theme development. Student quotes were provided to gain a deeper perspective and rich detail into students' lives as they transitioned into the college setting for the first time. I utilized NVivo, a qualitative research program, that aided in compiling and coding all data points from the individual interviews, artifact questionnaires, letters to self, and focus group findings.

Once the participant responses were coded, I was able to create six different themes to identify similar experiences found within all 10 participants. These six themes included: transition, mental health symptoms, self-efficacy, support services, coping strategies, and recommendations. All participants reported some level of difficulty adjusting in their new

transitional state of attending a higher education institution. Students' responses varied in regards to whether their first or second semesters were the most difficult when transitioning, mainly due to the level of intensity with course work. Jia reported the entire first year was a difficult time of transition. Students reported a varied level of mental health symptoms to include general adjustment concerns, anxiety, and depression. Some student participants reported having a mental health treatment history prior to attending the university, with these symptoms resurfacing or becoming exacerbated with the new transition experience. Other students reported mental health symptoms for the first time. All participants reported having a basic level of self-efficacy that allowed them to press forward in conquering their year of transition. While some students reported an initial lack of self-efficacy, with the assistance of their support systems, this quality increased once they achieved passing grades and moved onto their sophomore year of college. Students reported various types of support services, including community counseling, faith, family, friends, and school staff and services. All students noted that having a support system aided them in overcoming the overwhelming mental health symptoms and adjustment difficulties within their first year of college. Students also reported various coping strategies that aided them in reducing symptoms, including plush animals, television, jewelry, books, and The Holy Bible; as well as various activities such as crocheting, drinking warm beverages from a favorite coffee mug brought from home, pictures of loved ones, and enjoyable experiences such as mission trips. Lastly, students provided recommendations on how to better aid freshman students entering the higher education system to include reaching out for assistance when students begin to feel overwhelmed.

Lastly, this chapter discussed all research questions developed for this study. From these questions came examples of quotes from the research participants that provided answers and

student opinions on these questions, which further aided in understanding the implications of what this research study was aiming to discover.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of students with mental health issues entering the higher education setting and the perceptions of the therapeutic support offered at the institution. This study aimed to compile descriptions of students' lived experiences as they transitioned from high school to college, as well as delve deeper into the adjustment symptoms they endorsed during this transition into a new school environment. In addition, I provided opportunities for the 10 student participants to discuss the resources they utilized throughout their time of transition, as well as other resources offered that were not utilized or were not offered. Chapter Five consists of a summary of the research findings that answer the research questions asked throughout the study. The chapter then further discusses the results and implications of this research and compares and contrasts these findings to the relevant literature related to the topic. The theories that helped drive the study's qualitative research direction, (i.e., Schlossberg's transition theory and Bandura's self-efficacy theory) were also reviewed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of the research, including methodological and practical findings, and how they relate to the current expanding research. In addition, the delimitations and limitations of the study, as well as recommendations for future research were discussed.

Discussion

As predicted, students reported difficulty transitioning into a new school setting and environment. Students reported there are several types of support systems that aided them in successfully transitioning into the college setting and passing their first year of schooling. Students' abilities to adapt to new situations and settings correlated with their level of self-

efficacy. However, some of the student population was found to have ongoing low self-efficacy and views of themselves and their abilities to remain successful throughout their schooling after having received additional assistance and support services. When researching self-efficacy, several authors noted the importance and correlation of students in the higher education setting being successful as it related to their willingness to seek help when beginning to have negative thoughts regarding their innate abilities. Conyers et al. (1998) found students willing to request assistance showed a strong motivation to enhance their capabilities in the classroom; therefore, providing an opportunity for them to gain a positive sense of self-efficacy.

Interpretation of Findings

Sophomore level students ($N = 10$) at Rose College participated in this qualitative study. These students reported experiencing some level of general adjustment difficulty when entering the college setting, as well as the benefits of seeking additional support services to aid in their successful transition during the completion of their first year of higher education learning.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Overarching findings from this research study include that all student participants transitioning into the college setting endorsed experiencing some level of adjustment difficulty. Responses varied within the 19 total participants who volunteered to participate in this study. However, nine students were disqualified due to limitations of not having on campus experiences or being considered a sophomore student status but being currently enrolled in their first year at Rose College. As a result, 10 students successfully completed the research study. Students endorsed general adjustment symptoms to include reported feelings of stress, feelings of being overwhelmed, moments of tearfulness, or absence from classes in order to take a moment to reflect on the individual demands found within each of their daily lives.

Transitioning Difficulties Found in Student Populations

Students reported a variation in timeframes of the most difficult time in transitioning into the college setting, but all reported having some level of difficulty throughout their first year of college. These students were found to have a great deal of added responsibility that would be considered self-inflicted to include engaging in extracurricular activities such as serving on the debate team, engaging in military service, sports, marching band, theatre, leadership opportunities on campus such as being a spiritual leader, as well as several students also taking on part-time employment positions. While researchers Hatch and Garcia (2017) found positive implications for student involvement in extracurricular activities and persistence to pursue education, some student participants over-committed in the current study and thus had increased their transitional difficulty. Implications for future research should include reviewing the optimum level of extracurricular commitment among students.

In addition, triangulation was utilized to discover themes throughout the research to include individual interviews, artifact questionnaires, letters to self, and the focus group. Creswell and Poth (2018) defined triangulation as “researchers mak[ing] use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories, to provide corroborating evidence for validating the accuracy of their study” (p. 328). Furthermore, students reported an added layer of difficulty with processing isolation and different learning outcomes due to COVID-19. Diehl et al. (2018) reported an increased feeling of loneliness led to anxiety and depression symptoms.

Mental Health Symptoms Endorsed by Students

Several students reported having historical symptoms of anxiety or depression, which resurfaced upon entering the college setting and then exacerbated with increased demands of course work assignments, extracurricular activities, and job performances. Several students

reported experiencing mental health symptoms prior to the start of entering college or previous mental health diagnoses. This information corroborates Reid et al. (2016) research findings of students having prior symptoms, along with the positive influences of support systems to process this transition period. External influences of students processing stressors may have been influenced by the level of reported symptom severity. External influences included experiencing the loss of a loved one, family being disconnected and not readily available to support students due to current living conditions being distant from the university, as well as strains on peer relationships and partnerships.

Self-efficacy

All student participants reported initially negative views of self-efficacy within their first year transitioning into a college setting. Tirpak and Schlosser (2015) found students avoided counseling centers due to lack of confidence. This was noted among several student participants initially, before reaching out for guidance from other support systems. In addition, findings from Holt and Fifer (2018) aligned with findings from the current study, including students becoming more successful over time with the support of various individuals; more specifically for the current study, the guidance of school spiritual mentors at the university.

Support Services

Several students reported faith in Christian beliefs and philosophies were a major source of support during their transitional period. These spiritual beliefs led students to seek pastoral counseling and pastoral staff and faculty assistance, as well as actively participate in school Bible study groups, attend church, and take personal time to read The Holy Bible.

In addition, students reported utilizing family, friends, community counseling, and other school services offered at the institution, including but not limited to utilizing the Rose College's

office of spiritual development, college counseling, and Rose College Care. Furthermore, students utilized various coping strategies, which aided students in reducing their mental health symptoms overall to include items such as stuffed animals, watching television shows, reading books, spending time with friends and family, and so on. Students found varied levels of support offered at the college institution to be more beneficial and more easily accessible than others. The students' responses to the student supports question included the Rose College's Counseling Center, the spiritual offices, Rose College's pastoral counseling offered at the schools' church, and the Department of Divinity. This finding is corroborated with previous research from Killum and Degges-White (2017), which discussed the limitations of students gaining accessible mental health counseling services for a long-term period of time. Implications for future research should include looking into opportunities to gain counseling services for students with long-term mental health needs versus temporary, short-term services. Additional reported barriers included limited hours of availability and difficulty connecting to counseling staff via telephone, or having appropriate time management to physically attend the counseling center and request an in-person appointment. In addition, students reported limitations with seeking in-person counseling during their freshman year due to COVID-19 precautions and considerations.

Coping Strategies

Students utilized a variety of coping strategies to help process their stressors to include plush animals, music, television, The Holy Bible, and reading. While coping strategies found within this research were not specifically listed in the research previously discussed in other chapters, this newfound information can only benefit future areas of research, including providing outlets for student participants to create collages and showcase their specific coping mechanisms utilized throughout their transition period.

Recommendations

As discussed by Kalkbrenner et al. (2019), the need to expand resources on college campuses is one of the most vital steps to be taken across policy, practice, and student services. Having the ability to gain more assistance from universities will only benefit students gaining early-intervention access to programs, thus reducing their mental health symptom severity and need for long-term services. In addition, students recommended in this research the need to provide more technology-based intervention services, to include text and chat options available on institutional websites and phones, as well as offering after-hours services for those whose schedules cannot accommodate session times during normal business hours. These recommendations provide further implications for research within the higher education setting.

Implications for Policy and Practice

There are several implications for policy and practice generated from this research study. In regards to this particular study, it is important to note the small sample size of 10 participants. All 10 participants successfully completed the initial interview of the study, and eight out of 10 participants completed part two of the research study, and five of the participants engaged in the focus group. Implications for policy and practice regarding information gathered from this study include creating universal policies for colleges across the world to provide additional support services for students transitioning into their first year of college to include mandated student orientations, student mentorship programs and being matched with upperclassmen of similar majors and disciplines, connecting with supportive faculty and resources once per semester, as well as providing outlets for students to connect to crisis resources and support after normal business hours, in the event of emergencies or increased mental health crisis.

Implications for Policy

It is incumbent that officials on the local, state, and federal levels earmark funds to develop a safety net for educational settings to address the mental health issues of students. This proposal may be started by using a grant-based approach, via school administration to local, state, and federal institutions to define goals, objectives, and tasks that will be completed by a control group within a set period of time. Findings from this study demonstrate a need for further services, and once completed on a larger scale, should produce an increased demand for crisis intervention and strategies. Furthermore, higher education institutions should consider implementing a mandatory life enrichment class to help further address and educate students regarding general adjustment concerns and mental health symptoms. The purpose of this class would be to educate students on the importance of addressing mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual (if applicable to the individual institution) well-being.

Implications for Practice

The implications of this study may also be transferrable to higher education institution settings as a whole. Specifically, students utilizing services at Rose College found both the school counseling center and pastoral counseling offered at the institution effective for reducing general mental health and adjustment symptoms. However, students also noted a gap in services to include crisis intervention services and the need to expand the basis of services offered to include both mental health and pastoral guidance. For example, individual institutions should have a mobile crisis team readily available for students who report having any suicidal ideations, homicidal ideations, or traumatic events or concerns during after-business hours in order to ensure immediate attention to student concerns. This mobile crisis team should consist of one law enforcement official, one emergency services member, one mental health clinician, and one

spiritual leader (if applicable to the institutional setting). These recommendations may be transferrable to other college settings and should be considered when examining specific population needs at the higher education level. This may also be an opportunity for residence life to provide individual presentations to all students utilizing on-campus counseling.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

As identified in Chapter Two, the empirical literature discussed the significant gap in recent literature that expands on meeting student mental health needs. While researchers such as Mortier et al. (2018a) discussed the heightened level of suicide rates in the college student population, only two out of the 10 participants reported experiencing suicidal ideation. However, Carr et al. (2013) noted that the heightened levels of psychological distress and negative symptoms found within the college setting were found to be accurate throughout their entire student sample. The majority of students discussed general adjustment issues and symptoms throughout the current study, but several students admitted to gaining diagnoses of anxiety and depression while attempting to seek mental health services once symptoms were reported to reach a level that was impacting their daily functioning. In addition, the inability to gain adequate care due to impacts of COVID-19 were reported amongst several students. Due to the lack of resources found within the student counseling center, several students were forced to seek out community counseling in order to address their symptom concerns. One area of empirical research that was not discussed in previous research findings was the positive implications of seeking out pastoral counseling and other faith-based services to address mental health symptoms. All 10 participants reported the strong implications and positive effects of seeking out these faith-based services while attending Rose College, and this aspect should be taken into further consideration when reviewing literature in future research studies. This major finding of

seeking alternative methods of counseling shed light on several student transitional issues and will certainly create implications on recommendations of future research in the field of mental health with ongoing difficulties in being able to provide a higher level of care to the college student population.

In terms of theoretical significance, this study's findings of students having difficulty when placed in a transitional state of attending a new school environment as well as living in a new setting are corroborated with Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. Schlossberg's four S's of transition were found within this study to include "situation, self, support, and strategies" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 216). The students were found to be in a new situation and setting at Rose College, which initially impacted their general functioning and influenced their level of difficulty adjusting into this new situation. The students initially questioned their sense of self upon entering the new college setting. However, with their grounded support systems in places and new sources and learned coping strategies, students were not only able to successfully transition into their college setting, they successfully passed their coursework and transitioned into their sophomore year of college, amongst the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 restrictions altered the course of educational instruction and therapeutic intervention strategies, and these new circumstances provided an added element to existing research that has yet to be captured when considering implications of students transitioning into the higher education setting. Specifically, within Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, implications of utilizing new support systems that may not have been considered as effective as in-person learning or mental health counseling resources should be considered.

Furthermore, when considering Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory student's levels of reported self-efficacy were challenged during their time of transition into the higher education

setting. Conyers et al.'s (1998) findings also aligned with the current study's findings, specifically noted, students' levels of performance were impacted as a result of being in a new setting. Conyers et al. (1998) also stressed the importance of students gaining academic accommodations and additional assistance to effectively transition into the college setting. Students in this research study were found to have a high enough level of self-efficacy, which prompted them to seek assistance and remain motivated enough to work towards successfully passing their coursework.

Theoretical implications found within the current study are consistent with the theories of Schlossberg and Bandura. Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory was consistent with findings from this study in regards to times of transition being difficult for students entering into the college setting. Students endorsed difficulty transitioning throughout different terms of their freshman year, including one student who reported their whole first year was a time of great transition. Furthermore, students who had positive sources of support including community counseling, family, friends, faith, and school staff and services were able to successfully gain resources, pass their first year of school, and successfully transition into their next year of college coursework. In addition, students reported utilizing positive coping strategies to help reduce reported symptoms of stress and difficulty adjusting to include the use of their Holy Bible, various stuffed animals, and other stress reduction strategies such as painting artwork and crocheting. Students also noted physical items such as television, jewelry, clothing, and coffee mugs as some other items used to help cope in times of great transition.

Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory proved to be consistent within this research study as well. All student participants reported to have low self-efficacy when transitioning into the college setting. However, with the assistance and guidance of the students' support systems, the

students' self-efficacy was reported to increase over time for the majority of students. Students noted in their letters to self the hope, strength, and community that aided them within their first year, as well as signs for positive experiences in the future.

Empirical implications found within this research included students endorsing mental health symptoms throughout their transitional period. The students reported a range of mental health symptoms from general adjustment issues to experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression. In addition, two students reported experiencing a history of suicidal ideation. All students reported having awareness of the student counseling center located on campus; however, several students reported limitations of gaining access to this resource due to scheduling conflicts, limited office hours, and no in-person sessions offered during the initial COVID-19 pandemic, as well as limitations on sessions offered through the counseling center that health insurance providers would cover. Furthermore, students seeking mental health counseling services through community resources were negatively impacted based on limited transportation options during their freshman year and limited opportunities to gain referrals for long-term counseling services.

One major implication of this research study involved the aspect of faith and the relationship each student had to God. Every student reported the strength they found in prayer, consulting pastoral counseling and pastoral leadership at Rose College., consulting the Holy Bible and taking advantage of student Bible study groups created room for instilling hope in their futures, as well as instilling a sense of security during times of uncertainty. Furthermore, students reported the primary purpose for choosing Rose College was due to the strong Christian values offered at the institution. This is a major implication that has not yet been deeply explored within research focused on students' experiences transitioning into the college setting.

This study will provide practical implications for college institutions at large. This study focused on the transitional implications of students' well-being as they take on entering a higher level of educational demand, while also tackling new challenges within new settings with new peer relationships and added levels of independence and responsibilities. Findings from this study suggest that having a strong support system correlates with a positive and successful transition for students. More support systems further provide the motivation and increased self-efficacy needed for students to successfully continue personal growth and academic achievement. In addition, students reported implications of gaining support for mental health resources both in-person and through the use of telehealth services. While some students reported appreciating the opportunity and ease of telehealth services, the majority of students reported preferring in-person mental health resources. Students also stated having access to pastoral counseling resources and a faith-based community positively influenced their ability to effectively cope with difficult situations.

Limitations and Delimitations

Delimitations included decisions I initially made to narrow the research focus on specific student participant groups and scope of the overall topic of research. Delimitations of this study include the specific criteria created and disseminated throughout Rose College commuter life boards found throughout campus, as well as e-mail sent to sophomore students meeting the criteria. The delimitations included utilizing students who were over 18-years-old. This reduced the risk of student safety concerns as well as provided an opportunity for students to feel comfortable voicing their symptoms without judgment or concern for parental notification. In addition, students were required to have full-time, sophomore status. This particular specification was a main focus of the research in order to gain rich data from the students' in-person

experiences throughout their freshman year of college. Students were also to have the experience of living on campus in order to gain the best understanding of what offerings were available to students who had resources readily accessible to them throughout their first year of school. Lastly, students needed to report experiencing distress while enrolled in their first year of school and have some knowledge of the level of support offered at the institution.

These criteria potentially limited the scope of the research findings based on student age and level of schooling accomplished. In addition, gender must be taken into consideration when discussing study findings. Nine out of the 10 participants were female. The male involved in this study was reported to have a difficult outlook and understanding regarding seeking mental health resources compared to his female counterparts. In addition, this study included students with a broad range of ethnicities including Caucasian, African, African-American, and Asian-American ancestry. Students ranged in general geographic representation to include having come from the west coast to other countries such as Africa. While there is diversity found within this particular population, all students also endorsed having strong Christian values. The characteristics of this specific sample may limit the transferability of study findings to other sites and populations. In addition, the limited nature of reaching a larger group of students should be taken into consideration when analyzing the results of this research study. In addition, all students were enrolled at Rose College, a faith-based institution. These findings may be limited in terms of broad generalization based on students voluntarily seeking a faith-based college atmosphere, compared to other major state universities.

I was unable to proceed in successfully interviewing several Rose College students who initially showed study interest. Another limitation to the study included the inability of the researcher to interview students who had left the university during or after their Freshmen year.

According to the Bombaugh and Miller (2019), the importance of increasing student success and enrollment at the University of South Florida was reviewed within the local state governance and granted additional funding to increase resources available to first-year students to include increased levels of support to include student orientation, case management and counseling support, a broad range of student options and opportunities for involvement, as well as an increase in staffing, and student funding and wellness offerings. Bombaugh and Miller (2019) provided further statistical significance to show longitudinal progress at the institution from 2010 where student graduation was at 51% to 2017 where 71% of students successfully graduated within a six-year timeframe. In addition, student retention rates for freshman year students increased significantly to 90% within the 2015-2016 cohort years (Bombaugh & Miller, 2019). These statistics and interventions were found to be effective in maintaining high student enrollment and may add another level of consideration when reviewing freshman student participant populations across colleges nationwide.

Recommendations for Future Research

When discussing the study findings, recommendations to consider for future research in the field of education and mental health include reviewing which services may be provided in addition to the traditional in-person counseling services for students reporting adjustment issues within their new college atmosphere. One area of consideration that would be helpful to examine would be how universities are reaching students on a broader level to discuss mental health awareness and educate students on what mental health symptoms look like (i.e., general adjustment concerns to anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideations). In addition, campuses nationwide can utilize student orientation to discuss the importance of mental health awareness and the broad range of resources offered on campus and in the local community to students.

including in-person on-campus students, commuter students, and online students. Universities could gauge students' mental health standing by providing student surveys, as well as reviewing additional opportunities for student readiness throughout their freshman year. Furthermore, future topics to explore may include the link between student faith with student success in transition. Reviewing implications for students transitioning from year to year at the college level may also be an area of future research consideration. Lastly, researchers should consider the rates of recidivism within student participation when attempting to have three different stages to qualitative research. This study may have had a higher rate of success if conducting all portions of the research study during one designated day. In addition, due to COVID-19 limitations, completing this research study virtually may have caused implications for the smaller rate of student responses. Future research recommendations may include sampling and collecting student participation on an in-person basis.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of students with mental health issues entering the higher education setting and the perceptions of the therapeutic support offered at the institution. Research findings suggest six major themes found throughout the research gathering process to include: transition, mental health symptoms, self-efficacy, support services, coping strategies, and recommendations. Three out of six themes included sub-themes that further broke down students' reported responses to include endorsing mental health symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and general adjustment issues. The transition theme also included a sub-theme that specifically discussed the timeframes in which students were reporting particular difficulty transitioning into the college setting. Lastly, students reported five major support services utilized to aid them in their state of

transition, including community counseling, faith, family, friends, and school staff and services. Leighton stated something every student could relate to: "...literally not being able to function because my brain was just thinking I – I can't do this. I physically can't do this. Like my brain could not take any more" (Leighton, Individual Interview, 2021). All students felt on the brink of exhaustion and being overwhelmed. However, with the aid of the students' support systems, they were able to overcome their individual biases of themselves and succeed in passing their first year of college schooling. If it were not for the students' level of support, they could have very likely increased in concerning symptoms or risked their ability to pass and complete their school requirements.

The key points from the findings include considering the importance of faith-based services and intervention strategies as an additional crucial element of support for future research. Shaler et al. (2020) noted that students found value in prayer and in seeking faith-based services, but also noted limitations of students seeking these services initially and primarily due to the stigmatization of seeking mental health counseling explicitly. Participants in the Shaler et al. study also reported the need for administrators and university leaders to help normalize the process of seeking counseling services by promoting these services on a regular basis.

In addition, when attempting to review students' reports of mental health symptoms, it may be beneficial to involve the school's counseling center in order to aid students in better understanding their symptom presentation or having written consent to gain student diagnoses in order to better understand mental health implications of the students involved in the research study. Furthermore, having the opportunity to link students with counseling services that meet their individual needs would be most helpful in gaining the best access to resources and support systems created for students undergoing this transitional time period. With the aid of faith and

prayer, students reported an added level of support that may not have been acknowledged in other universities that do not have a Christian-centered approach to teaching and education. Students transitioning into the higher education setting will generally experience a level of discomfort when gaining access to a new setting, new curriculum, and educational demands. It is vital to note that students experiencing this transitional phase need more resources available to help them transition in a successful and less stressful manner. While academic success is vital to student achievement post-graduation, mental wellness and psychoeducation regarding gaining effective coping mechanisms to effectively process the ongoing stressors that come with higher education learning should be considered equally necessary and should be reviewed with more scrutiny than in decades past, and more specifically post COVID-19 pandemic.

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APPENDIX A: Liberty University's Institutional Review Board Research Permission

December 1, 2020

Liberty University
Institutional Review Board
1971 University Blvd.
Green Hall 2845
Lynchburg, VA 24515

Dear Institutional Review Board Member:

As a graduate student in the Doctor of Philosophy Program in Graduate School of Education, at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctor of philosophy degree. The title of my research project is A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Mental Health Symptoms and Awareness in the College Student Population and the purpose of my research is to understand the experiences of students with mental health issues entering the higher education setting and the perception of the therapeutic support offered at the institution, along with the perceived influence of transitioning into the higher education system.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at [REDACTED]

Participants will be asked to meet with the researcher virtually in order answer the ten basic researcher questions related to their experiences while enrolled at Liberty University. Liberty University staff will also be asked to answer seven questions within a virtual focus group, in order to better understand the counseling services offered at the institution. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please respond by email to [REDACTED]. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Hare, M.A.
Ph.D Higher Education Administration/Educational Leadership Candidate

APPENDIX B: Liberty University's Institutional Review Board Approval**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 14, 2021

Stephanie Hare
Lucinda Spaulding, Alexandra Barnett

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-761 A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF MENTAL HEALTH SYMPTOMS AND AWARENESS IN THE COLLEGE STUDENT POPULATION

Dear Stephanie Hare, Lucinda Spaulding, Alexandra Barnett:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:

101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX C: Recruitment Email

Research Participants Needed

Transition to College and Mental Health Study

- Are you a first-time Sophomore and full-time student?
- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Have you experienced any distress while enrolled in college?
- Do you believe the supports offered at your institution are adequate to address any distress you have experienced during your transition to college?

If you answered **yes** to any of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in this research study.

The purpose of this research study is to discuss with sophomore students transitioning into the collegiate setting, their perspective on the availability, accessibility, and effectiveness of mental health resources offered at [REDACTED]. Participants will be asked to speak with the research and answer a few questions related to this topic. Participants will also receive a \$20 gift card for their time and efforts.

The study is being conducted virtually, in order to provide a secure, safe, and confidential environment!

Stephanie Hare, a doctoral candidate in the [Doctoral Academic Department/School of Education] at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Please contact Stephanie Hare at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] for more information.

Appendix C: Follow-up E-mail

September 27, 2020

Liberty University
Institutional Review Board
1971 University Blvd.
Green Hall 2845
Lynchburg, VA 24515

Dear Student:

As a graduate student in the Doctor of Philosophy program in Graduate School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. Last week, an email was sent to you inviting you to participate in a research study. This follow-up email is being sent to remind you to respond directly to this email if you would like to participate. The deadline to confirm your participation is January 30th, 2021.

If you choose to participate in this research study, you will be asked to answer ten questions regarding your transition experience at [REDACTED] and your mental wellness surrounding this major transition. It should take approximately one hour for you to complete this virtual interview with the researcher. Your responses to interview questions will be anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be required. You may also opt out of the interview and study at any time.

To participate, contact me at [REDACTED] to schedule your interview.

A consent document will be given to you at the time of the interview. The informed consent document contains additional information about my research, please sign the informed consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

If you choose to participate, you will receive a \$20 gift card for your time and efforts related to this research.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Hare, M.A.
Ph.D Higher Education Administration/Educational Leadership Candidate

APPENDIX D: Interview Protocol**Interview Questions**

1. What has brought you to participate in this study today?
2. What factors played into you choosing [REDACTED] as your institution of choice, when you transitioned into a higher education setting?
3. What symptoms, if any, did you experience when you first transitioned and attended [REDACTED]?
4. Provide an example of a day where you felt overwhelmed by the continued stressors in which you are attempting to juggle a school, work, and life balance?
5. Were social supports found helpful when attempting to maintain a certain level of functioning in order to remain enrolled at [REDACTED]?
6. Were you made aware of mental health services being available at your current institution?
7. Did you utilize any services available at your institution (i.e. mental health counseling)?
8. Were there other services offered outside of the counseling center? For example, religious organizations or religious groups found on campus?
9. Did you feel stigmatized or judged by others when attempting to engage or utilize these services at your institution?
10. What services would you find most helpful, if any, for students transitioning into a collegiate setting?
11. If you were unable to successfully receive resources while enrolled at your college institution, was the counseling center at your institution able to provide you with community resources?

APPENDIX E: Artifact Protocol

Artifact/Collage Questions

1. What objects, if any, did you find helpful or supportive to you throughout your transition into your freshman year of college?
2. Can you gather material objects (i.e. mental health resources, faculty comments or business cards, books, stuffed animals, letters from support system, etc.) and organize them into a collage?
3. When you have gathered all objects, please take a picture of each object and create a free collage via befunky.com. Please use this link to access the upload section of the collage maker [<https://www.befunky.com/features/collage-maker/>].
4. Please save the collage as a PDF document and upload it to the secure google documents link provided.

APPENDIX F: Letter to Self Protocol

Letter to Self Questions

Please discuss these areas of concern within your letter to self.

- 1.) What was your initial perception of the transition from high school to [REDACTED] [REDACTED] collegiate setting?
- 2.) Did you feel accepted and connected to the University upon being admitted and on-campus?
- 3.) How did you wish you handled situations in which you felt overwhelmed, anxious, depressed, or isolated from peers?
- 4.) What support systems helped get you through your freshman year transition?
- 5.) What supports did you wish you had while transitioning in your freshman year?
- 6.) What were your major take away moments now that you have successfully transitioned into your sophomore year of college?

Appendix G: Consent Form

DISCLAIMER:

To all students completing this study, this research is focused on the mental health and wellness of each participant. While each participant may have varied views or experiences regarding mental health and wellness, it is important to note if any student is struggling in these areas in particular there are services to assist you. Prior to the interview, the researcher will provide a hand-out of local resources in the area free to students. In addition, students can contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) -800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746 for immediate assistance.

This assent form is utilized to inform all participants the intentions of the researcher to request information involving students lived experiences including areas of mental health and wellness, while transitioning into the collegiate institution. The participants will willingly consent to providing insight into their beliefs of how the institution has helped or hindered their process and will provide details of what support systems have aided them throughout their transition period into the college setting.

Each participant has the right to discontinue of the study at any time with no penalty. This study is completely optional to complete and the financial incentives will not be forfeited if the student decides to discontinue the study at any time.

If you are willing to complete the study please fill out this section below:

Initials of Student

Program

Year in Program

Student's Name (printed)

Student's Signature

Date

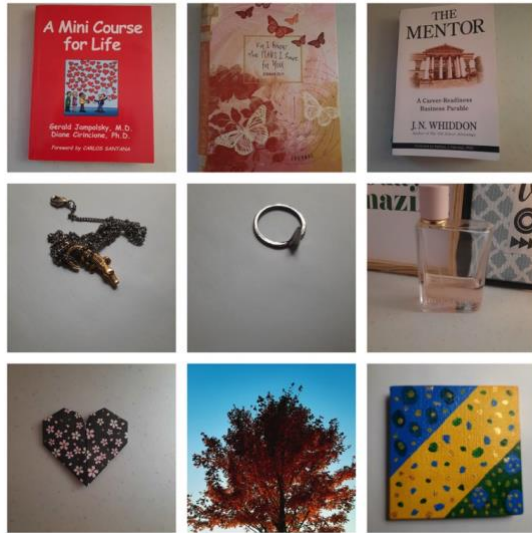
Appendix H: Available Mental Health Resources

If you need additional assistance please utilize these available resources free of charge.

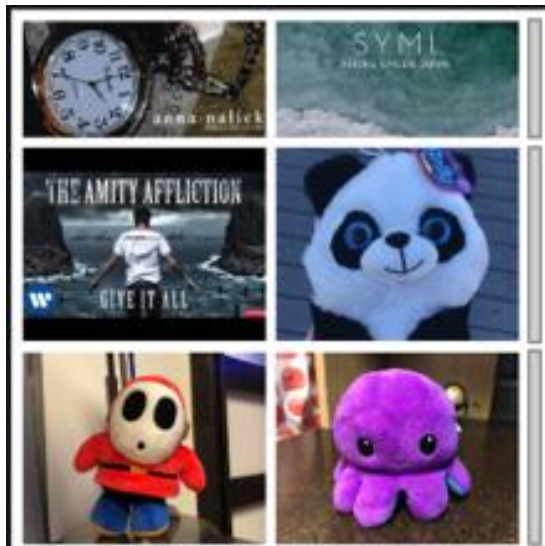
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline	1-800-273-TALK (8255) or Live Chat Online at https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/
Crisis Text Line	Text "HELLO" to 741741
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration National Helpline	1-800-662-HELP (4357)
[REDACTED] Emergency Line	[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Counseling Office	[REDACTED]

Appendix I: Student Participant Collages

Caimile- Participant 1 Collage



Natalie- Participant 10 Collage



Appendix I: Student Participant Collages

Declan- Participant 13 Collage

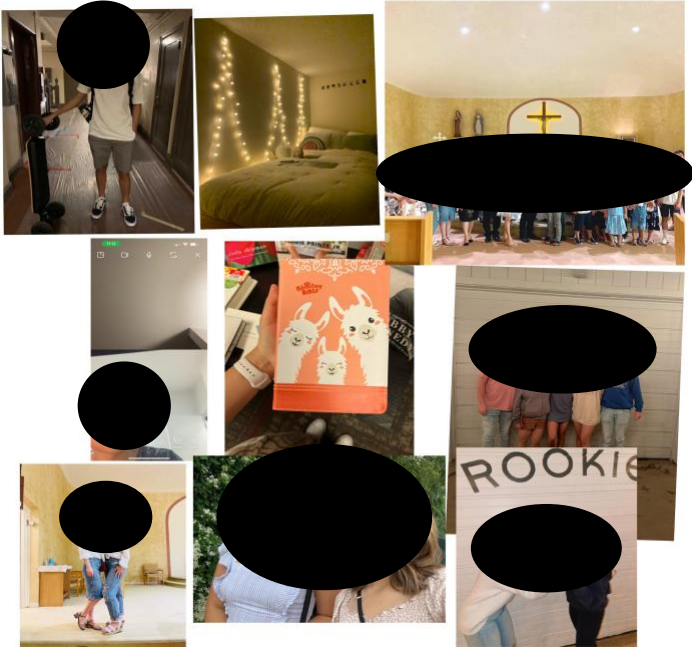


Amanda- Participant 14 Collage

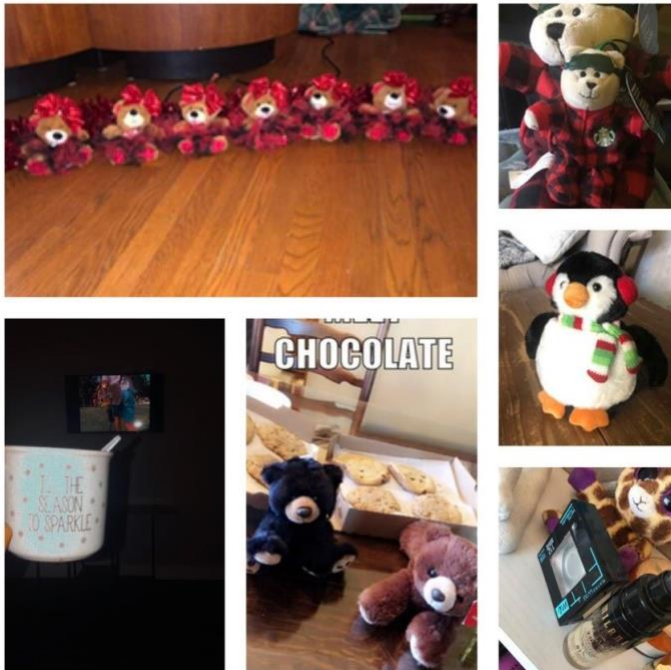


Appendix I: Student Participant Collages

Jia- Participant 17 Collage



Patricia- Participant 19 Collage



Appendix J: Student Participant Artifact Table of Content

Participant Pseudonym	Artifact Themes
Caimilie	1.) Books 2.) Jewelry 3.) Perfume 4.) Artwork
Natalie	1.) Music 2.) Plush Animals
Declan	1.) Religious book 2.) Picture of loved one 3.) Plush animal
Amanda	1.) Sign language 2.) Crocheting 3.) Music 4.) Church/prayer 5.) Television 6.) Artwork
Jia	1.) Pictures of loved ones 2.) Room 3.) Artwork 4.) Mission trips
Patricia	1.) Plush animals 2.) Coffee mug

Appendix K: Examples of Letter to Self

Caimile

Dear [REDACTED] I am very proud of you for how you have handled your first year of college, you went through many ups and downs, and yet you are still here. I am glad that even in the darkest moments that you were able to find your way through the results that were provided to you. Your transition from high school to college was definitely strange because of the coronavirus, but I think you handled it well because you found the results that could help you succeed in school. That is one vow that you have not broken since you set, and I am proud of you for that. After being admitted into the university, you felt very welcomed and you quickly found your community within the International Student Center. You also found your community within the School of Business by being active in class and making new friends, of which some of them have become your best friends. I did wish that you handled your dark moments better by telling people and not just dealing with them by yourself. I wished you truly knew how many good people there were around you during your darkest times. And communicated that you were struggling, eventually, you did, when it was almost too late, but you were able to be helped, even at such a late time. I am glad you reached out to the Counseling Center at school to help and also reached out to the Clinic, the dietitian, and a financial coach to help you with the different aspects that you were learning to operate in your newfound adult life. All the supports you needed were available at your fingertips, and there was nothing that you lacked. One key major tip from freshman year is to ALWAYS ASK FOR HELP!!! Overall, the events of freshman year have already happened, I cannot change some memories, but I can hold onto the happy ones, and learn from the difficult ones.

Candace

APPENDIX F: Letter to Self Protocol

Letter to Self Questions

Please discuss these areas of concern within your letter to self.

- 1.) What was your initial perception of the transition from high school to Liberty Universities collegiate setting?
 - a.
- 2.) Did you feel accepted and connected to the University upon being admitted and on-campus?
 - a. yes accepted, no connected. imposter syndrome too
- 3.) How did you wish you handled situations in which you felt overwhelmed, anxious, depressed, or isolated from peers?
 - a. procrastinating and playing video games is NOT going to help! it's going to make everything so much worse!
- 4.) What support systems helped get you through your freshman year transition?
 - a. community group. lean into Margo a little more; she actually wants to help you
- 5.) What supports did you wish you had while transitioning in your freshman year?
 - a. CSER guidance! having a mentor would have been fantastic!
- 6.) What were your major take away moments now that you have successfully transitioned into your sophomore year of college?
 - a. *claps* GET HELP. Nobody said you have to handle it alone.

Dear [REDACTED]

I'm you from the future. No, everything is NOT going to sort itself out. You have to put some effort into it, and I'd appreciate it if you got started a little earlier than I did... will.

It's going to be hard to be so far away from home, especially when all your friends get to go home for minor holidays and you only get Christmas and summer break. Call mom and dad more often.

Natalie

Dear [REDACTED]

This is 19 going on 20-year-old you as a sophomore in college. I think if I met you, I'd wanna slap you and shake you over your stupidity and naivety. But I guess it's whatever, you need to learn on your own. I'm not gonna talk about how all of your drama ends, otherwise, I'd ruin some things for you. Instead, I'm going to warn you about what is going to happen in your first year of college. Marching band is going to feel like torture for you. Oh don't get me wrong, you're gonna be happy that you improved your marching skills and that you now know how to march a show, but other than that you're going to hate it. You're going to let yourself go because you start suffering from fatigue. Even though sixteen credits is typically a decent amount of credits for a semester, it is going to feel worse than it should because it's eight classes with a lot of homework. Except for that one guy, you're not going to have a social life and he's the only person you really talk to besides your RAs and RD. You may think at first that I'm wrong because you keep trying to talk to people and it seems like it's working, but then you're gonna start getting tired and then you give up. I won't tell you how and why you met your RD, that's something you have to find out on your own. One major difference between high school versus college that I will warn you about is that you will have to learn to check for homework on your own because professors probably won't tell you about it. I'm sorry that I'm telling you all this so straightforward, but it's the unfortunate truth.

I regret isolating myself from people during that time. As much as I needed it in order to grow as a person and to process everything, I could've used a little more company. It's a bad habit that we haven't grown out of yet. Yes, I'm sorry to tell you that I still struggle with having a social life. I tried a little harder this year, but my schoolwork won't allow me to, although I will admit that I accidentally got myself into double CSER this fall semester, so maybe I could've done better this year if I just had one instead. Even though I probably made you anxious about what it is I'm talking about that's going to happen in your future, I will tell you that the very small circle of people you do during the fall semester will be very supportive and helpful to you, except for that one guy. He's going to get you in some trouble. Don't worry, you won't be stuck in that forever. You'll eventually have the courage to walk away. That's partly why I regret isolating myself from people our freshman year because if I hadn't, I could've avoided that mess with him so I could just have only healthy relationships.

Oh and also, you won't have your therapist for a couple of months because insurance told her that she can't talk to anyone out of state. Don't bother going to the school counseling services because they're going to tell you that they only do short-term counseling and that you need to go somewhere else. I know, I wish they did long-term too. Quite disappointing to be honest.

I'm going to end this note on some positives because that would be cruel for your future self to just scare you with your upcoming troubles and not give you any advice or solutions. You're not going to suffer from fatigue forever. It will go away eventually, and then you'll start to slowly be

able to pick yourself back up. You're going to need help with that, as I think we both know we're not the best at disciplining ourselves. I will say that your entire freshman year is going to suck, but your spring semester will definitely be better than your fall semester. Less drama, but still pretty busy and keeping to yourself once again. My advice is to fix the relationships that you will lose as a result of your boyfriend and your impending chaos, let people in your life and cherish them, and cherish your stuffed animals. I know this sounds silly, but their cuteness is really therapeutic. It was really helpful to me to just squeeze the panda and the octopus legs; it comforted me and could even calm down my anxiety too. I can't give you much more details, but just know that you're going to end your freshman year as a different, more mature person and a stronger woman. You just need to take a deep breath, take things one step at a time, and remind yourself that nothing lasts forever. God's not done with you yet, He's going to change you for the better. He's still working on me too, and I can't wait to see how my future's going to look. Good luck me, you can do it. Please don't drop out, the pain won't last forever!

Sincerely,
Future you

Declan

Letter to Myself

Dear [REDACTED]

Do remember what it was like 2 years ago when you imagined that college would be so much different than high school? I remember very well. I'm glad you're not disappointed that it's not totally what you expected. The Lord does a lot in situations we don't expect and understand. I was never really concerned with being accepted when I joined, just with succeeding in school. I certainly felt connected to the University when I arrived; the classes were to my liking and I was succeeding in them very well. To this day I still feel very connected to the University and would never want to leave.

I know I'm not great at handling the stress of my life. The military adds a lot to my plate that's already very full with a biomedical science degree. I wish I was able to relax more often and take a breather and appreciate the rest God gives to His children. However, I end up burying myself into my work in an attempt to finish what I can and lighten the load I have on myself. The RA's did a lot to help me my freshman year, as did my church. I wish I could have had my pastor from back home to guide me, but I believe the support I received was sufficient.

My major takeaway would be to appreciate to the fullest what God has given you while you have it. I have worked myself very hard to be successful and to accomplish the plan God has for me, and in the midst of that work I failed to appreciate the rest that God offers to His children. I would never want to take for granted the gifts that God has graciously given.

Amanda

Dear [REDACTED]

I hope you are doing well. Going from high school to college wasn't what you expected. Initially, I thought that it would be a pretty clean transition: finish in 4 years, get research experience, then go to medical school. But, I was wrong. Our transition has been filled with tears, worry, self-doubt, and so many other feelings. However, that is not all of the journey.

Although I didn't want to come originally, Liberty has been a blessing. I have met close friends who I will be close to for a lifetime. Although I was going through a lot mentally, they were there to support me and reassure me of my value and potential. It was through them that I was able to view my situation through a different lens: it's okay if you spend 5 years in college!

Some major takeaways from freshman year are to not focus on working. Yes, working lets me make some extra side money, but it's not worth it. I also encourage you to take advantage of mentorship programs LU offers. I know counseling is not really your preference ([work on swallowing that pill](#)), but at least take baby steps on getting mature advice.

In terms of handling stress, start with easy assignments and work your way up. If you feel overwhelmed try and read your Bible about God's promises about your future. Remember, that one way or another, you will become a doctor who is fluent in ASL. Have faith ;)

Respectfully,

[REDACTED]

Jia

APPENDIX F: Letter to Self Protocol

Letter to Self Questions_Participant #17

Please discuss these areas of concern within your letter to self.

- 1.) What was your initial perception of the transition from high school to Liberty

Universities collegiate setting?

My first perception of the transition from high school to Liberty University collegiate setting was harsh. I have been taking college classes throughout my high school career.

But this is worse than I expected.

- 2.) Did you feel accepted and connected to the University upon being admitted and on-campus?

Luckily, I did feel accepted and connected to Liberty University when I first came in. I felt love from the students and professors.

- 3.) How did you wish you handled situations in which you felt overwhelmed, anxious, depressed, or isolated from peers?

I wish that I could handle the situation much better. I know that I will experience anxiety, depression, stress, and more. But I did not expect I would be this bad, probably because I have so much on my plate.

- 4.) What support systems helped get you through your freshman year transition?

God has helped me a lot these days. At the end of the day, I just want to give it all to him but sometimes, I have a thought that I might be able to do it by myself. I know that I am wrong so that is why I am still working on it.

5.) What support did you wish you had while transitioning in your freshman year?

I would say I need to start supporting myself. Sometimes, I know everyone around me supports me but I keep putting myself down. That is also the reason why I am miserable.

6.) What were your major take away moments now that you have successfully transitioned into your sophomore year of college?

I know what is going on in college now. I am trying to manage my time well with my classes schedule. Time management is the key for sophomore year. I need to get out of all the toxic relationships and keep myself healthy for the most part.

Patricia

APPENDIX F: Letter to Self Protocol

Letter to Self Questions

Please discuss these areas of concern within your letter to self.

- 1.) What was your initial perception of the transition from high school to Liberty Universities collegiate setting? *I thought that it would be very welcoming and I would make a lot of friends*
- 2.) Did you feel accepted and connected to the University upon being admitted and on-campus? *Yes but only because of COVID there were a lot of huge groupchats for incoming freshman who were bored because they were on lockdown. Through this I met some of my best friends.*
- 3.) How did you wish you handled situations in which you felt overwhelmed, anxious, depressed, or isolated from peers? *To not take it so personally because everyone and everything is changing so I should give grace to myself and others*
- 4.) What support systems helped get you through your freshman year transition? *Great friends and supportive professors.*
- 5.) What supports did you wish you had while transitioning in your freshman year? *More hall or community events when I lived on campus, but due to covid it was almost a crime to try to reach out to people that were other than your roommate without a mask*
- 6.) What were your major take away moments now that you have successfully transitioned into your sophomore year of college? *That people come and go and that classes and stress*

on and off campus are temporary and it is more important to make sure your mental and physical health is good.

Appendix L: Researcher's Personal Journal Excerpt Reflections

Participant Pseudonym	Researcher's Personal Reflections
Caimile	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A student coming for a different country has enough stress when transitioning into a completely new setting, let alone concentrating on school obligations. 2. Would having participated in their athletic sport have been a more grounding experience and added more support systems in place or caused greater stress? 3. Was there a stigma attached to receiving mental health counseling services and attending a hospital for assistance based on her cultural and family values?
Dominic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This student encountered a tremendous amount of loss in losing her father when attempting to attend college. This would have thrown back my ability to succeed my first year as well! 2. The student did not want to go into detail about this loss but I wonder if she really received the amount and type of support that would have benefitted from in the grief and loss process?
Leighton	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This student appears energetic and willing to participate but also appears to be concerned about how she identifies in terms of sexuality. Is this something masked because of her choice to attend a religious university?
Savannah	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This student definitely reported concerns for stigma and judgment when attempting to seek counseling services, even when they have experience seeking assistance before. Did her past experiences impact her willingness to try to receive additional supports in her new school setting?
Candace	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Did the participant's over-commitment to completing a large amount of coursework her first year send her into a state of duress? 2. If it weren't for her family's involvement in seeking out services offered throughout the institution through the freshman Facebook group, would the student have ever made efforts to reach out for assistance independently?
Natalie	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The participant had to connect with their original therapist in their home town due to only having short-term services available on campus? Is this is big deterrent for other students attempting to seek mental health services on college campuses?
Declan	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. While this student originally came off as anti-mental health they seemed to have benefitted from utilizing all of the services the university offers including counseling services.

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. This participant mentioned the “stigma” of men seeking mental health services, was this a primary reason as to why the student stated they didn’t believe mental health services benefitted him initially? 3. Being the only male to participate in the study, did this impact how the other female students participated in the focus group once this student became more vocal throughout the discussion?
Amanda	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This student mentioned the medical field being cut throat about professionals seeking mental health services, did this delay the time it took the client to reach out for support due to fear of being judged and stigmatized? 2. I felt really proud of the student for admitting to reducing their work load in order to be the best functioning student possible instead of persisting through an impossible coursework load and becoming so overwhelmed they needed immediate and crisis intervention services! She listened to her body and mind and that is impressive!
Jia	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This student also discussed real difficulties when conquering a pre-medicine course load, on top of being involved in extra-curricular activities and having a looming sense of stress around the need to succeed in her future profession? Are there cultural considerations that also impacted this student’s ability to gain professional mental health supports or even discuss her distressful moments of crying with her peers?
Patricia	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It is impressive this student is pursuing the field of psychology not only for her passion, but to assist her family. 2. The example provided of this student attempting to gain assistance from college staff due to another student reporting concerns and thoughts of suicide was extremely concerning and saddening to hear that so many individuals needed to reach to get this student the assistance they needed.

Appendix M: List of Codebook Themes

