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The Role of Occupational Therapy in Meeting Mental Health Needs of College Students in the South Dakota Regental University System

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BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

There are significant barriers to success in college for students with disabilities, many of whom have mental health challenges. There is a strong correlation between disability status and mental health symptoms associated with poor academic performance (Flemming et al., 2018; Jefferies & Salzer, 2022). Occupational therapists can be helpful in providing needed services for people with disabilities and mental health conditions (Adamou et al., 2021; Gutman et al., 2020). Currently available interventions are offered by disability services, TRIO, and student counseling programs. However, these providers are overwhelmed by the heightened demand for services on college campuses (Lipson et al., 2019; Venville et al., 2016). Occupational therapy (OT) can help alleviate that pressure for services. The purpose of this study was to investigate: 1) the extent of mental health service usage by students in the SDBOR system; 2) how service providers deliver services to students in the SDBOR system to meet their mental health needs. Through this investigation, we can explore how occupational therapy can bridge gaps in service accessibility for college students.

METHODS

Research Design: Mixed methods with a cross-sectional survey and grounded theory designs.

Participants: Students (18+) and service providers in the South Dakota Board of Regents (SDBOR) universities; sixty-eight students and eight service providers participated in the study

Research Instruments: An adapted Mental Health Service Usage and Help Seeking Questionnaire (Healthy Minds Network, 2022) was administered to volunteering students online through Qualtrics. The Questionnaire inquired about mental health service use, diagnosis, and knowledge of resources available on campuses.

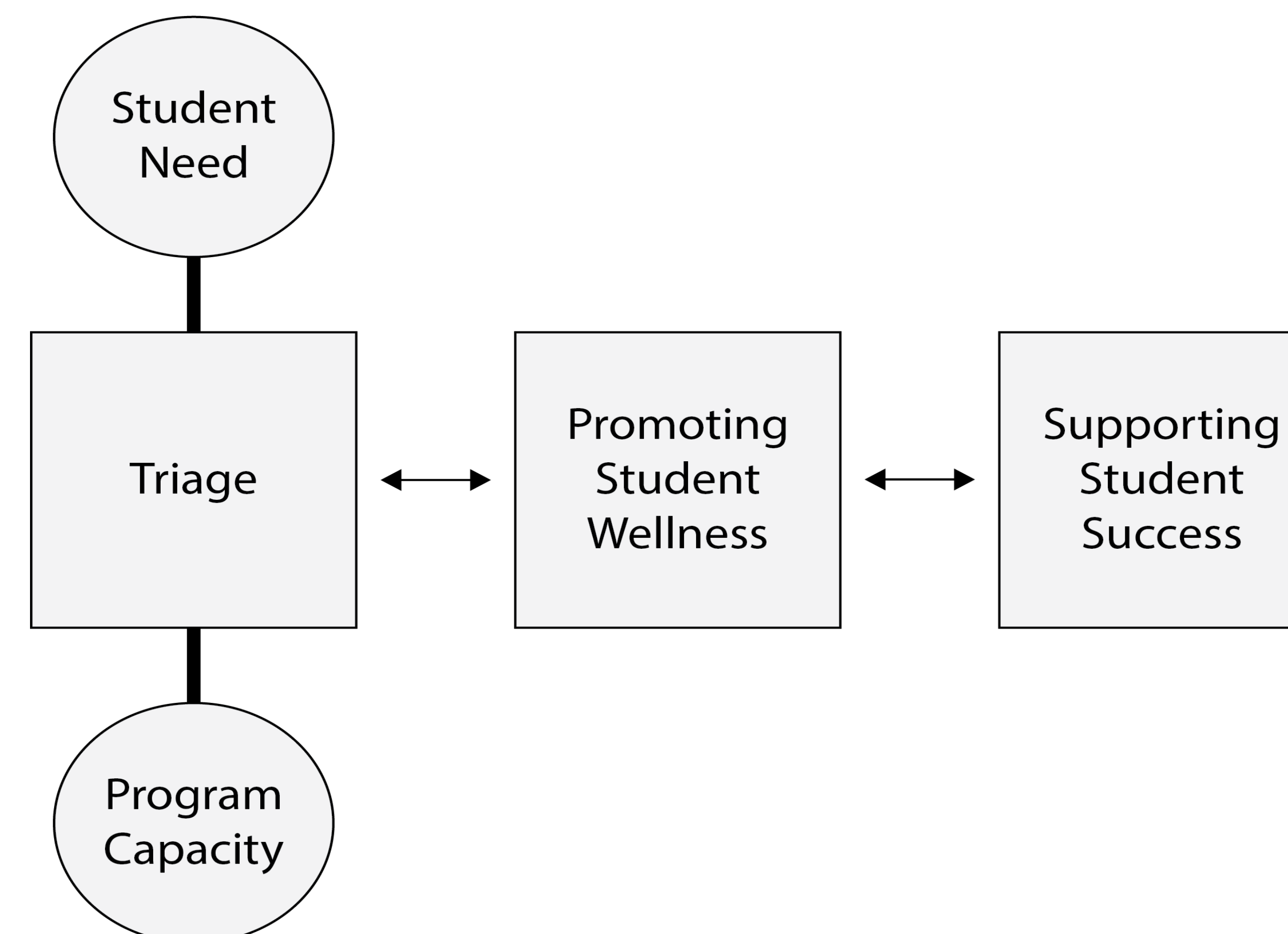
Interview Guide: Students and service providers who volunteered for the qualitative phase of the study were interviewed individually over Zoom about their perception of how services were delivered to students. Each interview, which was guided by open-ended questions in the interview guide, was about 60 minutes long. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis: Qualitative data were analyzed using grounded-theory procedures: open coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS for Windows version 29.0 (IBM Corporation, 2022). We conducted Chi-square goodness of fit, Kolmogorov Smirnov, and one-sample t-tests.

RESULTS

Sixty-eight students and eight service providers volunteered for the study. Sixteen data records were incomplete and therefore removed from the sample. Therefore, the sample size was N=60. Results indicated that 76.67% of the student participants were not registered with the Office of disability services, 48.33% did not believe they were eligible for additional services, and 65% had utilized mental health services at some point. Further, 47% of the student participants did not have a known mental health diagnosis. Perceived stigma against receiving mental health services was significantly higher than hypothesized, $t(59)=18.78, p<.001$, Cohen's $d=2.93$ (a large effect). The perceived need for mental health services was significantly lower than hypothesized, $t(59)=-.176, p<.001$, Cohen's $d=2.93$ (a large effect). Most participants (76.67%) utilized formal and informal mental health supports in the previous year, though many (88.33%) did not utilize self-help therapy services, and more than half (56.67%) reported experiencing barriers to service utilization. Qualitative data revealed three concepts that explained the process of service delivery to students: *Triage*, *Supporting Student Success*, and *Promoting Student Well Being*

Figure 1.
Service Delivery Process



As seen in Figure 1, the service delivery process began with triage, which is a process of comparing student needs against program capacity and campus resources. Once this is understood, services to promote student wellness are provided, if needed. Upon achieving wellness or initiating services to promote wellness, support can be provided to facilitate the student's academic success. This process is often ongoing and dynamic. Needs are regularly evaluated on an individual and campus level and evaluation is embedded within each component of the model.

IMPLICATIONS

This study provides insight into student mental health service utilization and how services are delivered in the SDBOR University system. While most students did not utilize disability services nor did they report a diagnosed mental illness, many reported past or present utilization of mental health services. Additionally, scores indicated that students perceive a need for mental health services. Students did not utilize self-help strategies, further indicating a need for mental health service providers. Lastly, students reported utilizing a variety of formal and informal mental health supports despite experiencing barriers to service utilization. Occupational therapists can assist in the expansion of mental health and disability services in this setting and facilitate training opportunities for faculty and staff pertaining to mental health. More research needs to be conducted to help define the specific role of occupational therapy in this area of practice.

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