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## Identifying potential barriers to mental health of students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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**Identifying potential barriers to mental health of students at the University of Tennessee,  
Knoxville**

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Chancellor's Honors Program

Psychology Honors Concentration

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### **Abstract**

The mental health of college students is a growing area of research, especially following the drastic impacts and experiences that came with the COVID-19 pandemic. This research seeks to identify potential barriers to the mental health of students, specifically at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. An online survey was offered to students at this institution and allowed students to self-report on their experience at the university and how it has affected their mental health. The survey included questions on academic experience, knowledge of campus resources, personal identity, and other factors to assess student mental health and hear about the participants' unique student experiences. The results identified potential barriers such as a need for greater academic support, a lack of knowledge of certain mental health resources, and a potential lack of representation of students in underrepresented communities. This research has important implications and suggests ways in which this institution can increase academic support and create more accessible resources for students, while recognizing that more research is needed on the mental health of underrepresented students at this institution. Based on these results, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville has the opportunity to improve the mental health of students by offering mental health training to academic advisors, creating a digital mental health app for campus resources, and increase overall advertisement of mental health resources.

*Keywords:* Mental health, college students, barriers

## **Identifying potential barriers to mental health of students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

College is a time to learn about independence, engage in academic and extracurricular enrichment, and come into contact with a larger community on campus. However, with all of these factors come a number of transitions and challenges that students must face and overcome. Because of this, a growing area of research is showing that college students are a “vulnerable” population to mental health struggles during their time attending their respective universities (Son et al., 2020). Adding to the growing area of research regarding student mental health, the COVID-19 pandemic has called attention to mental health through a different lens, as many students were facing isolation and worries surrounding this worldwide emergency during a critical time in their identity and personal development (Son et al., 2020). Research on college student mental health is rapidly growing, as campuses are becoming more aware of student needs and more in tune with the evolving needs of students following the COVID-19 pandemic (Son et al., 2020).

Narrowing down the broad topic of mental health for the purpose of this article, this literature review will focus on four areas of current research: college student identities, access to campus resources, the academic experience, and severe mental health issues such as suicidal ideation or self-harm. First, a discussion of college student identities lends itself to a few different avenues. The first avenue to explore is that of minority racial and ethnic identities on college campuses. Prior research has shown that students from “underrepresented” communities may have a more difficult time transitioning to college and may face unique challenges as they begin their college career (Kook et al., 2023). Specifically, students from underrepresented

populations may see more “depressive symptoms” towards the beginning of their college experience, coupled with greater stigma surrounding the utilization of mental health resources (Kook et al., 2023). Not only are students in underrepresented populations facing stigma regarding pursuing mental health resources, they also may be facing additional generalized experiences related to stigma and discrimination in their daily lives that may lead to more negative mental health outcomes (Billingsley & Hurd, 2018). This unideal combination of factors and campus experiences are currently limiting the mental health care that these underrepresented populations of college students are receiving.

The second avenue of consideration regarding college student identity would be that of sexual and gender minorities. For the purpose of this project, sexual and gender minorities will refer to the LGBTQIA+ population. It is important to note that sexual and gender minorities are not the same and are to be distinguished as separate descriptors; however, for the purpose of this literature review, they will be discussed at the same time, as the previous research that will be addressed discussed their findings as pertaining to members of both sexual and gender minority communities. Prior literature on the mental health of sexual and gender minorities on college campuses calls attention to the possibility of “higher levels of psychological distress” of these individuals, as well as a general increase in the number of barriers that were faced by students identifying as sexual and gender minorities when attempting to seek out mental health resources on campus (Conner et al., 2023). Some of the barriers to obtaining mental health resources that were reported included a general mindset that the resources would not be beneficial, embarrassment, monetary concerns, and utilizing resources that were not on campus (Conner et al., 2023). These findings call attention to the importance of connecting with the campus community for sexual and gender minorities and how increased campus outreach could have a

positive impact on the mental health of these students (Conner et al., 2023). Overall, as the United States enters into a post-pandemic era, it is necessary to consider the already prevalent “identity distress” that may have resulted in young adults during and following the COVID-19 pandemic as college campuses look to connect with different communities, provide greater mental health support, and ultimately lessen the burden of identity-related mental health struggles for all communities of college students (Samuolis, 2023). It is important to acknowledge the social isolation and uncertainty that the pandemic brought and to consider the impact this time had on students that may have already been struggling with their identity.

In addition to college student identity, another important area of research in college student mental health is access to and knowledge of campus resources. General research on utilizing campus resources points to an increase in utilization within the last two decades, but as the increase in utilizing campus resources has increased, so have patterns of more severe mental health problems (Lipson et al., 2019). College students also may not understand what constitutes a significant mental health problem. For example, they may dismiss or downplay severe mental health issues, assuming that it is just a part of being in college (Lattie et al., 2019). Based on interview surveys at a large public university in the U.S., Son et al. discovered that some college students have a hard time trusting mental health counseling resources on campus because of fears of stigmatization relating to talking about their mental health concerns on campus or through campus resources (2020).

For the students that do choose to utilize campus mental health resources, the increasing mental health concerns on college campuses have also led to difficulties in meeting the growing mental health needs of student populations and ultimately to difficulties in student access to campus mental health resources for those that do choose to utilize these resources (Lattie et al.,

2019). Many campus counseling centers are recognizing the growing mental health challenges for students and unfortunately, it can be difficult to find the funding or hire the number of counselors to support this growing demand (Abrams, 2022). Students are struggling with a variety of serious mental health concerns, including managing the personal and community effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, dealing with the heightened economy, coming face to face with instances of “mass violence”, and seeing the direct impacts of “social injustice”, all while dealing with the everyday demands of being college students (Abrams, 2022). The weight of these mental health needs lead students to seek out campus services, in which there are struggles to accommodate these growing campus population needs.

The third area of research that pertains to college student mental health is the academic experience. The academic experience of college students has shifted vastly within the past five years as higher education institutions first had to adjust to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and are now entering into a post-pandemic world that has seen several changes. Bruffaerts et al.’s work suggests that college academics are already demanding, but if they are coupled with issues relating to mental health, “academic functioning” can be negatively impacted (2017). Negative mental health experiences that affect academic performance and success can potentially lead to greater negative impacts, such as becoming discouraged and dropping out of the university altogether. This concern is especially important when considering college freshmen, as they are already going through a major life transition in entering college and the world of academia. Bruffaerts et al. calls attention to the reality that some college freshmen already face mental health struggles before coming to campus, so it is critical that they be supported during this transition (2017). Positive mental health interventions, such as lessons on managing stress and setting goals can help students who are carrying heavy academic loads, suggesting that the

connection between academics and mental health in college students is an important consideration (Abrams, 2022).

One of the most serious and concerning mental health concerns on college campuses is suicide risk and suicidal ideation. Liu et al.'s work points out that rates of suicidal ideation, self-harm, and attempted suicide are relatively high at this point in time and that general college, and identity-related stressors are affecting these high rates (2018). Liu, et al., draws attention to two harrowing statistics: their research found that, amongst their undergraduate study sample, 24% of participants reported suicidal ideation, and around 9% of participants reported attempting suicide (2018). The sample used in this study came from over 100 colleges in the United States and considered the experiences of over 90,000 students, so these statistics are reflective of the general college student experience in the United States. These high rates are extremely concerning and have only been more impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the isolation and uncertainty that it brought (Ross et al., 2023). Students in these situations require immediate intervention from trained individuals, and this cannot be done if campus mental health resources are not able to fully support the growing student populations. Universities are looking to provide more "rapid access and assessment" resources to aid these students quicker and more effectively, but these resources are still works in progress (Abrams, 2022).

For the purpose of this article, this research will be looking at mental health as it relates specifically to the population of students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. With over 36,000 total students currently enrolled at this large, southeastern university, there are always opportunities to assess the systems and attitudes of the university, its departments and offices, and its students to ensure that campus leadership is able to accurately and effectively maximize and enrich the student experience (Fact Book UTK, 2023). With this large, growing student



population comes a need for mental health resources and support on campus, which leads to questions regarding whether or not all students are knowledgeable about and are able to access mental health resources on campus. Finally, it is important to consider that the University of Tennessee, Knoxville is a Predominately White Institution (PWI), with a white faculty and staff population of over 75%. The researchers are interested in whether or not minority students and identities feel represented on campus and if this representation, or potential lack thereof, has any impact on their mental health (Fact Book UTK, 2023).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify potential barriers to the mental health of students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. While the current literature on college student mental health offers a plethora of data and examples of the state of mental health amongst general college students in the United States, there is a lack of information regarding the state of student mental health and perceived barriers at this institution. Each student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville has had a unique experience on campus and journey with their own mental health, so this research hopes to shed light on these experiences and enrich the understanding of student mental health. Based on the literature, it is likely that there will be barriers negatively affecting the mental health of college students at this institution.

### **Methods**

The participants were all undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. They were recruited to complete a both quantitative and qualitative, online survey through the “SONA” database, a Research Experience Program associated with this institution. This program allows students to complete research in exchange for SONA credits as a part of

some undergraduate courses. A survey was used for this research because SONA is an online database, and this was the most accessible and efficient way to reach a large number of students.

During material creation, the researcher met with a number of campus leaders who represent the University of Tennessee, Knoxville to gain expert feedback on how to shape the questions and categories of the online survey and better understand the population of students at this institution. These campus experts include Dr. Chandra Myrick, Assistant Vice Chancellor; Dr. Jill Zambito, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Health and Wellbeing; Dr. Nicole Saylor, director of the Student Counseling Center; Anthony Prewitt, director of Multicultural Student Life; and Bonnie Johnson, director of the Pride Center

The survey was administered online in the SONA database, and students registered in SONA had the opportunity to choose which research they participated in based on a short title and description. SONA was utilized because it is connected to the course work for many classes, and because of the need for SONA credits to complete these courses, students participate in research in this database in large waves. Participants completed the survey online via a mobile device or a computer. The survey was completely anonymous for those participating.

At the beginning of the survey, participants were asked demographic questions to better understand aspects of their personal identity and experiences as a student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Participants were asked about their age, gender identity, racial and ethnic identity, sexual orientation, and academic demographics. Participants were also asked about their military, work, and Greek Life involvement.

Throughout the survey, questions were divided into four main categories, including: academic experiences, knowledge of campus resources, personal identity, and other factors. These categories were identified as areas that may be related to barriers in mental health for

students on college campuses after talking to the different campus leaders and reading through the literature. Throughout the survey, questions were offered in a variety of different formats, including multiple choice, free answer, and matrix-style. At the end of each major section, participants were offered the opportunity to add any additional thoughts they had regarding the section topic in a free-response format. Finally, at the end of the survey there was a question offering participants the opportunity to express any additional thoughts regarding their experience at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

The survey was in the SONA database for just over three weeks. Ultimately, 166 students completed this survey. The survey was closed, and the results were analyzed descriptively to identify potential barriers to student mental health.

## **Results**

### **Participants**

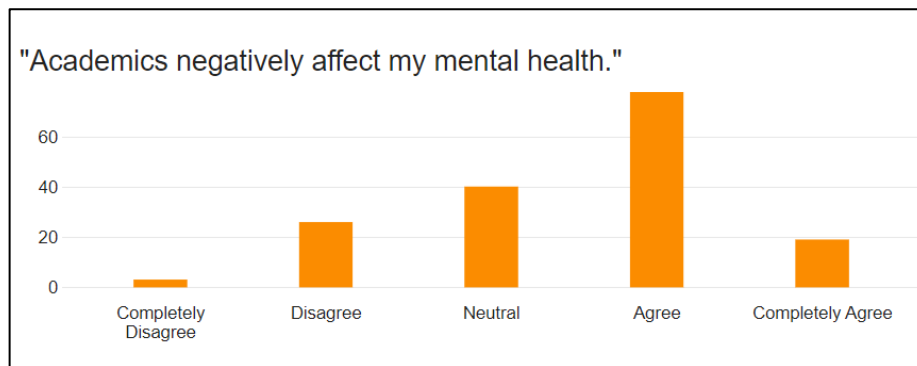
Overall, 166 students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville participated in this survey via the SONA database. Of these participants, 42% were Freshmen, 39% were Sophomores, 11% were Juniors, and 8% were Seniors. Students reported ages ranged from 18 to 37. When asked what gender they identified with, 104 participants reported female, 57 participants reported male, 1 participant reported transgender male, and 4 participants reported non-binary or gender queer. Considering racial breakdowns, a striking 89% of participants identified as White, 7% identified as Asian, 5% identified as Black or African American, and 1% identified as Native American or Pacific Islander. When asked later if they identified with the BIPOC community (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), 9% of participants reported yes. Only 7% of participants identified as Hispanic or Latino. Finally, 87% of participants identified as

heterosexual or straight, 1% identified as lesbian, 0% identified as gay, 10% identified as bisexual, and 2% identified as “Other”. When asked later in the survey whether or not they identified with the LGBTQIA+ community, 13% of participants responded yes.

68% of participants were in-state students, while 32% reported that they were out-of-state students. Only one student reported that they were in the ROTC/military, and 11% of participants self-reported that they were a military veteran. Exactly 50% of participants reported having a job, with 50% reporting that they do not, so this demographic was not utilized in cross-sectional analysis with other factors. 32% of participants reported that they were a part of Greek Life on campus, with the majority of these students being involved in Panhellenic Council.

### **Academic Experience**

The section gathering demographic information found that participants had a variety of different majors, minors, and concentrations that were spread across a number of different disciplines. 11% of participants were in an honors program, and students spent differing amounts of hours in class and homework each week. Finally, all participants reported that they have in-person classes this semester, with 58% of participants having at least one online class. When asked which they prefer, 84% of participants preferred in-person classes. The first statistic of note regarding academic experience produced positive results, with 61% of participants feeling that their overall experience with professor support for mental health has been good or extremely good. These trends were seen in the question addressing major/minor/concentration specific classes, as well as classes that fell outside of these restrictions. However, when asked how much they agree with the statement “Academics negatively affect my mental health”, 58% of participants agreed or completely agreed. This data is shown in the graph below.



*Figure 1: Effect of Academics on Mental Health*

When asked the same statement regarding academics positively affecting mental health, the levels of agreement were spread across all responses. When asked about general support from different individuals relating to academics and other life factors, there were not additional results to note.

After completing the multiple choice and matrix questions, participants were asked if there were any written comments they would like to include, and there were a staggering number of responses. After reviewing all of these comments, there was undoubtedly a theme of frustration with the lack of availability of academic advisors and with the difficulty in getting responses back from this campus resources. In addition to concerns about academic advisors, there were multiple responses that called for more “check-ins” with their mental health and hopes for more accessible mental health and academic support. These are interesting trends because, when asked about felt support from academic advisors, only 14% of participants disagreed. Perhaps support and mental health considerations are perceived differently amongst participants. Finally, participants reported that they would like to know more about campus resources available to them regarding academic support.

**Knowledge of Campus Resources**

The next section of the survey pertains to student knowledge of campus resources that are offered to them to support their overall wellbeing. There were a few positive statistics to discuss. First, 94% of respondents have heard of the Student Counseling Center, and the exact same statistic can be said of the Student Health Center. The data also supports that students are aware of what these two resources can do. Additionally, out of the 34 students that reported that they have had an experience with the Student Counseling Center, 59% said that it was a satisfactory experience. The Center for Health Education and Wellness, Title IX Office, Dean of Students, Big Orange Pantry, Smokey's Closet, and Resident Assistants all had the majority of responses from participants saying that they had heard of these campus resources.

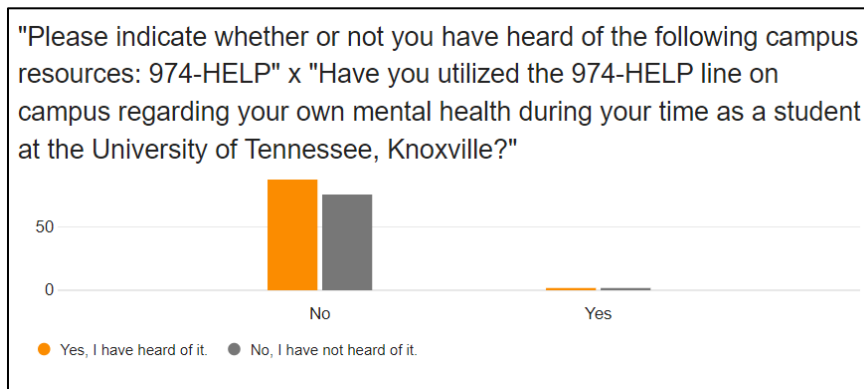
While these results are positive, there were several negative results that stand out. First, when asked if students were aware of any campus resources that can support their mental health, 18% of participants reported that they were not. For the next few questions, participants were asked about their awareness of different campus resources. First, 44% of students reported that they had not heard of the PRIDE Center, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville's support center for LGBTQIA+ members of campus, and 60% of participants were not aware of what the PRIDE Center can do. Furthermore, 38% of participants had not heard of Multicultural Student Life, and 61% of participants did not know what this office can do. Another negative result to note is that 63% of participants did not know what the Dean of Students Office can do. Finally, both the Title IX Office and The Center for Health Education and wellness had, not quite the majority, but almost 50% of responses suggesting that students are not aware of what they do.

Considering mental health specific services on campuses, when asked if they have reached out to the Student Counseling Center before, 83% of participants had not, with 85% of participants having not participated in individual counseling, and 99% of participants having not

participated in group counseling at the campus Counseling Center. Of those students that had utilized this campus resource, 59% of participants reported having a satisfactory overall experience.

When provided the opportunity to add written responses at the end of this section regarding knowledge of campus resources, there were several responses and concerns. Participants were first asked, “If you have not utilized the Student Counseling Center, feel free to explain why here”. Some students simply reported that they either do not feel they need to go to counseling, were “too busy”, or already see an off-campus provider. Many participants, however, responded with concerns that the Student Counseling Center on campus “is overcrowded”, “usually packed with people”, and “very difficult” to set up an appointment with. Other respondents expressed that they had heard negative things about this resource and were not sure if they would be able to get in with this resource or that they were “uncomfortable going”. Finally, one comment stood out, saying, “I didn’t know it was a thing. I’ve heard of coworkers on campus who have gotten counseling, but it was all negative and said that unless you said you were actively in danger to yourself or others they didn’t prioritize you.”

Regarding another mental health service on campus, 46% of participants had not heard of the 974-HELP line, the campus mental health hotline, and 59% of respondents did not know what 974-HELP can do. Perhaps the most striking statistic is that, out of the 163 respondents for this question, 100% of participants had not utilized the 974-HELP line for themselves during their time on campus. When asked if they had utilized this helpline for someone else before, only 2 of the 163 respondents said yes. These results are represented in a cross-sectional analysis in the graph below.



*Figure 2: 974-HELP Cross-Sectional Analysis*

Results surrounding the satisfaction of experiences with this resource do not seem viable, as the response numbers do not correlate to the results above.

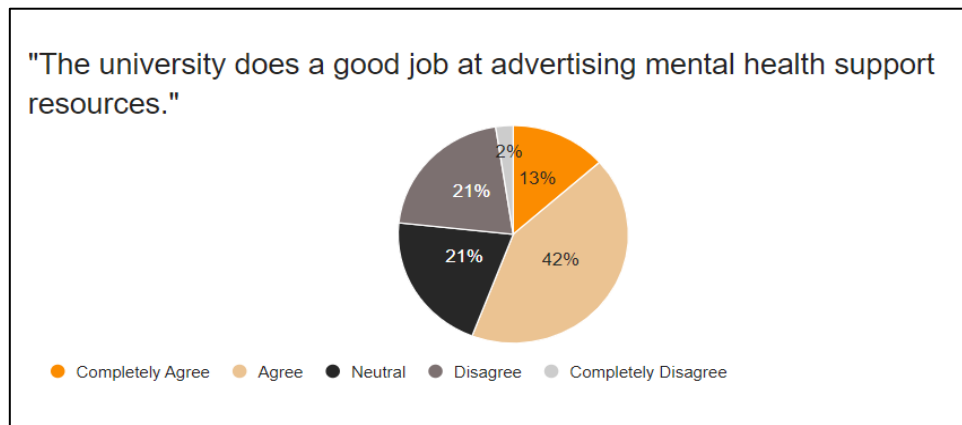
In addition to gathering written comments regarding the Student Counseling Center, the survey asked the same question regarding why respondents had not used the 974-HELP crisis line. Many participants felt that they did not need to utilize this resource. However, the main response of participants, outside of feeling they did not need to utilize it, was that they were not aware of this resource. A few participants wrote, “I don’t know what the 974-HELP line is for”; “I’ve never heard of 974-HELP prior to this survey”; and “I’m not sure what they do so I wouldn’t know when to call”.

One more campus resource to think about is Resident Assistants in the on-campus housing options. Surprisingly, 75% of the respondents had not utilized their Resident Assistant to support them and their mental health, and the majority of respondents responded “not applicable” when asked about the satisfaction of their experience utilizing a Resident Assistant. When respondents were asked why they had not utilized their Resident Assistant, a variety of written responses were offered. First, there were some participants that had not lived on campus during

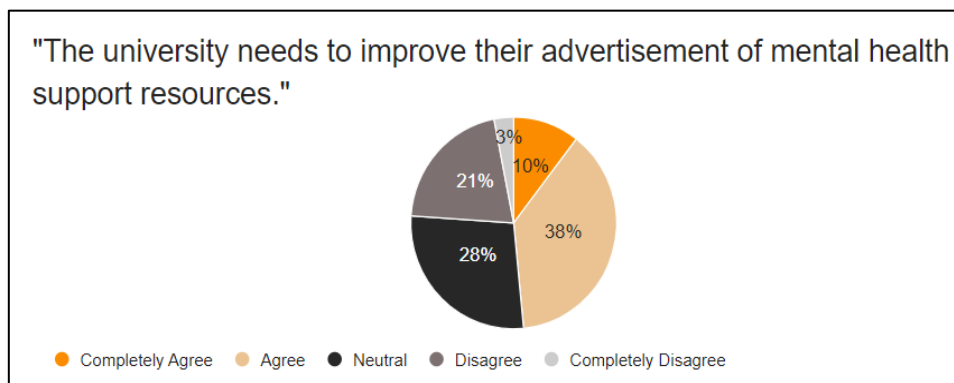


their time at this university, so this experience was not applicable. However, other participants expressed that they “didn’t know this was a service the RA provided” or that “mental health problems were not applicable to RA”. Other participants said wrote “I don’t think they would care” and “I don’t know my RA super well, so she wouldn’t be the first person that I would go to if I needed help or support with my mental health”.

Two additional questions were asked about the role the university plays in advertising their mental health resources. Participants were first asked how much they agree with the statement, “The university does a good job at advertising mental health resources”, to which 55% of participants agreed or completely agreed. However, when asked how much participants agree with the statement, “The university needs to improve their advertisement of mental health support resources”, 48% of respondents agreed or completely agreed. This data is expressed in the graphs below:



*Figure 3.1: Advertisement of Resources*

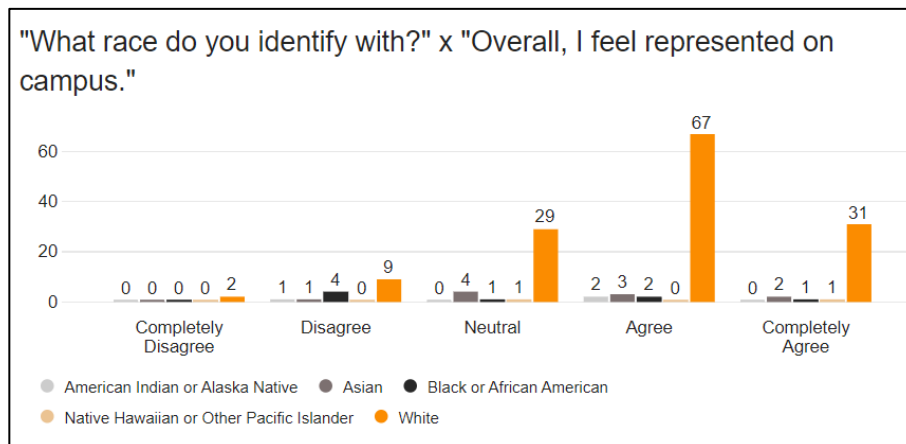


*Figure 3.2: Advertisement of Resources*

Finally, at the end of this section, participants were asked to provide any additional comments they had about campus resources. While there were not many comments in this write-in section, a few comments stood out. First, two respondents wrote positive comments about the role the Student Health Center has played during their time as a student. The other comment spoke to the advertisement of mental health support in the classroom, saying, “I feel like mental health support has primarily been advertised in my Psychology classes. I think that it would be beneficial for all classes to advertise it.”

**Personal Identity**

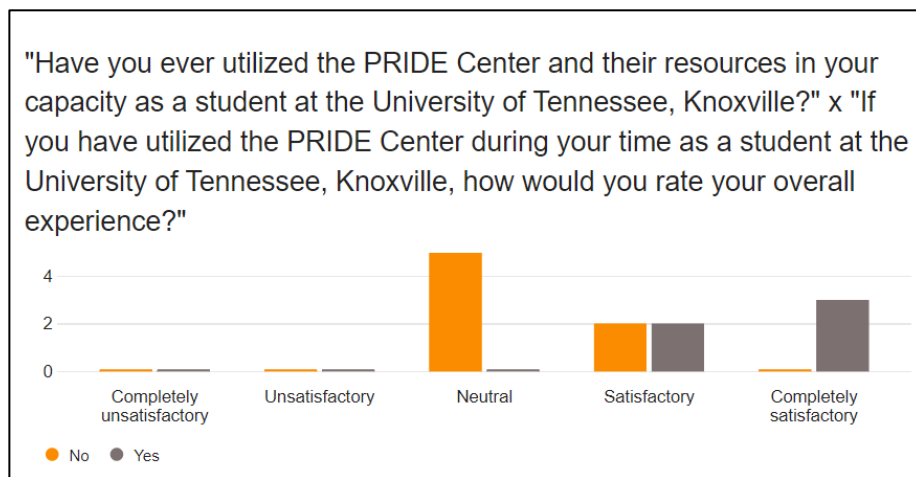
Moving on from knowledge of campus resources, the next section of the survey focused on personal identity and its connections to mental health. First, when asked whether or not respondents feel represented on campus, 66% of respondents said yes, but it is important to note that the majority of respondents identify as “White”. This data is shown in a cross-sectional analysis between the question from the demographic section, “What race do you identify with?” and the level of agreement with the statement, “Overall, I feel represented on campus.”



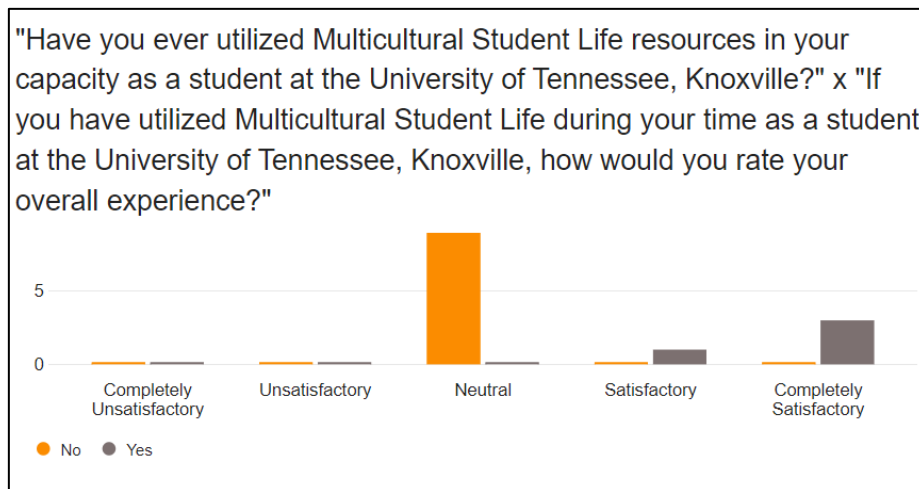
*Figure 4: Race and Representation Cross-Sectional Analysis*

Along similar lines, most participants feel represented on campus through their professors and peers and do not feel that their identity has negative impacts on their mental health. When asked whether or not respondents feel privilege because of their identity on campus, the results are almost evenly spread out across the distribution from completely disagree to completely agree; on the other hand, when asked about feeling inferior because of identity, 11% of participants agreed. Similar trends are seen when asked about how identity has impacted the UTK experience, with the majority of participants disagreeing when presented with the statement, “My identity has negatively impacted my overall experience at UTK” and more spread-out responses being reported when “negatively” was changed to “positively”. When this statement was reported with “no impact on my overall experience” in relation to identity, the results were also spread out across responses. Finally, when asked about level of agreement with the question, “I have experienced bias at UTK because of my identity, 18% of respondents reported that they agreed, and when presented with the statement, “I have been discriminated against at UTK because of my identity”, 8.5% of participants agreed.

A few more questions were asked pertaining to identity-related services on campus. First, the overall experience for students that have utilized the PRIDE center has been satisfactory, with 58% saying so, and no participants reported unsatisfactory experiences. Similar results are reported for those that have utilized Multicultural Student Life, in that those that have report generally neutral or satisfactory experiences. However, there seems to be a lack of awareness of and involvement in the PRIDE Center, with 36% of participants reporting that they were not aware of this resource, and 96% of participants having never utilized it. Finally, only 5 out of the 162 respondents have utilized Multicultural Student Life during their time on campus. These results are shown as cross-sectional analyses between utilization of the campus resource and satisfaction with it below:



*Figure 5: Utilization and Satisfaction of PRIDE Center Cross-Sectional Analysis*



*Figure 6: Utilization and Satisfaction of Multicultural Student Life*  
Cross-Sectional Analysis

A few written comment sections were offered regarding additional thoughts on personal identity and associated campus resources. First, participants were asked what values or identity traits they look for in a counselor. The following values and traits were brought up multiple times by different participants: empathetic, accepting, supportive, openness, understanding, approachable, good listener, respect, honest, kind, knowledgeable, patience, trustworthy, caring, relatability, non-judgmental, and helpful. Outside of these repeated answers, there were a few responses indicating that Christian values were important to them, and one comment indicating that they look for a counselor who is “Understanding, Open-minded, Queer, POC”.

The next written section asked students why they had not utilized the PRIDE Center. Many respondents shared that they did not feel they were a part of the LGBTQIA+ community and therefore did not need to utilize these services. A few participants wrote that they did not know what the center’s purpose is or that it was a resource that campus offered. Some other respondents added, “Don’t know where it is”, “Frightened of if people saw me doing so”, and

“Not sure how they could help”. For transparency, the researchers will note that one respondent replied, “Jesus is King. Man is for female female is for man”.

When asked why participants had not utilized Multicultural Student Life, many students replied that they were not aware of this resource, and a few participants expressed uncertainty about what this office does. Some concerns were expressed from students identifying as White, with responses such as, “I wasn’t really aware of them and I believe that the Multicultural Student Life is better with minority groups, I have trouble believing that it has Caucasian people in mind” and “I am a white, straight male, I am not allowed to have a culture its racist”. Finally, there were a few responses expressing a potential desire to learn more about this resource, saying, “I have never step foot in, but I want to” and “I am Asian American, and I haven’t heard much about clubs that relate to that race/identity”. Finally, when asked to expand on any thoughts pertaining to personal identity at the end of this section, one participant wrote, “Many students I have met here are uneducated, homophobic, and racist.”

### **Other Factors**

The final section of the survey to consider is the “Other Factors” section, in which a few data points stand out. First, when asked how much they agree with the following statement, “Money negatively affects my mental health”, 48% of participants agreed or completely agreed. Next, when asked about the effects of their personal health on their mental health, there was a lot of variation amongst responses, but ultimately, 35% of respondents agreed or completely agreed that their health negatively affects their mental health. The majority of participants reported positive effects of family on their mental health. Results regarding the statements “My family negatively affects my mental health” and “Money positively affects my mental health” showed more spread-out responses. When asked about substance use, 35% of participants reported that it

negatively affects their mental health. Finally, a positive statistic to note is that both on campus friendships and off campus friendships are positively affecting the mental health of over 90% of participants.

Finally, students were asked if there were any other factors that affect their mental health in a written response section, and the only additional trend that was reported in responses was stress. The final question of the survey asked if there was anything else that respondents would like to add about their experience at UTK, and there were a few students that spoke positively about their experience as a student at this university, with one respondent saying, “I am really enjoying my time here”. There was one negative response, however, that suggested that the university “seems greedy” and that “there is a lot of things they overlook or just overall do not care about”. These responses add to the variation in connotations of written responses seen throughout the survey.

### **Discussion**

This research sought to identify potential barriers to the mental health of students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Through a qualitative, online survey, the results of this survey support the original hypothesis suggesting that there are barriers negatively impacting the mental health of undergraduate students at this institution. Results in areas such as academics, knowledge of campus resources, personal identity, and substance use suggest that there are a few barriers to consider when considering the mental health of students at this university. Through these results, this large university can evaluate how they can enrich the experience of their undergraduate students.

The first category of results that identified potential barriers to mental health for students was academic experience. With the majority of participants agreeing that academics negatively affect their mental health, these results suggest that there could be improvement when it comes to the relationship between academic support and student mental health. Perhaps the most impactful responses in the section pertaining to academic experience came from the written comments. There were multiple participant responses indicating frustration with the experience they have had with academic advising at this institution, a primary resource that is directly connected to the course load and schedules that students create for their classes. The importance of academic advising cannot be stressed enough, as it can have a direct impact on student academic experience and ultimate graduation. There were calls for greater availability and quicker response times from academic advisors, as well as hopes for more “check-ins”, as one student suggested, when it comes to academic support and how it relates to student mental health.

While the academic experience of students yielded some important considerations, the category pertaining to knowledge of campus resources presented a variety of results to consider in connection to student mental health. As a general trend across responses, it seems that the larger campus resources, such as the Student Counseling Center and the Student Health Center, are more well-known across participants, while the smaller resources and those that tend to be more identity-specific, such as the PRIDE Center and Multicultural Student Life, were less known. One interesting exception to this trend is that the majority of respondents were not aware of what the Dean of Students Office does, which is concerning because they offer a variety of supportive services to students, their mental health, and their needs.

One of the most striking areas of results pertained to knowledge of the campus mental health line, 974-HELP. This resource falls under the Center for Care and Resilience and offers



students the opportunity to talk to representatives over the phone or fill out a concern in an online form for either themselves or another student on campus. While this resource is an accessible support option for students at this institution, there is a general lack of knowledge about this resource and what they do, which was supported by both statistical and written responses. Furthermore, none of the 163 respondents had never utilized this resource for themselves, and only 2 participants had utilized this resource for someone else. These results show a striking lack of utilization and understanding of this resource and suggests that it is possible that students may not understand the scope of its services, which go beyond being a suicide hotline and go into supporting student mental health on campus.

While many students had heard of the Student Counseling Center, as discussed above, a vast majority of students had not reached out this resource during their time at this institution, and almost none of respondents had utilized the group counseling option available to them through the Student Counseling Center. When asked why they had not utilized the Student Counseling Center, students reported a number of concerns about the availability and experience of trying to utilize this resource, and it was clear that there is concerning messaging spreading about its accessibility in supporting students and their mental health. These results suggest that student attitudes surrounding the Student Counseling Center at this university, as well as the experience in first seeking treatment, could use some improvement, at least from the student perspective.

It is also possible that personal identity had an impact on the mental health of students. As mentioned above, this university is a PWI, and this classification is clearly seen amongst the participants that took this survey. With the vast majority of participants identifying as White, this leaves little room for data from underrepresented populations. This trend is also supported by the

cross-sectional analysis that was conducted in the results section, ultimately demonstrating that, of the respondents that reported feeling represented on campus, the majority of these students also identified as White. Still, despite this data, some respondents reported that they have experienced bias and/or discrimination at this institution because of their identity, which suggests a potential connection between personal identity and mental health. Moreover, when considering identity-related resources on campus, the data suggests that, while there were not a lot of participants utilizing or knowing about resources such as the PRIDE Center or Multicultural Student Life, those that have utilized these resources have been satisfied with their experiences. This data offers the possibility that these resources may be impactful enough for students that they could be bolstered and widen their reach and impact on campus.

The final result to consider more in depth is that some of the participants reported that substance use has negatively impacted their mental health. This is an important consideration to note, as college students are a vulnerable population to substance use. However, a connection can be made in that the majority of participants have also heard of the Student Health Center, which often works to support student awareness of substance use and encourage positive habits. This would be an interesting area of future research of the university as it pertains to mental and physical health.

With a number of results to consider in this project, there are a few areas of implications that have the potential to positively impact the student experience at this institution. First, pertaining to the academic experience at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, it is clear that academics play a role in student mental health on this campus. Because of this, it is essential that the university consider the academic experience of students from a mental health lens. Prior research on the connections between academics and mental health has suggested the essential

role that professors can play in offering this support to students, suggesting that the balance between professor's knowledge and their "attitudes" towards students can be impactful (Baik et al., 2019). Because student comments on this survey pointed more to the potential negative effects of advisor support rather than professor-related support, it may be important to consider the role of academic advisors in the academic success and mental health support from the same lens. Research suggests that, to support professors and to therefore support students, institutions could offer more mental health training and knowledge of how students are balancing their mental health and academics in the post-pandemic world to professors (Baik et al., 2019). This same line of thinking could also be applied to academic advisors, as they connect with thousands of students and greatly impact the lifestyle and academic schedule of these students. This is a wonderful opportunity to connect the value of student support and enrichment to both professors and academic advisors with more positive mental health and potentially, academic outcomes.

When considering the implications of the results stemming from student knowledge of campus resources, the results suggest that many students agree that this institution could improve in their advertisement of mental health support resources. To serve a student population of tens of thousands of students is no easy task, but the opportunity to enrich the student experience and better support their mental health cannot be ignored. Based on the results, it is clear that more advertisement is needed for the 974-HELP line to maximize the potential effect of this campus resource. It is also important to consider that there may be misconceptions on its purpose, as help lines are generally associated with the concept of suicide hotlines. To better serve the campus community and to increase the knowledge and understanding of this campus resource, more awareness should be spread about the purpose of and accessibility of the 974-HELP line.

In addition to the lack of knowledge of the purpose of 974-HELP, the perceptions surrounding the Student Counseling Center on its availability, accessibility, and ability to support students, even among students who have not utilized this resource, must be shifted in a more positive direction. Because the majority of students who have heard of this resource are generally satisfied with their experience if they have utilized it, the center has the opportunity to change the narrative of their accessibility and open their arms even wider to the students on campus. Spreading more awareness about the extent of the counseling center's resources, such as about group therapy options, could allow this resource to serve more students in a more efficient way.

To increase accessibility and resource knowledge of mental health resources, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville could put together an all-encompassing digital application for the sole purpose of housing information about mental health resources and even offer practices such as meditation and mindfulness activities at the touch of a button (Lipson et al., 2019). Lipson, et al. 's 2019 work emphasizes the importance of utilizing digital resources to reach more students and to encourage students to use campus mental health resources. Furthermore, Lattie et al. 's work adds to the discussion of digital services and draws attention to the ways in which they could “reduce barriers” to student access to these resources as well (2019). It could also be beneficial to work with current and/or former students to create this resource to gain perspective on the reality of the student experience and perspective and show students that their mental health and input are a priority (Baik et al., 2019). The results of this project highlight the need for greater accessibility and knowledge of mental health resources, which could be adequately fulfilled by the development of a comprehensive mental health digital application.

The final area of implications to consider is that of personal identity and minority representation on campus. After conducting this survey and only receiving 11% of responses from non-white participants and only 13% of responses from self-identifying members of the LGBTQIA+ community, it is clear that more research must be done to identify potential barriers to the mental health of those underrepresented communities at this institution. This heavily skewed distribution towards the voices of white and heterosexual participants does not necessarily pose a limitation of this study, per se, but calls attention to the potential lack of representation present at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and calls for more research to be done that specifically speaks to the experiences of these communities of students. With a growing field of research being devoted to better serving the mental health of underrepresented students on college campuses, the time is now to take this step to better serve the students at this institution. Lipson et al. 's 2022 work reminds the mental health community that “treating student mental health as a priority for investment” is a step that can push universities forward when it comes to supporting underrepresented students. Moreover, because there were some students indicating that they had experienced instances of bias and discrimination on campus because of their personal identity, research addressing these student needs and potential barriers is all the more important.

One limitation of this survey is that the results found are only correlational. Future research could address causational factors to barriers to mental health on this campus and cross-sectionally with other institutions. Overall, this project draws attention to the need for greater academic support, increased, advertisement of campus mental health resources, and the potential lack of representation of students in underrepresented communities in mental health research. With a growing world of literature and research opening up about the complexities of college

student mental health, it is clear that now is the time to make student mental health a priority at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The results of this project suggest that it is time for the University of Tennessee, Knoxville to operate under a lens that prioritizes mental health and student wellbeing and shapes a brighter tomorrow for all students, from all communities.

### **Conclusion**

This research sought to identify potential barriers to the mental health of college students, specifically at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Through data collected via an online survey, the results called for greater academic support, especially from academic advisors and increased advertisement of and more positive narratives surrounding campus resources, calling attention to the effectiveness of the campus 974-HELP line and Student Counseling Center in particular. Moreover, while resources such as the PRIDE Center and Multicultural Student Life exist for underrepresented students on campus, more research is needed on how the campus can better support the mental health of students in underrepresented communities. To better support student mental health and to enrich the overall experience at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, this research suggests the creation of a comprehensive app that is home to all of the mental health and wellbeing resources on campus to create more accessible options and tackle the barriers found in this research. Overall, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville has an incredible opportunity to create a campus where mental health and representation are prioritized and enhanced to better serve the thousands of students that choose to call it home.

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