

Changing the Way We Educate to Prioritize Minority Students' Mental Health and Enhance Their Well-Being

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Abstract

The extensive presence of mental health conditions is continuously increasing among tertiary students. In the United States, it is estimated that 42% of college students suffer from anxiety and/or depression, and 38% have been diagnosed with a mental health condition. Furthermore, 13% of college students have ideated suicide, and approximately one thousand college students commit suicide each year, making this the second leading cause of death among tertiary students. However, despite these alarming statistics, there is minimal research on students' mental wellness, the factors contributing to their poor mental health and well-being, and the solutions and strategies to address these factors. Mental health is a core component of well-being, which influences all aspects of our daily life. Thus, students' academic success is correlated and significantly impacted by their mental health and general well-being. To this end, fostering awareness about our students' mental health, understanding inclusion, diversity, and equity, and enhancing students' well-being is of utmost importance to the academic community. This study aims to address and prioritize minority students' mental health and well-being by identifying the factors contributing to their anxiety and stress as well as proposing strategies to enhance their mental wellness and overall well-being. To achieve these objectives, the research study (a) gathered and assessed data from a minority-serving institution's (MSI) Counseling and Psychological Services; and (b) conducted a survey to students, which helped recognize some of the main academic factors contributing to students' stress and anxiety as well as identify current and potential resources that the institution can offer to enhance their well-being. The data collected from 456 students show that the main mental health issues are anxiety, depression, academic distress, and uncertainties about the future. The survey results showed that several academic factors, such as exams, not understanding assignments, financial issues, lack of time management skills, poor school-work-life balance, and presenting in class, greatly impact students' stress, anxiety, and overall well-being. In light of the results, the research proposes additional resources including peer mentoring programs, time management seminars, financial aid and budgeting workshops, increasing career/job fairs and networking with companies, as well as professional skills workshops including public speaking that can be implemented at not only MSIs, but also at other educational institutions to contribute to the mental wellness and overall well-being of students.

Keywords: Academic Distress, Academic Success, Anxiety, Depression, Mental Health, Stress, Well-Being

Background and Motivation

The prevalence of mental health conditions among college students is steadily rising [1]. In the United States (U.S.), approximately 42% of college students suffer from depression and/or anxiety, 38% have been diagnosed with a mental health condition, and 13% have ideated suicide [2]. In fact, suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students and roughly 1088 college students in the U.S. die each year by suicide [3].

Mental health is an essential component of well-being since it influences and impacts many aspects of everyday life, including one's academic performance [4]. Students suffering from mental distress are likely to experience detrimental academic consequences, such as impaired cognitive functioning, learning disabilities, and poor academic performance [5]. Hence, mental distress severely impacts a students' academic progress and success. A myriad of stressors affect students' mental health and overall well-being such as (a) relationships, including family, romantic, peer, and faculty relationships; (b) inadequate work-life balance, procrastination and time management concerns [6], tight and inflexible schedules, and the lack of extracurricular activities [5]; (c) financial burden due to high tuition costs, large student debt, and inadequate finances; (d) academic pressures due to anticipation of high grades but not necessarily attaining them, demanding and difficult coursework, competition to outperform other students to ensure academic and future career success, and students' inability to cope with failure [7], course examinations, and trying to fulfill family and friends' expectations [6]; (e) difficulty with language when studying abroad; (f) institution's environment and difficulties adapting to this new environment and/or community [6]; (g) minority students' feelings of lack of support and isolation, and encounters with discrimination and microaggressions, which are intentional or unintentional actions, words, or events that can put people down and/or offend them [8]; and (h) fear of public speaking and oral presentations [9].

Despite all of these contributing factors and their academic consequences, many students encounter various obstacles and barriers to seeking help [10] such as absence of time, lack of emotional openness, privacy concerns, financial constraints, not recognizing or accepting the need for help, lack of awareness about accessible resources and services available [11], and the stigma of mental health conditions [10], [12], [13]. Public stigma is the stereotyping and discriminative actions toward people seeking help for a mental health issue; self-stigma is the internalization of public stigma [14]. This causes students to believe that mental health problems demonstrate weakness, which in turn would affect their career trajectories and thus success [12]. To this end, in order to improve students' well-being, the academic community must spread awareness of students' mental health and propose strategies to address challenges related to it while considering inclusion, diversity, and equity within these educational contexts. Proactive solutions to address these mental health challenges prior to the student's development, rather than relying primarily on reactive solutions, is of utmost importance [15].

Methodology

This study, which aims to improve the mental health and wellbeing of minority students, was motivated by the pervasive presence of mental health conditions and their effects on tertiary students. This was done by first conducting a bibliographic search, which included a review of existing literature on mental health conditions in student populations, their impact, and institutional strategies to address them in order to improve students' overall well-being. Second, to identify the leading mental health concerns for students, this study gathered data obtained from a Florida International University's (FIU) Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) reports, which were retrieved from two digital platforms: (1) Bettermynd [16], and (2) Togetherall [17]. Bettermynd [16] is a platform that partners with colleges to improve the mental health of students and provides access to diverse counseling resources. This platform's report

included data from 456 students. On the other hand, Togetherall [17] is an online community to get support to improve mental health and well-being. This community's report included data from 144 students. Finally, 93 responses were collected from a survey that was conducted in order to determine the primary academic and life factors affecting students' stress, anxiety, and overall well-being. Subsequently, the collected data was examined, which aided in the development of proposed strategies to improve students' mental health and their overall well-being. The following section will go over the survey design and present the research overview to provide a better understanding of the steps taken in this study.

Survey Design

The survey aimed to learn about the students' mental health issues, as well as the factors impacting their mental health and overall well-being. To achieve these goals, the survey was designed considering (a) the data collected from the literature on the stressors affecting students' mental health and overall well-being; and (2) the data gathered from Bettermynd [16] and Togetherall [17] regarding the leading mental health issues affecting students.

This study utilized a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data from students. The administered survey included a demographic section and a total of four questions pertaining to mental health and overall well-being. The first part of the survey included two questions. The first question was intended to identify the main academic influences that contribute to the poor mental health of the students at a minority serving institution (MSI). The second question aimed to identify how the educational institution can help students reduce or overcome their anxiety and stress thus improving their well-being.

The second part of the survey sought to determine the factors that affect the well-being of the students at an MSI. Student participants were asked to rate, according to their level of satisfaction, from 0 (not satisfied) to 100 (very satisfied) the following thirteen aspects of their lives: career, creativity, diet, education, exercise, finance, health, home environment, joy, relationships, social life, spirituality, and university environment. Additionally, the survey included a text entry question asking the students what improvements they could make to balance the previously mentioned aspects.

Finally, this study analyzed all of the data obtained from the surveys and from the institution's Counseling and Psychological Services and proposed several strategies that can help enhance the student's mental wellness and overall well-being. Figure 1 illustrates the research overview.

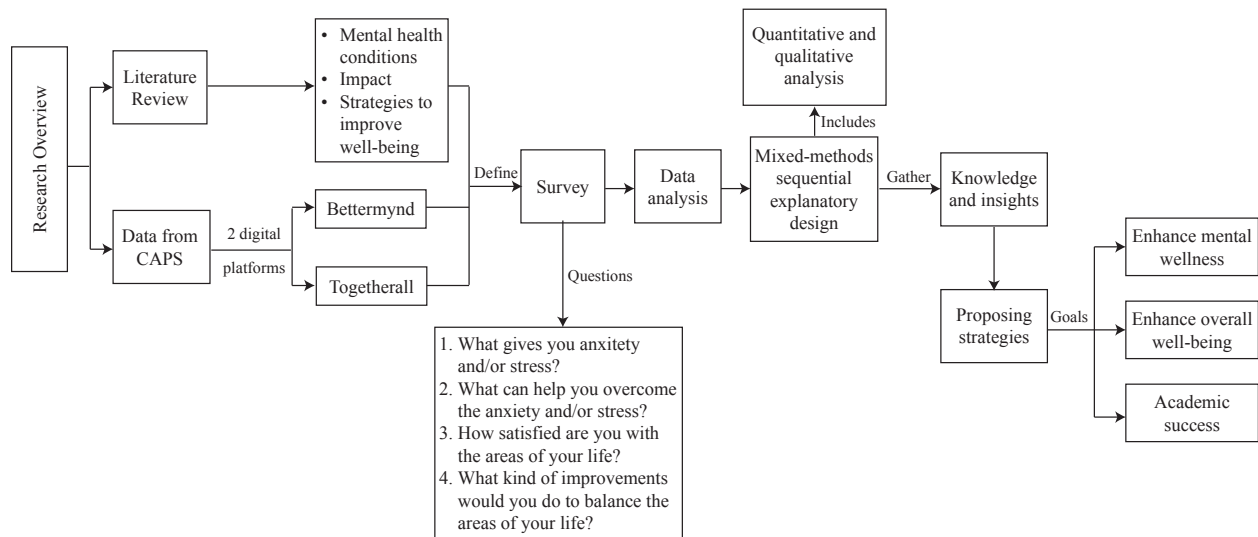


Figure 1: Research overview

Results and Discussion

Bettermynd and Togetherall Data

According to FIU’s CAPS reports from Bettermynd [16] and Togetherall [17], general anxiety, depression, uncertainty about the future, stress at school or work, and academic distress are the leading mental health concerns for students. Bettermynd [16] is a platform that partners with colleges to improve the mental health of students and provides access to diverse counseling resources. According to this platform’s data provided by 456 students in April 2022, around 70% of students suffer from general anxiety, more than 50% from depression, and around 45% from academic distress. Other concerns reported include relationship issues (38%), social anxiety (35%), eating disorders (14%), trauma (12%), sexuality (8%), sexual assault (7%), and substance abuse (4%). This data is presented in Figure 2. Togetherall [17] on the other hand, is an online community to get support to improve mental health and well-being and according to its data provided by 144 students, 66% suffer from anxiety, 57% from depression or low mood, 56% have a general sense of uncertainty about the future, and 56% suffer from stress at school or at work. Other concerns reported include lack of motivation (43%), social isolation (37%), stress at home (37%), relationship problems (29%), difficulties managing change (20%), eating disorders (10%), and bereavement or loss (8%). This data is presented in Figure 3.

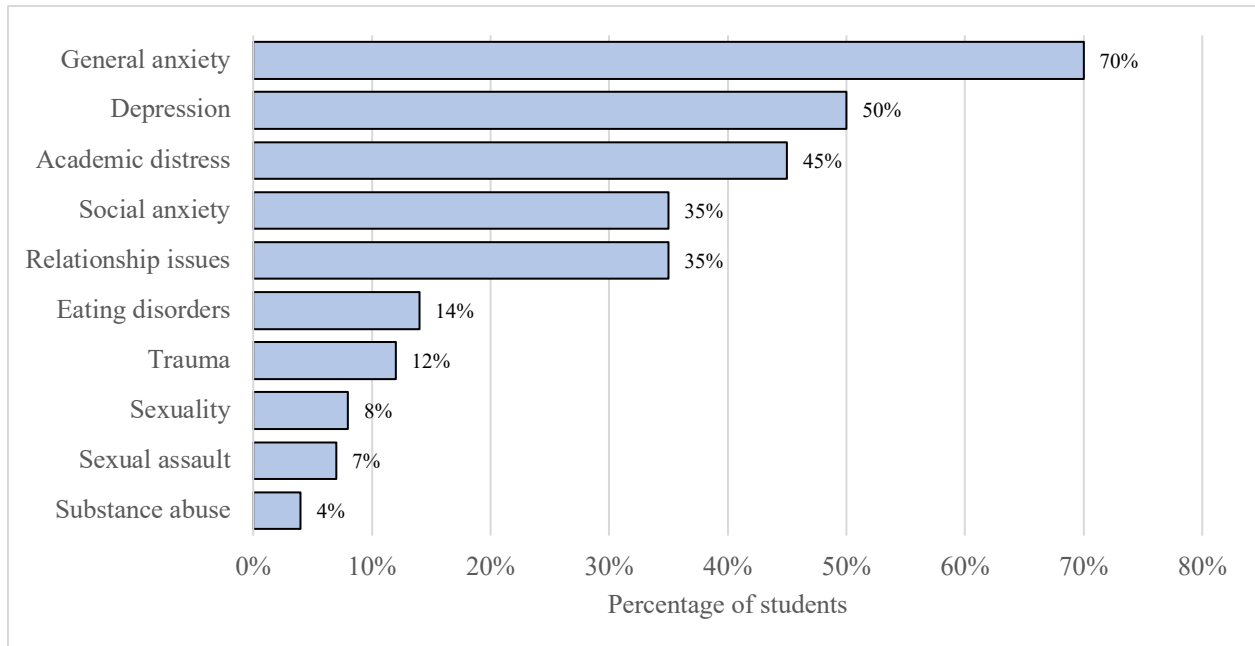


Figure 2: Bettermynd's data obtained from FIU's CAPS

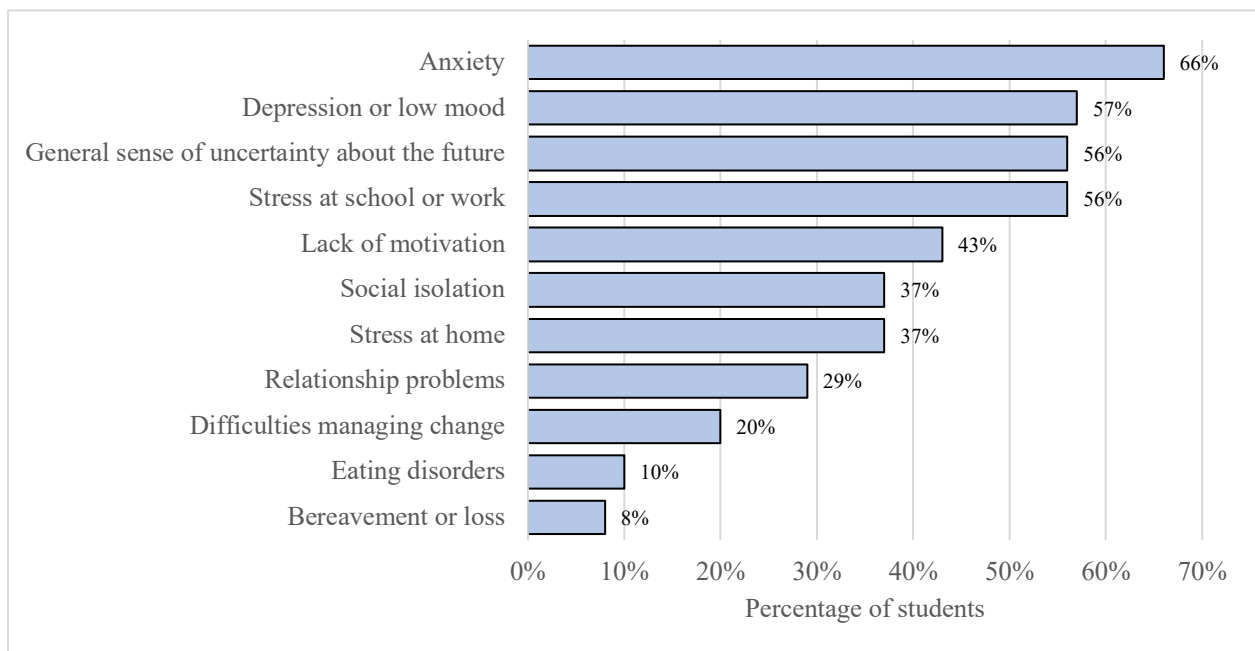


Figure 3: Togetherall's data obtained from FIU's CAPS

The previous data shows that anxiety, stress, depression, academic distress, and uncertainty about the future are the main mental health and well-being issues affecting students at this MSI. Although the sources of these issues may vary; whether it be from home, school, or work, providing strategies to help enhance the mental wellness at the institution may in fact, improve students' overall mental health and well-being. This study aims to improve the overall well-being

of students by prioritizing their mental health and providing them with strategies to reduce their levels of stress and anxiety.

Survey Results

This section presents the results associated with 93 students' responses. This study utilized a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data from students. The recorded data included a diverse group of students as shown in Figure 4, which included (a) 68 males, 24 females, and one student that preferred not to answer; (b) students from multiple races, including African American, White, Asian, among others; and (c) Hispanic and non-Hispanic students.

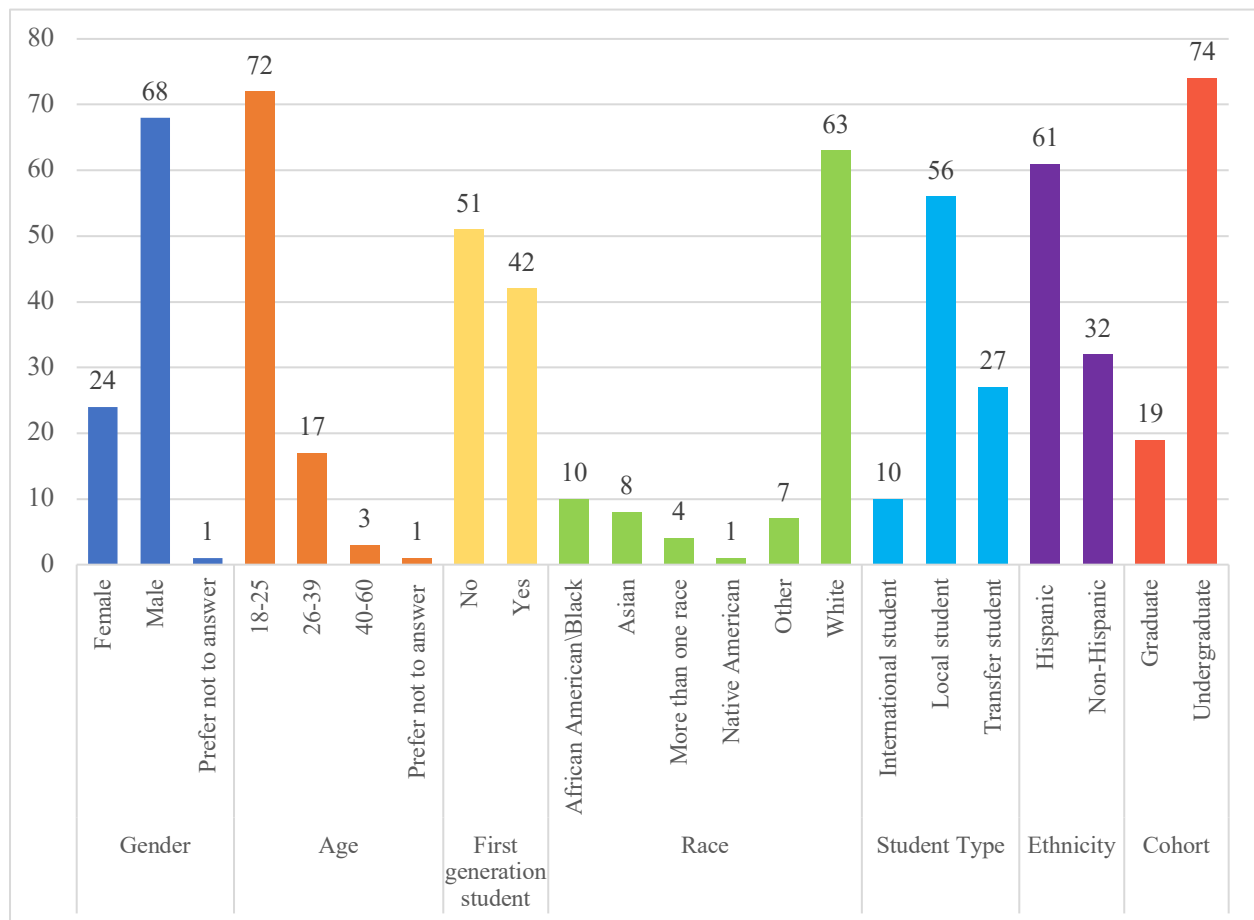


Figure 4: Students' socio-demographic background, n=93

The results from the 93 conducted surveys indicate that there are many academic factors contributing to students' stress and anxiety. The key contributing factors include exams, having to do assignments that they don't understand, coursework deadlines, lack of balance between academic and social life, increased workload, and lack of time management skills, presenting in class, tuition fees and expenses, uncertainty about the future, and not knowing where they are

going to work. Figure 5 presents these results in order of priority, from the main contributing factor to the least contributing one.

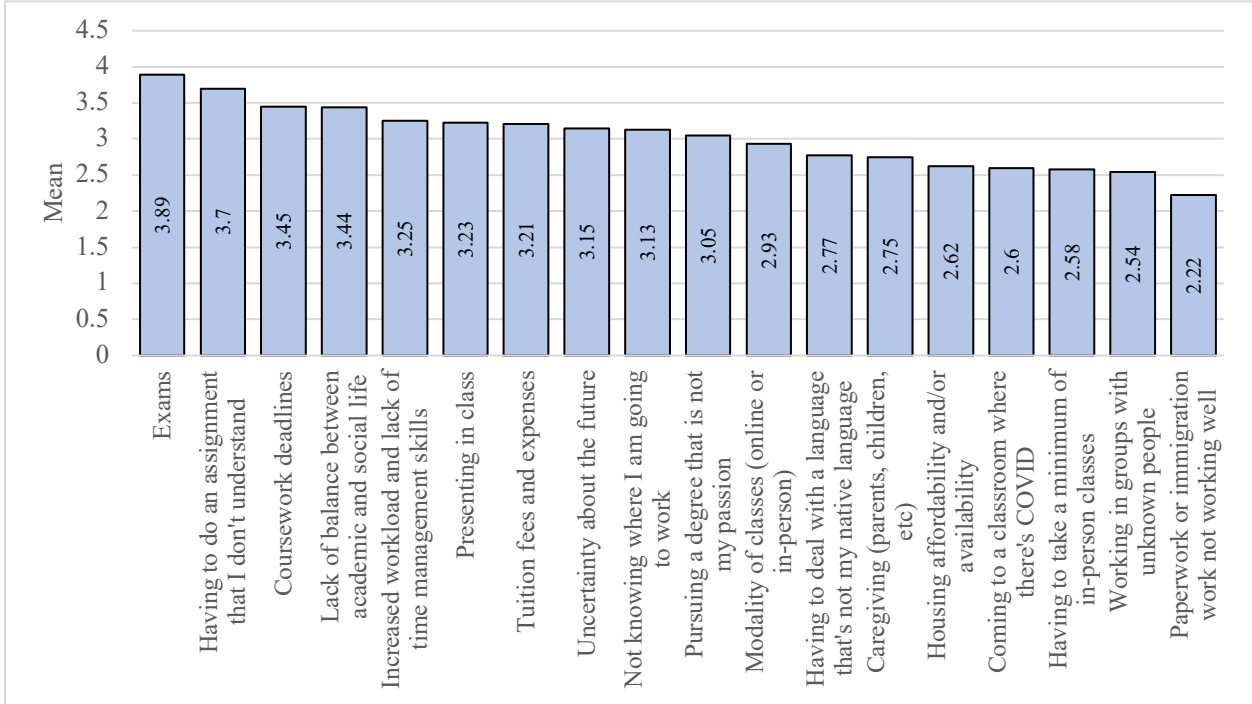


Figure 5: Factors that contribute to the stress and anxiety of FIU students

There are many ways to help students improve or overcome their stress and anxiety levels as can be seen in Figure 6. The main strategies are a clear road map to choose courses, time management seminars and/or workshops, financial aid and scholarships, career fairs to explore job opportunities, tutoring to help with courses, networking with companies, social gatherings, and public speaking workshops.

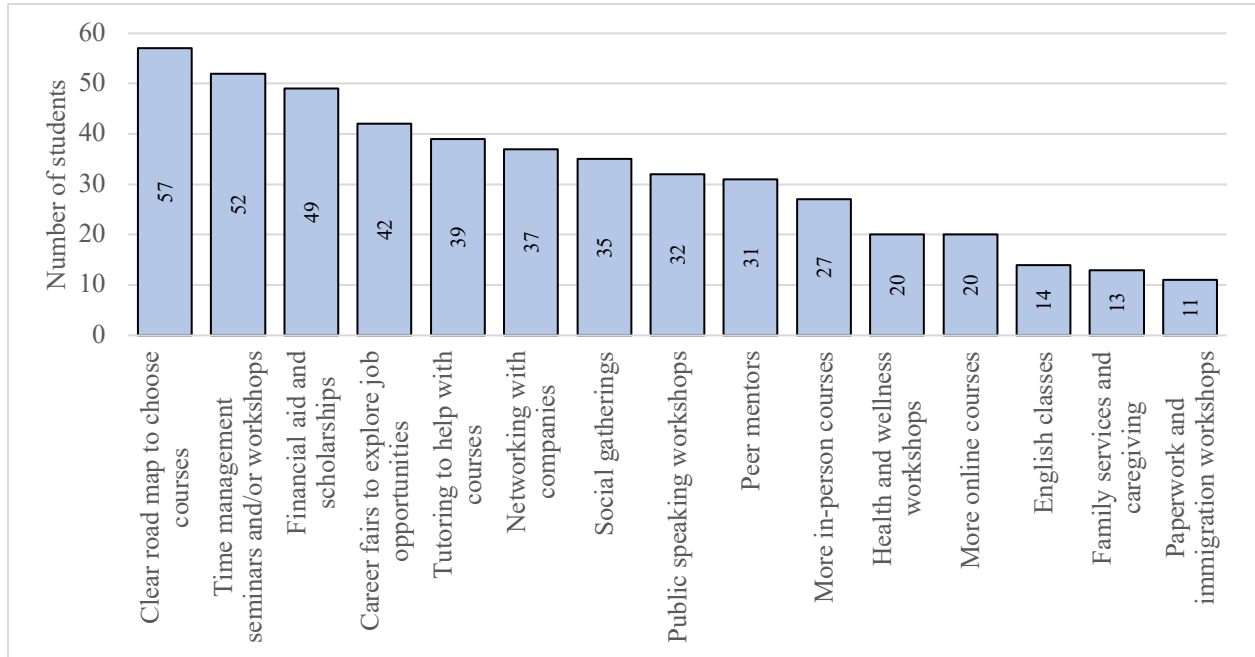


Figure 6: Strategies that can help students improve or overcome their stress and anxiety

Several areas pertaining to daily life seemed to have a great impact on the student's overall well-being. These areas and the level of satisfaction that students selected in each are displayed in Table 1 and Figure 7. The results revealed that several of those areas had minimum values of zero, which indicated that some students were not at all satisfied with those particular areas of their lives. Spirituality, finance, exercise, diet, social life, creativity, and career had the lowest scores.

Table 1: Satisfaction with the areas of life

Factors impacting well-being	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance
Home Environment	2.00	100.00	85.34	19.96	398.45
Education	2.00	100.00	80.17	19.83	393.19
Health	16.00	100.00	78.66	21.92	480.66
Joy	0.00	100.00	78.09	26.67	711.20
University Environment	2.00	100.00	77.98	25.89	670.36
Relationships	0.00	100.00	72.48	32.19	1035.95
Career	0.00	100.00	72.97	27.64	764.21
Creativity	0.00	100.00	69.76	26.05	678.43
Social Life	0.00	100.00	66.70	31.10	967.37
Diet	0.00	100.00	59.86	30.80	948.85
Exercise	1.00	100.00	63.63	31.24	976.05
Finance	0.00	100.00	63.27	26.96	726.58
Spirituality	0.00	100.00	61.91	34.72	1205.49

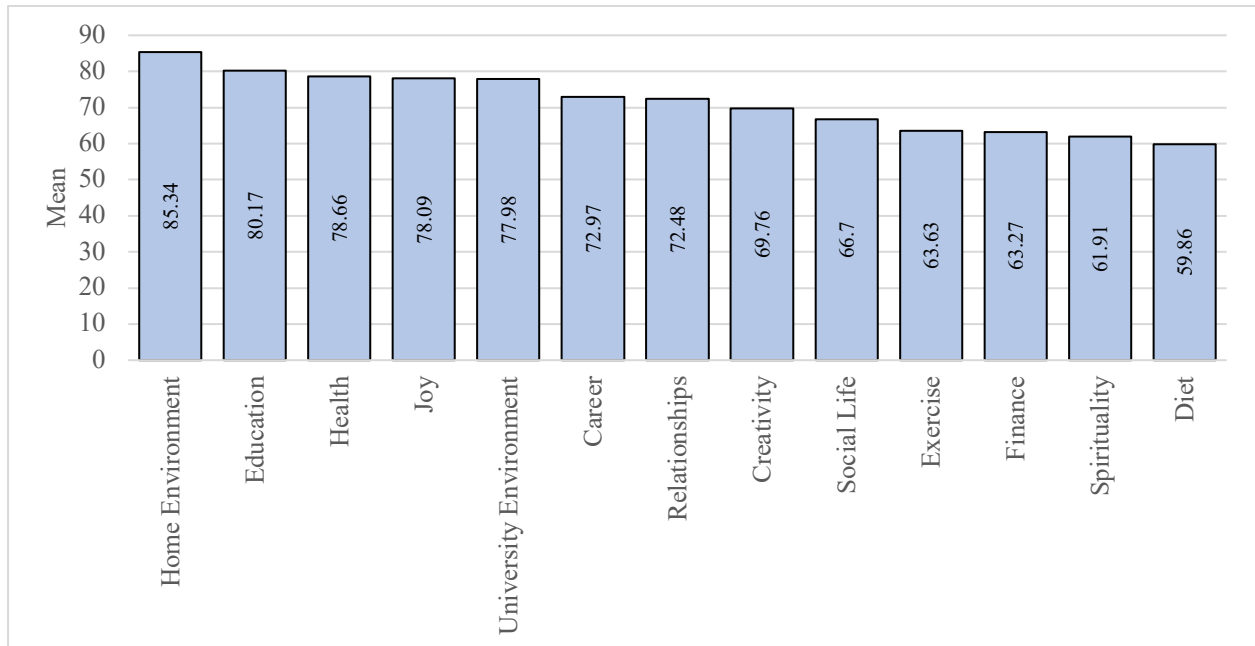


Figure 7: Satisfaction with areas of life

Students reported that they could balance and improve the areas previously mentioned by (a) improving their time management skills to balance school, social life, and/or work; (b) having more money and better financial health by getting a job or by decreasing tuition fees; (c) improving their healthy habits by improving their diet, exercising more, and/or sleeping better; (d) working on their relationships and/or being more social; (e) going to therapy and/or meditating; and (f) prioritizing school, studying more, and getting better academic advising.

Limitations and Future Work

The results of this study revealed that several academic factors significantly impact the students' mental health and overall well-being. One limitation of this study is that students' mental health and well-being results are entirely self-reported. As a result, biases and the maturity of the subject might influence the results. Another limitation is that the sample of participants was limited to students at one MSI and does not necessarily represent the culture of all other educational institutions. Future studies could focus on investigating the research in several educational institutions. However, FIU is one of the leading and largest MSIs in the U.S., thus rendering and reflecting the sample to be a representative for the minority population that participated in the survey. As such, the results of this study pave the way for other institutions with similar demographics to begin looking into their students' mental health in an effort to inflict change in support systems and use the recommendations provided. Recommendations are preliminary and future work could study other populations to refine them in order to support a larger population of students across educational institutions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study revealed high levels of stress and anxiety due to academic factors. The data obtained from Bettermynd [16], which included data from 456 students, and from Togetherall [17], which included data from 144 students, highlighted that anxiety, stress, depression, academic distress, and uncertainty about the future are the main mental health and well-being issues affecting students at FIU, one of the largest MSIs in the U.S. The results from the 93 conducted surveys showed that many academic factors, including exams, not understanding assignments, financial issues, lack of time management skills, poor school-work-life balance, and presenting in class, greatly impact our students' stress, anxiety, and overall well-being.

In light of these results, this research proposes several strategies that can help reduce students' stress and anxiety levels and hence enhance their mental wellness and overall well-being:

- 1. Time management seminars and/or workshops** – Several students reported lacking time management skills, which according to this study, negatively impacts their mental health and well-being. Successful time management strategies may not only decrease students' levels of anxiety and stress but can also increase their academic performance and enhance their achievement [18], [19]. Additionally, previous studies have found that students who reported more purpose and structure to their time are more optimistic about their future, have more efficient study habits, fewer physical symptoms of depression, and better overall well-being [19]. Monthly or bimonthly seminars and/or workshops can help students learn how to effectively manage their time by setting goals and priorities, planning, organizing, learning how to say “no” to what is not important, blocking out distractions, and delegating. By learning how to successfully manage their time, students would be able to balance school, work, leisure, and their personal lives, thus enhancing their overall well-being.
- 2. Financial aid and budgeting workshops and/or counseling** – According to this study, financial hardships and lack of financial health are main contributors to the mental health and well-being of students. In particular, international students have more stress related to finance than non-international students because they are not allowed to work off campus due to visa restrictions [20]. Financial health and having a monthly budget can help students to (1) eat healthy foods more often than unhealthy foods [21] thus improving their diet and contributing to their overall well-being; (2) improve their concentration [21] and thus their academic performance; (3) improve their ability to face problems, their feelings of usefulness, and their decision-making capability; (4) participate more in social activities and enjoy their day-to-day activities more; and (5) contribute to their overall happiness [21] and thus impacting positively in their overall well-being. However, many students don't have the knowledge to manage their financials and are not familiar with management practices, such as budgeting [22]. Financial aid and budgeting workshops and/or counseling can help students discover all of the available financial aid options, such as scholarships, grants, loans, funding from companies, and federal work-study. Additionally, these workshops or counseling sessions can teach students how to budget and wisely manage their financials, thus improving their financial health.
- 3. Creating a peer mentoring program** – The results of this study show that one main contributor to mental health and well-being issues is having to do assignments or projects

that the students do not understand. In fact, according to this research results, this is the second main cause of students' stress and anxiety. Peer mentoring programs where higher-grade level students help lower-grade level students with their courses and assignments could reduce stress and anxiety. Further, mentors can teach students important academic skills, such as how to improve their study habits, and give them the support and encouragement they may need [23]. Two added benefits of this program are developing a network of friends, and support systems in which mentors learning from their mentees can help them become better students [23]. Thus, creating a peer mentoring program can have a positive effect not only on the academic performance of the mentees but also on the well-being of both the mentee and the mentor.

4. **Mental health awareness workshops** – Many students aren't conscious of their mental health issues or do not want to seek help and/or treatment. The main barriers to mental health are financial concerns, social stigma, lack of information about resources available, and limited access to mental health services [24]. These free workshops can help students (1) learn how to identify the key signals of mental health concerns; (2) become aware of the vast number of free wellness resources offered by the university and their accessibility, such as free psychological consultations, apps for mental health and well-being, and anonymous forums; and (3) help overcome the barriers of public and self-stigma, which may lead students to not seeking the help and/or treatment they may need. Public stigma is the stereotyping and discriminative actions taken towards people seeking help for their mental health issues; self-stigma is the internalization of public stigma [14]. These workshops can identify and promote all of the wellness resources available so that more students can easily access and take advantage of them.
5. **Public speaking courses and/or workshops** – Public speaking is an important facet of academic life, career advancement, and professional success [9]. However, according to many studies, the most common fear among people is public speaking[25]. In this study, many students reported that presenting in class causes them stress and/or anxiety. Public speaking workshops and/or courses can improve students' presentation skills, reduce their fear of presenting and speaking in public, and thus increasing their self-efficacy as they become more knowledgeable in designing, practicing, and delivering a speech[26]. Developing public speaking skills will not only help students in the classrooms but will also prepare them for their professional careers.
6. **Promoting and increasing career fairs** – According to the data obtained from Togetherall [17], 56% of students at FIU have a general sense of uncertainty about their future. Career fairs, also known as career expos, provide a venue for students to meet with employers, recruiters, organizations, and companies [27]. They are one strategy that can help students not only find jobs but also think more clearly about their career paths [28] and therefore their future. Students can learn about diverse employment opportunities and career options, practice interviewing skills, network and interact with other students and professionals [27]. Hence, promoting and increasing career fairs and encouraging students to attend even if they are not currently looking for a job is important as it can have a positive impact on students' mental health and well-being.
7. **Wellness activities, such as meditation, yoga, and mindfulness** – Meditation, yoga, and mindfulness are popular practices used to improve mental health [13]. Yoga is a mind-body practice composed of physical postures, breathing techniques, and simple meditation exercises. This practice can help reduce mental distress [29], which includes anxiety, stress,

depression, and somatic symptoms such as fatigue, headaches, and sleeping problems [5]. Meditation is a practice that can calm the mind and improve awareness of oneself, mind, body, and the environment [30]. This practice can help reduce anxiety, stress, rumination, and increase forgiveness among students [31]. Mindfulness is a type of meditation that involves being fully present, observing without judgement, acting with awareness, and being nonreactive to experiences [32]. One can practice mindfulness in many forms such as focusing on the breathing, intentionally paying attention to what one is doing, drawing, coloring, journaling, among others. This practice can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression [32]. Meditation, yoga, and mindfulness can improve students' mental health thus improving their academic performance and overall well-being. Occasionally incorporating these activities and promoting all wellness resources that the educational institution offers can encourage students to practice and benefit from them.

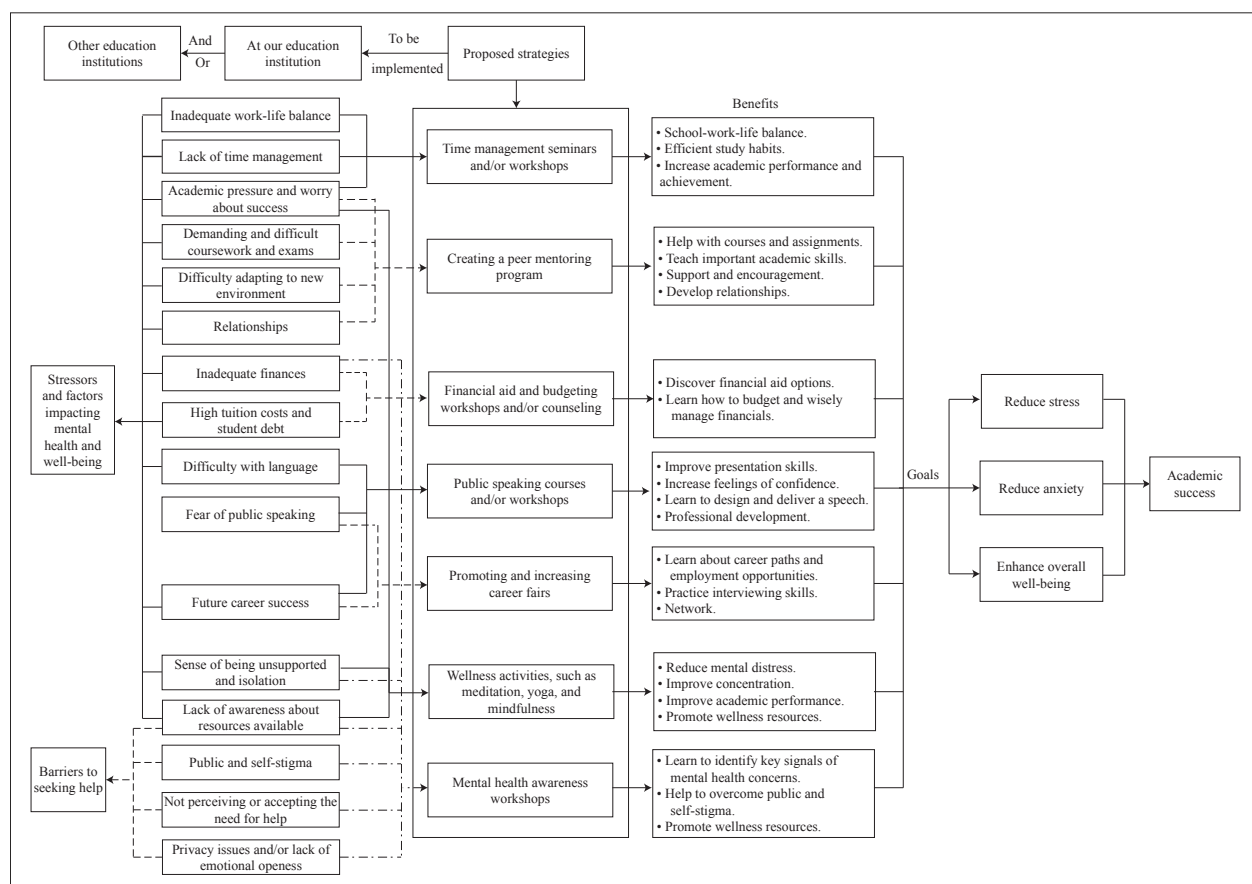


Figure 8: Proposed strategies to enhance well-being of students

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