

2020

## College Freshmen Perspectives of Teaching and Learning About Emotional Wellbeing

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Kathrine A. Pigeon

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Walden University  
2020

Abstract

College Freshmen Perspectives of Teaching and Learning About Emotional Wellbeing

by

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EDS, University of Mississippi, 2013

MA, University of Mississippi, 2012

BS, Middle Tennessee State University, 2010

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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## Abstract

This case study responded to a problem reported by freshman on evaluations from a university experience course. The students identified mental health as a significant barrier to succeeding academically, and the most critical area of students' need. The rationale for this study was to develop policy recommendations based on the content of the interviews that provide new insights and information to improve student experiences, offer adequate support and relief, and more effectively meet student needs. The first research question explored the perceptions of first-year students enrolled in a freshmen experience course at a local 4-year college regarding their learning about emotional wellbeing. The second research question investigated the preferences of first-year students enrolled in a freshmen experience course at a local 4-year college regarding instructional strategies while learning about emotional wellbeing. The framework for this study included Debellis's and Goldin's theory that students' beliefs on the subject matter in this study, mental health education, influences their learning. Data were collected from 9 student participants using semistructured interviews, a writing prompt, an observation checklist, and a research journal. The thematic analysis resulted in 5 themes: (a) significant and meaningful experiences; (b) most relevant course topics, activities, skills, and tools; (c) student recommendations and preferences for future courses; (d) student perceptions of the classroom environment, teacher, and student-teacher relationship; and (e) overall student perceptions, thoughts, initial attitude, emotions, and expectations of the course. Key findings led to a white paper to facilitate empathetic understanding and the development of improved teaching practices. The study can contribute to positive social change by refining student mental health learning and by enhancing the lives of college students through improving teaching, learning, and faculty training, and educating the college community.

College Freshmen Perspectives of Teaching and Learning About Emotional Wellbeing

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## Dedication

I dedicate this study to all the hard-working students, researchers, and educators who have had times of doubting oneself and thought they would never fulfill their purpose. At times when in pursuit of goals, it may seem we take two steps back for every step we take forward. While the journey makes us who we are and what we become, it is commitment to self and purpose that determines fate. Finally, this study is also dedicated to my parents, fiancé, and loved ones. I could not have done this without you. When I could not believe in myself, I persisted because you believed in me.

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The past five years of my life have been a personal and professional journey. The journey was not consistent, there were times of progress, frustration, self-doubt, and celebration. Some things did remain consistent and that was the support and guidance of Dr. Orr, Dr. Hogan, and Dr. Kendrick. You all have molded me into what I have become. I must say, what a transition! This finished product is not mine alone, we did it together.

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## Section 1: The Problem

The United States has undergone many significant changes such as the rapid increase of diverse populations, which is now an evident change in higher education (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Colleges and universities reflect and refract the major issues, changes, and shifts experienced by students. As cultural changes occur, the needs of students are changing. One of these societal changes includes an increase in mental illness. A positive relationship has been established between emotional/mental wellbeing, academic performance outcomes, student attendance, and general adjustment to higher education (Ning, Wihite, Wyatt, Young, & Bloemaker, 2012). There is a growing number of students enrolling in post-secondary institutions and reporting mental health concerns (Vanderlind, 2017).

Mental health issues are most likely to pose as a barrier to academic success during the transition period between high school and the postsecondary institution stage (Beiter et al., 2015). Due to the multiple dimensions in which a student may be affected by mental health, more energy and focus on meeting college students' mental health needs by improving education is needed by universities (Hancock & Agozzine, 2015). It is important to teach students about mental health education because they are in the process of becoming more responsible for their mental health and help-seeking behaviors. Also, students may be poorly informed about general mental health education and lack mental health awareness (Downs, Alderman, Schneiber, & Swerdlow, 2016). When college students face turmoil, mental health skills, and education are found to be deterrents to academic resiliency and student withdrawal (Hartley, 2013). The changing needs of students have resulted in friction and disconnect between meeting student needs and instructional strategies (Hancock & Algozzine, 2015). Raising faculty awareness on

student dispositions, enhancing instructive activities to minimize the negative variables on learning, supporting student affect, and promoting positive learning experiences can increase student performance while promoting the success of higher education (Eagan et al., 2016).

Because mental health wellness has been found to have a significant effect on college students in various ways, students could gain from more adequate university support (Eagan et al., 2016).

Although controversial, college years are the one time in a person's life where everything, including mental health care, is provided or can be provided in one place at the local university (Kilir & Wierman, 2013). The ideal environment that a university can provide a student with is one that not only trains for professional life and advances individual development, but one that also contributes to their psychosomatic, social, and mental wellbeing (Divaris et al., 2008). Even though concentration on the mental health of university students is growing, research studies investigating the student perceptions on teaching and learning about mental health are scarce. Many of the studies are from the faculty or university perspective (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013). Few studies examine the mental health challenges associated with university life from a student's viewpoint, despite the value it would have in improving mental health education and student support (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013).

The research problem addressed in this study pertained to student reports identifying mental health education as the most critical area of need, assistance, and the most significant barrier to their learning and success. The qualitative research method design, specifically a case study, was used in this study to learn about student perceptions on teaching and learning about mental health and wellbeing. The first step to improve teaching and learning about mental health is to gain a better understanding of student affect and perceptions on the learning content to

discover and develop instructional strategies (Lumpkin, Achen, & Dodd, 2015). I studied students using interviews. Using interviews was an ideal fit for this study because students should be given numerous opportunities and modes for self-expression in a student-centered, one-on-one environment to share their thoughts, beliefs, self-reflections, and reasoning freely and on their terms (Hancock & Algozzine, 2015). The better students are understood, the more information is available to change or develop teaching approaches and techniques, to best-fit students and maximize learning (Beiter et al., 2015).

Because universities only recently accepted responsibility for student mental health, qualitative research on teaching students about mental health is limited and reflects a gap in research and practice (Downs et al., 2014). I used a qualitative research design to fill that gap by increasing current understanding and knowledge, making it possible for new teaching techniques and practices to be developed (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). The freedom and flexibility of using interviews allow students the opportunity to experience those applied conditions. Expanding current knowledge and understanding about students is needed to make adequate changes to support students' emotional wellbeing, and necessary for the future success and prevalence of colleges (Beiter et al., 2015).

### **The Local Problem**

The local problem was reported by freshmen college students, at a 4-year southern university enrolled in a university experience course, reporting mental health education to be a high needs area, and a hindrance to learning (Smith, 2013). In this study, I worked to address the local problem regarding the unmet mental health education needs of freshmen, and mental health being a barrier to learning and academic success. Cited in the university's historical records, in

2006, educators at a southern university took immediate action in response to changing emerging trends in students by creating a department with courses designed from current research findings on mental health approaches and student survey findings to target retention (■■■ Facts and Statistics, 2016). A growing body of research regarding the mental health concerns of college students highlights the need for educators to think about the influence of mental health on students and to take action. Acting is vital considering how mental health may hinder or present a barrier to student success. Mental health resources on college campuses do not effectively meet the demands and needs of the new and growing student populations (Vanderlind, 2017). The same issue regarding generic U.S. universities failing to meet the new mental health needs of students is true at the local university as well (Alsup, 2018).

In recent years and to date, the volume of student reports regarding mental health obstacles and hardships has consistently increased annually (Vanderlind, 2017). Mental health challenges have been found to hinder and become a barrier to academic success and degree completion. Emotional, social, and academic intelligence interact with, and influence, one another (Matterson, 2015). All different types of intelligence need to be developed for students to become well-rounded and reach their full potential (McGowan et al., 2018). Nearly half of college students reported having mental noise, challenges, and distractions significant enough to negatively impact learning and performance (Beiter et al., 2015). In one study, 43% of students reported feelings of depression significant enough to make it a challenge for them to study (Beiter et al., 2015). Due to the growing number of students reporting mental health issues and the effects of mental wellness on student learning, inadequate mental health education is becoming a more common significant barrier to learning (Vanderlind, 2017). These challenges

are not only generically true of U.S. universities but have specifically been reported at the local university (Alsup, 2018).

The chancellor of the university stated, “The goal is for students to study in high-quality programs powered by an academic support system that is well-rounded and addresses diverse student needs to enable them to stay on track” (Alsup, 2018). It is understood attaining goals that meet the academic and mental needs of all students and diverse student populations has been a challenge. Mental health education improvements are needed to meet the new and growing needs of the “new student” (Vanderlind, 2017). This relates to mental health because a stronger support system would sustain student mental health and, in return, academic success on not only a national level but a local one as well.

The number of freshmen enrolling at the southern university has declined for the second year in a row from 3,697 in 2017 to 3,455, a 6.5% decrease, in 2018 (Alsup, 2018). Although the number of students enrolling in the university has decreased, the number of students enrolled in the course has increased. This is related to mental health because it may reflect the growing number of students seeking and needing additional support (█████ Facts and Statistics, 2016). The director of the academic probation program admitted, “There is an increase in students with issues pertaining to their mental health and wellbeing” (██████████, personal communication, May 14, 2013). The ` course and academic probation course are considered developmental courses and according to Vanderlind (2017), there is no existing research on the connection between students in developmental education and mental health, which poses a grave concern due to the rising number of mental health concerns reported by college students. This is problematic on a local level because mental health was reported by students to hinder academic

success and degree completion. It is evident in the school's data that no significant progress in addressing this issue has been made by the local university (████ Facts and Statistics, 2016).

The university's success and future rely on the students, and the small local community significantly relies on the university's growth, and the population of students for business (Kilir & Wierman, 2013). The decline in freshmen enrollment at the southern university is reflected and supported by the decline in the number of students enrolling in any university across the state (Alsup, 2018). The university is responsible for the mental health needs of students, and universities have access to large numbers of individuals who may potentially be affected or helped (Vanderlind, 2017). Additionally, if more adequate and sufficient mental health support existed and was highlighted to potential students, more individuals may become more inclined to enroll.

On a local level, the university provides more than 14,000 jobs and provides \$200 million in payroll and these numbers have significantly increased since this last report and continue to increase as the university grows (Kilir & Wierman, 2013). Like most townships in this state, the university is in a small town with minimal economic advantages other than the university. More than \$200 million dollars are paid in property taxes alone and the university accounts for more than 1 billion dollars yearly in economic activity in the local community, which is more than 75% of the local economy (Kilir & Wierman, 2013). The influence of the university on the local economy is so significant, it affects the entire state economy (Kilir & Wierman, 2013). Supporting student mental health is supporting enrollment, and supporting enrollment is supporting the local university and city employment. These factors critically influence the local economy which is largely dependent on the local university (Alsup, 2018). Therefore, it is

critical to monitor the local university's growth and changes within students to assess new and/or changing needs in students, such as mental health, to facilitate not only their success but the university's success.

### **Rationale**

The rationale of this study was to conduct a case study on college freshmen perceptions of teaching and learning about mental health education to further current knowledge on student perspectives of mental health education. By using qualitative methods to gain a deeper individualized understanding of college student perceptions regarding teaching and learning about mental health, I hope is to aid in filling gaps in the literature, and to address the problem of how the mental health needs of students are met. Mental health issues are becoming increasingly reported by freshmen students and have established a sense of urgency to better adapt teaching techniques to meet these needs by using the findings from this study to improve and change how learning about the subject of mental health is approached and taught (██████████, personal communication, May 14, 2013).

Findings may support and offer further insight into the past quantitative research study results (Morgan, Pullon, Macdonald, McKinlay, & Gray, 2017). Moreover, learning more about the aspects of students will facilitate the development of new teaching techniques and instructional strategies. Conducting a case study on the mental health education college freshman receive in an introductory course to the university is the goal of this research. The focus is to use semistructured interviewing, an observation checklist, and a student writing prompt to further the current understanding of student perceptions on teaching and learning about mental health. The findings from this study will advance current knowledge and understanding of student



perceptions allowing new teaching techniques and practices to be developed from the results. The findings from all three data sources will be used to review and adjust the curriculum and provide additional training workshops for faculty.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Affect* is one of several internal representations in individuals and the affective system is more than an insignificant response to cognitive representation or a mere component of cognition. Affect encodes information about external and social environments along with information about the cognitive and affective components of a person and others including social and cultural expectations (Eagen et al., 2016). Affect influences a person's values, beliefs, belief structure, and ultimately their perspective (Hannula, 2002).

*Beliefs* are multiple-encoded cognitive/affective configurations and include positional encoding where an individual attribute some type of truth value (Hannula, 2002). Beliefs have a psychological function in individuals and are affective in nature (Hannula, 2002). Affect stabilizes beliefs.

*Belief structure* is a set of supportive, reinforcing, and consistent beliefs that warrant cognitive and supportive affect in individuals (Hannula, 2002). This is individually based whereas belief systems are socially and culturally shared belief structures that imply beliefs people should hold, but perhaps, are not held by everyone (Hannula, 2002).

*Campus climate* is determined by the present attitudes, behaviors, and standards of faculty, staff, administrators, and students regarding the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential attitudes (Stebleton, Soria, Huesman, & Torres, 2014). Campus climate has a strong influence on student affect and perception.

*Emotional learning* is the ability to identify and regulate emotion, solve problems, and develop positive relationships by applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary. Emotional learning enhances self-awareness, social-awareness, responsibility in decision making, impulse control, stress management, persistence, goal setting, motivation, and relational skills (Praditsang, Hanafi, & Walters, 2015).

*Learning style or learning preferences* is an individual's preferred or favorite way to intake knowledge or information (Riner & Willingham, 2010).

*Mental health* is determined by emotional, social, and psychological wellbeing (George, 2013). Mental health affects thoughts, feelings, and actions. Mental health predicts how students handle stress, relate to others, and make decisions. The World Health Organization (2011) explained mental health as the condition of a person's mental state, the realization of personal potential, having the ability to cope with life stressors, and being able to work productively and fruitfully.

*Mental health crises* defined by Kadison and DiGeronimo (2014) is the name given to the current period in higher education describing the sudden increase of mental health issues in students and the limited number of teachers and resources to meet student mental health education needs.

*Mental Health Stigma* is defined by college student beliefs about the meaning of mental health its acceptance or resistance (Askell-Williams & Lawson, 2015). There are two distinct types of mental health stigma: social stigma and perceived stigma. Social stigma refers to how society and peers view mental health as negative or positive. Perceived stigma refers to each person's perception of mental health on the inside and as an individual. A person's perception of

social stigma and perceived personal stigma can conflict or contradict and sometimes are only differentiated by awareness. For example, a person may view social stigma regarding mental health as negative and refrain from addressing mental issues for social reasons and to align with peers. However, a person may also perceive mental health differently on a personal level or as it related to them personally versus in a social context or social context involving sharing personal information. Social stigma is characterized by predetermined attitudes and discriminating behaviors directed toward individuals with mental health challenges because of a label they have acquired. In contrast, perceived stigma or self-stigma is the internalization of perceptions of discrimination by the individual suffering from mental health (Link, Cullen, Struening, & Shrout, 1989).

*Mental noise* occurs when a problem, stressor, or fear exists causing the mind to be preoccupied with thoughts until unpleasant feelings, thoughts, and emotion increase so much, the mind is distressed to the extent that it becomes impossible to reach its full learning potential due to the distraction of mental noise (Beiter et al., 2015). Occurring as an involuntary action, the mind is prevented from focusing on the present task (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz & Perry, 2006).

*Metacognition* is higher-order thinking which empowers understanding, analysis, and management over one's cognitive processes, especially during learning (Al-khateeb, 2011).

*Perception* is described as the process in which information from an outside environment is taken, constructed, and re-organized to make meaningful sense to a person (Lumpkin et al., 2015). Because the process of perception is subjective, individuals may have different perceptions of the same environment depending on the specific parts of the situation each selectively absorbs, how each organizes the information and the way each interprets it to process

the situation (Lumpkin et al., 2015). The beliefs, values, belief structures, and belief systems a person holds from their biology and life experiences are variables that determine their perception (Hannula, 2002). Perception is unique across individuals and is important in understanding and predicting behavior. Perception is influenced by a person's needs, therefore, understanding perception helps teachers better understand student needs (Lumpkin et al., 2015).

*Social-emotional intelligence* is the ability to identify, interpret, and control one's emotions while recognizing the emotions and feelings of others (Matterson, 2015). To have emotional intelligence means to have multiple intelligences. In students, IQ and emotional intelligence will be viewed as parallel processes running dependent on one another, yet both processes significantly impact the other. Emotional intelligence cannot be viewed as independent of cognitive processes according to this theory (Matterson, 2015).

*Social and emotional learning* is explained as the process in which a person gains and effectively exerts the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to understand and regulate emotions, set and meet positive goals, feel and reflect empathy to others, find and maintain healthy relationships, and make appropriate choices (Ning et al., 2012).

*Student affect* is the attitudes, interests, and values students gain from school. These items become a defining part of shaping students after school and in their scholastic academic achievements (Popham, 2018).

*Student-centered learning* encompasses a wide variety of educational programs, learning experiences, instructional approaches, and academic-support strategies with the intention to address the specific learning needs, interests, aspirations, or cultural backgrounds of individual students and groups of students (Viti & Henning, 2014).

*Student resilience* described by Himmel (2015) as the ability of students to adjust and continue academically, despite adversity. Resilience is developed.

*Student wellbeing* is not only the absence of disease but a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellness. A state of wellbeing in which a person recognizes his or her capabilities can cope with daily life stressors, productively work and be fruitful, and can give back to his or her community (McGowan et al., 2018). Emotional wellbeing is described as the ability to grow and learn from experiences. Being emotionally well is having the power to express feelings, the ability to exercise emotional expression, and the capability of forming supportive and interdependent relationships with others (Praditsang et al., 2015).

*Values* are distinct from beliefs because they are philosophically-based versus psychologically-based though they are closely entwined (Hannula, 2002). Values reflect what is worthy, valuable, or good versus what is empirical and logical. Values are a personal choice and a part of the affective system in a person and a powerful motivator, driving individuals to define their purpose and determine right from wrong (Hannula, 2002).

### **Significance of the Study**

In this study, I worked to address the local problem of mental health named by first-year college students enrolled in a freshmen experience course at a local 4-year southern university as a significant barrier to academic learning and success. Learning about student perceptions and affect can further current understanding of student needs and existing dispositions. Depending on the information gained from this study, the universities could further develop training for teachers and make changes to better meet student needs. Changes to class instruction such as

adding activities to lessen the negativity of student dispositions could be developed and implemented.

The understanding that mental health wellness influences student learning, combined with the fact that more students are reporting mental health challenges, shows that universities are seeking solutions to better support student mental health (Vanderlind, 2017). Many significant factors are impacting the prevalence of higher education that depends on student success such as enrollment rates, degree completion, funding, and college employment placement (Kettuen, 2015). Most contributors and stakeholders decrease funding depending on student degree completion rates (Kettuen, 2015). Supporting student mental health supports university finances and funding by keeping more students enrolled and reflecting genuine positive regard in student wellness. When funding to higher education institutions decreases the cost to the student can increase, limiting the opportunity for some, and creating a large financial barrier for others (Kettuen, 2015). These issues may create additional mental distress if students do not engage in stress management due to their limited mental health education or lack of resources. Additional variables of stress can contribute individually or collectively to the overall mental wellness of students (Kettuen, 2015). The more students struggle with mental health, the more likely they are to quit school and enter the job market without a degree. If the number of individuals entering the job market without a degree increases, employers may be tempted to emphasize degree completion less in the hiring process and lower pay (Kettuen, 2015). This may result in employers valuing a degree less when hiring for entry-level positions (Kettuen, 2015). It is important to be effective when teaching students about mental health and attaining more information about student perspectives on mental health education or teaching and learning about

mental health is needed to develop and implement evidence-based changes (Knolls and Annas, 2018). Young adults are the prime age for the onset of mental health issues due to biological and developmental reasons; however, college student freshmen are the most susceptible to the occurrence and onset of mental health issues because of the additional challenges this population faces such as financial, academic, adjustment, social, and transition from high school into adulthood stressors (Knolls & Annas, 2018). For this reason, meeting students' mental health needs is necessary to limit barriers to student success, support degree completion, and secure higher education's future while upholding the value of earning a college degree (Downs et al., 2014)

### **The National Problem**

On a national level, there are more mass shooting tragedies on college campuses now than ever before in history (Paolini, 2015). From the first highly publicized massive high school shooting in 1999 at Columbine High School to The University of Virginia Tech in 2007, and to more recently The University of North Carolina last year, 70% of college campus mass shootings have one common denominator, the mental health condition of the perpetrators (Peterson & Densley, 2019). Campus shootings and violence are rising and may be correlated to the growing number of students reporting mental health challenges. Although mental health is not the complete reason or an excuse for these tragedies, it was a defining characteristic of the perpetrators in the examples listed. Other common characteristics of offenders include past trauma and violent behavior. All perpetrators had a record of mental health disturbance and red warning flags. Most mass shootings especially on college campuses occur during high-stress such as at the end of the academic year in April or May or at the end of the fall semester.

Peterson and Densley (2019) stated most campus shooting could be prevented with more adequate mental health resources and assessment; however, first universities must overcome not wanting to talk about and lack of funding for research and resources for mental health.

These incidents bring national attention to students' emotional and mental health needs (Prince, 2015). Individuals suffering from mental health disorders are more than twice as likely to commit violent acts (Duwe & Rocque, 2018). This is symptomatic of the mental health crisis because more individuals suffer, report, or act out violently due to mental health problems on college campuses than anywhere else (Kadison, 2014). Unlike high school shoots, in 83% on mass college campus shootings the perpetrator was not white (Peterson & Densley, 2019). Diverse student populations may be more at risk for mental health issues (Knolls and Annas, 2018). For this reason, strategies for teaching and learning about mental health education should include a wide range of practices and approaches to cater to as many different students as possible. Because most of these violent acts take place at education institutions, this is a significant concern (Knolls & Annas, 2018). Universities have a responsibility to the students to create quality learning environments and address student needs because it effects campus safety (Prince, 2015). Improving mental health education supports a positive and supportive mental health climate and may allow students to recognize mental distress in others and report it if necessary (Paolini 2015). Since Columbine, the United States has not solved the problem, there is on average one mass shooting a day and most occur in educational settings including college campuses (Duwe & Rocque, 2018). The contributions resulting from this study could improve mental health education, decrease violent acts, enable others to identify and report mental



distress in others, promote a supportive mental health community and provide new knowledge from which better teaching and learning techniques can develop to support student success.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions are focused on perceptions of first-year university students enrolled in a freshmen introductory experience course at a 4-year college located in the south. Although the course is not required, it is taken by 80% of incoming freshmen who enroll for their first semester at the university. Besides a few additional course objectives and a stricter course schedule and nature, the experience course is like any other course taken by freshmen during their second semester who are on academic probation following their first semester. Student attitudes, perspectives, expectations, and participation may vary significantly between the two courses because in the first-course students choose to be there and are more likely to participate compared to those who are required to enroll in the second course due to being placed on academic probation from their first semester. Because mental health education was determined to be a need, the goal of the research questions is to learn more about perceptions of first-year students enrolled in a freshmen experience course at a local 4-year college. Learning more about student perspectives will further current knowledge and understanding, hence, reducing the problem in this study. The research questions will frame the study and will require learning about the perceptions of first-year students enrolled in a first-year experience course. The information gained will further current knowledge about different aspects of students and facilitate the development of teaching techniques and approaches, which can be shared at a workshop.

RQ 1: What are the perceptions of first-year students enrolled in a freshmen experience course at a local 4-year college regarding their learning about emotional wellbeing?

RQ 2: What are the preferences of first-year students enrolled in a freshmen experience course at a local 4-year college regarding instructional strategies while learning about emotional wellbeing?

### **Review of the Literature**

To conduct this literature review, I used the Walden University Library for research and to access electronic databases such as EBSCOhost in combination with databases in the library at a university, Google Scholar, ERIC, Education, and human development databases. Equally important, the terms that I used in the search process were *the impact of mental health on learning and academic achievement; student perceptions on learning, and mental health and wellness education and learning and teaching theories*. For quality control, I selected only peer-reviewed articles from the multiple databases used and cited. Some information overlapped in articles cited across different databases.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Research on student learning and academic success tends to focus on cognition more and on affect less (Savitz-Romer, Rowan-Kenyon, & Fancsali, 2015). The framework applied to this study stems from Debellis and Goldin's (1997) approach to the process underlying attitudes, thoughts, and feelings. Affect is one of several internal representations humans have and the affective system is more than an insignificant response to cognitive representations. The affective system encodes information about external and social environments, information about the cognitive and affective components of a person, and information about the cognitive and affective components of others including the social and cultural expectations represented in and projected by individuals (Eagen et al., 2016). Information the affective system encodes is

context-dependent and can change (Costa & Faria, 2015). For example, a student may feel confident giving a speech at a church or to their sorority but not in a speech class. Affect shapes, drives, and gives meaning to a person's strongly held beliefs, values, and belief structures (Hannula, 2002). These variables create and define human perspectives.

Beliefs are definite encoded cognitive and affective configurations and where a person attributes a truth value (Hannula, 2002). Educators who seek to change student beliefs or perspectives on learning about a subject are unlikely to be successful by simply addressing the content of a student's belief. Educators must go a step further and provide learning experiences and opportunities which are rich, diverse, and powerful in emotional content to facilitate change or reconstruction in a student's meta-affect and perspective (Hannula, 2002). Students must be in a context-appropriate environment to develop and learn (Savitz-Romer et al., 2015). Students do not change instantly, change is developed overtime (Parker, Saklofske, & Keefer, 2017). Learning opportunities and experiences are needed to assist student development and progress (Parker et al., 2017). Changes to belief structures regarding learning require changes in affect followed by cognition. The affective system in learning is central to cognition, affective configurations provoke, facilitates, emphasize, subdue, and otherwise interact with cognitive configurations in highly context-dependent ways (Savitz-Romer et al., 2015). Because this interaction is content-dependent, it would be beneficial to study student perceptions on teaching and learning about mental health, personality dispositions are measured by exploring a student's beliefs and values (Parker et al., 2017).

Affect underlies every expression of evaluation and is an important component to be aware of as well as the context of the environment when teaching (Costa & Faria, 2015). Gaining

a better understanding of student affect allows the interviewer to adjust questions and gives them additional insight into underlying processes and feelings allowing more knowledge to be gained on student perceptions. If gaining a better understanding of student perceptions is possible from this study, teachers will be able to use learning about student dispositions to improve instruction planning and incorporate activities to promote positive attitudes and minimize negative influences (Popham, 2018).

Debellis and Goldin viewed feelings and affects as parallel to cognition and critical to cognitive processes such as attention bias and memory action tendencies (Hannula, 2002). They studied the effects of student affective factors on their learning and success in a college course. The findings from the study showed student affective factors affect various learning processes and resiliency. Affective states influence the strategic decisions made during problem-solving and are context-dependent (Savitz-Romer et al., 2015). For example, feelings of frustration may evoke a change of approach to learning or solving a problem. Feeling frustrated during learning can trigger anxiety due to a fear of failure resulting in the meta-affective context becoming stressful and fearful. This framework is selected because it emphasizes the importance and needs to study students qualitatively to enhance understanding of each student's unique perspective on teaching and learning while also gaining insight into their affect.

Educators who simply attempt to modify students' strongly held beliefs and perspectives on teaching and learning about a subject are not likely to be successful because addressing or confronting the content or reasoning behind these beliefs and perspectives is only the starting point. The next step is to provide students with experiences and opportunities which are rich, intentional, diverse, and powerful in emotional/affective content to facilitate each student's

rewiring and reconstruction of new meta-affect, in turn allowing perspectives on teaching and learning to be modified (Hannula, 2002). Ultimately, studying students on a personal level is required to assess the individual qualities of each student.

Emotions, attitudes, beliefs, morals, ethics, and values are all subdomains of a person's affective state identified by Debellis and Golding (1997). Emotions are rapidly changing feelings embedded in context and underlie every expression of evaluation whether in school, interview, or counseling. Emotions can be measured by the adaptive-homeostatic arousal response where facial expression is observed and the student can verbally express their subjective experience. Students can learn to control and regulate their emotions, but it must be in an environment that condones their development (Savitz-Romer et al. 2015). The context of some environments restrains student development (Costa & Faria, 2015). If a student is aware of or learns to become aware of their emotions, they can identify, reflect on, and manage their emotions if adequate support, education, and opportunities for new learning experiences are received (Hannula, 2002). This is important because past learning experiences can create emotionally charged mindsets in the present causing mental noise. Mental noise is distracting, uncontrollable, and has a negative influence on the affective state of each student. Because mental noise disables the mind from concentrating on the present task, student learning potential is decreased.

As previously cited, beliefs are stabilized by affect, laid the foundation for understanding underlying student activity and parallel relationship to learning. Hannula (2002), reported student attitudes may predict student learning goals. Attitudes are concrete predispositions towards ways of feeling in types of situations and incorporates the balance between affect and cognition (Ning et al., 2012). Due to emotions, expectation, values, attitude is viewed as a category of behavior.

Beliefs are a result of student analyses of internal representations to which they have attributed truth, validity, and applicability (Hannula, 2002). Student beliefs, feelings, thoughts, and attitudes towards learning reflect student perceptions towards learning. There is a difference between a student feeling emotionally competent versus being emotionally competent and the context in which their perception exists is the distinguisher (Parker et al., 2017). This is important because perception can be a barrier to learning, influence the learning experience, and affect learning outcomes. These components which makeup perception are critical to identify and target in student to enable change and the educator to provide a variety of new opportunities (Hannula, 2002). Belief structures exist on an individual basis and are cognitively based but incorporate supporting affect. If the structure is socially or culturally shared, it is distinguished from an individual's structure and becomes a belief system (Hannula, 2002).

Attitude can be influenced by peers, personal and social goals, and expectations of learning. Due to the effect of student beliefs, feelings, thoughts, attitudes, and overall perceptions on learning, a multidimensional approach is needed. Because of the strong relationship these variables have on academic achievement, course expectations, student attitude towards learning, and goal setting, Debellis and Goldin's framework will be used in this study (Hannula, 2002). Debellis and Goldin's framework connects student affect and perception of learning. Learning about student perspectives gives educators insight into their affect and gaining this information allows educators to gain a full understanding of each student and as a unique individual (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Learning about student perspectives helps educators identify and target potential emotional and mental barriers to learning due to a student's beliefs, perspectives, and values. From here, these variables can be challenged and changed by providing students with

adequate education, skills, learning experiences, emotional experiences, learning opportunities, and with reflections of their affect. Raising student awareness of their mental health, reflecting affect, and providing better education on mental health enables students to learn to manage, control, identify, and regulate their emotions (Praditsang et al., 2015). Students who have strong emotional regulation and intelligence persist longer academically when fatigued or feeling distressed because they can cope or adjust (Parker et al., 2017).

Mental health education is important to teach college students because they are becoming more responsible for their health and maybe poorly informed and may lack mental health awareness (Beiter et al., 2015). Learning about student perspectives on teaching and learning about mental health and understanding their affective experience or system supports student success by preventing and controlling potential mental or emotional barriers to learning by improving education on mental health and each student's affect system (Hannula, 2002). The importance and influence emotional health has on learning and success have driven the development of some programs and practices to promote wellness (Parker et al., 2017); however, more need to be created which place a greater emphasis on the context and environment of programs because of some contexts rest development (Costa & Faria, 2015).

### **Review of the Broader Problem**

#### **College Freshmen Student Characteristics**

Although college students are more diverse than ever before, there are still common trends in student characteristics. Seventy-three percent of college students have reported experiencing a crisis about their mental health while in college (Carmack., Nelson, Hocke-Mirzashvili, & Fife, 2018).

Most students note the transition to college from high school and from their parents to independence to be harder than they thought (Robinson, 2015). Students were not aware of their present emotional state or mental noise and were unprepared to handle the increase in mental noise, emotions, and adjustment (Robinson, 2015). Defining characteristics of college students today include a decrease in spirituality from 45% to 36% in the last 18 years, a decrease in emotional wellness confidence from 64% to 47% since 1985, feelings of being overwhelmed have increased from 18% to 41% since 1985, and campus climate is reported to be less supportive and positive since 2014 (Hussar, 2017). Additionally, students are more polarized, less interested in humanities, spend less time with friends, are more materialistic, and less philosophical, and have more diverse personalities compared to past trends (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Some of these characteristics and changes in trends may influence student mental health making it necessary for educators to further their understanding of students to offer better support by improving education.

Overall students attributed their turmoil to “personal circumstances” or stressors in their life. Sixty-four percent of students reported the reason for dropping pertained to mental health issues, half of these students did not seek any help because they were unaware of the severity of the issue at the time and lacked information on how to find accommodations (Carmack et al., 2018). Grade point averages tend to decrease when mental issues exist and especially if the issue is related to suicide or depression (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Another factor that significantly effects grade point average if the student externalizes and/or internalized their mental health struggle (Bruffaerts, et al., 2018). Factors which triggered mental health issues were anxiety, panic, depression, poor adjustment, financial burdens, homesickness, feelings of loneliness and



isolation, stress from courses, social resources and/or skills, and post-traumatic stress resurfacing because of an increase in daily stress (Carmack et al., 2018). Themes found in freshman were issues dealing with diversity, stereotypes, and discrimination and making friends or having a safe and supportive environment (Long & Lane, 2014). Positive influencers of mental health are establishing a wellness routine, lifestyle adjustment, lifestyle therapeutic change, exposure to mental health education, healthy living options, and being prepared to access campus resources (Downs et al., 2014).

Seventy percent of students who graduate enroll in post-secondary education and 37-39% graduate (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Certain biological, environmental, and mental variables have a strong influence on overall mental health and in turn influence academic achievement. academic achievement. There are significant gender differences in dropout rates. Students who slept five to nine hours a night or socialized one to five hours a day were more likely to succeed academically (Long & Lane, 2014). Sleep and healthy social relationships affect the mental state, which can take a toll on mental health. Sleep is proven to weaken mental defenses, cognitive processing, the immune system, and negatively effects rational reasoning (Log & Lane, 2014). Students attribute academic probation to time management 78.9%, personal/relationships 48.3%, all health 24.4%, and 14.8% to an undisclosed issue (Long & Lane, 2014). Other common variables were, classroom sizes being too large, too many or too few teaching assistants, language barriers, and emotions such as nervousness to meet teachers during office hours. Social and living environment issues were also named such as roommate conflict, isolation, and poor contact with the resident assistant. Social anxiety is one of the most commonly reported mental health concerns (Praditsang et al., 2015). These additional stressors individually or collectively can

wear down on students' overall mental wellness. Finally, variables cited were not addressing health needs, not continuing medications prescribed, and lack of stress and emotional management and control (Bruffaerts et al., 2018).

### **Mental Health Shift in Colleges and Universities**

Formerly, psychiatrists and mental health professionals had an ancillary role in college mental health but that is changing (Downs et al., 2014). According to Prince (2015), higher education institutions have a role and a significant influence on the mental health of students. Higher education institutions are responsible for the mental health and wellness of its students although in the past this responsibility was rejected and is still controversial today (Downs et al., 2014). As defined by George (2013) student mental health is a state of emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. Mental health influences how a person thinks, feels, and acts (George, 2013). Mental health pre-determines how students react to stress, relate to others and make decisions (Thompson, 2014). Many factors contribute to mental health problems including biological factors, such as genes or brain chemistry, life experiences, such as trauma or abuse, and family history of mental health problems (George, 2013). The former role higher education institutions played in student mental health was and is still controversial and some still view the necessity to incorporate general mental health education in freshmen courses skeptically (Downs et al., 2014). This influence has contributed to the limited amount of literature produced from research studies on the relationship between mental health academic performance, specifically from a student's perspective (Prince, 2015).

Opportunities to attend college have expanded in recent years resulting in an increase in student diversity at colleges and reflecting the demographic changes in not only students but the

people of the United States (Eagan et al., 2016). Along with the increase in the diversity of student populations, student mental health needs and issues have also increased and become more diverse (McAllister et al., 2014). Analyzing 50 years of data from the CIRP freshman survey uncovered how many students have changed over five decades. College students today have more drive than they did 50 years ago, however, they also reported having more challenges involving their mental health (Eagan et al., 2016). Nearly half of college students reported having mental noise, challenges, and distractions significant enough to negatively impact learning and performance (Beiter et al., 2015).

The prevalence of mental health issues reported by students is rising annually along with diversity in student demographics and student needs (McAllister et al., 2014). There is enormous pressure on educators not only to keep up but to effectively meet the mental health needs of students (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2012). The amount of need has placed a strain on educators and the volume exceeds faculty member numbers and resources. Wang (2014) reported half of the students admitted having mental and emotional needs and 17% met the criteria to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder. Ninety-one percent of university counselors reported seeing an increase in students who reported experiencing mental health distress (McAllister et al., 2014). In one study 43% of students reported feelings of depression significant enough to make it a challenge for them to study (Beiter et al., 2015).

### **Mental Health Education and Campus Climate**

Due to the increase in student mental health needs and campus tragedies, Prince (2015) declared there is a nationwide mental health crisis across all higher education institutions. Kadison and DiGeronimo (2014) suggested that mental health refers to the efficient, satisfactory,

and sustainable state of mind. Mental health is a basic human psychological process of content integrity and coherence. Kadison and DiGeronimo (2014) coined the phrase “mental health crises” to describe the strain on resources, overload on faculty, and the inability of faculty members to evolve fast enough to meet the increasing mental health needs of college students. An increase in the number of faculty members and time is needed to relearn who students are today and understand their changing needs and perspectives on various issues to start moving forward. The rapid growth of student enrollment and the number of students identifying diverse mental health challenges across a large scale negatively effects faculty member’s sense of credibility (Knolls & Annas, 2018). A change is needed, and a plan needs to be developed and implemented to relieve, train, assist, support, and develop faculty members to allow them to better meet the needs of students and enhance student learning and support. For this reason, a study focusing on examining student perspectives on teaching and learning about mental health in a classroom setting is needed to support faculty, enhance the current policy by implementing changes, improve student learning, and to further support student success. Studies show the way students mentally process change, campus environment, mental stress, challenges, and other things has a significant impact on developmental and academic outcomes and faculty members have the potential aid processing (Stebbleton et al., 2014).

Few perpetrators of mass shootings have a verified history of being treated for a mental illness and all share common psychological characteristics, however, most displayed symptoms which would lead to diagnosis (Duwe & Rocque, 2018). Individuals suffering from mental health disorders are 59-62% more likely to commit violent acts (Duwe & Rocque, 2018). Seventy percent of mass shootings occur at education institutions or businesses and 40% of

perpetrators commit suicide (Knolls and Annas, 2018). Universities have a responsibility to create optimal learning environments and address student needs because it effects campus safety (Prince, 2015). Improving mental health education supports a positive and supportive mental health climate and may allow students to recognize mental distress in others and report it if necessary.

Social-cultural factors found in perpetrators include being a minority, social rejection, social isolation, social identity, and social inclusion or acceptance (Knolls & Annas, 2018). These factors are supported by higher education institutions by attempts to create and promote student social inclusion, efforts to create a respectful accepting campus climate, and promoting student engagement and transformation. Campus climate is explained as the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards of faculty, staff, administrators, and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential (Knolls & Annas, 2018). Diversity and inclusion efforts made by the university are not complete unless it addresses campus climate because the campus climate is considered a key component to a carrying out a comprehensive plan for diversity. Policies and practices are often revised to raise opportunities, advance social justice, and create quality experiences for all diverse groups of students with sensitivity to marginalized and underserved populations (Stebbleton et al., 2014).

Many studies have been conducted and support the notion that the way students experience their campus environment influences developmental and learning outcomes (Stebbleton et al., 2014). Negative environments have been proven to negatively impact learning. Campus climate also has a critical influence on faculty (Knolls & Annas, 2018). Faculty who experience the campus and work climate as positive, feel more personally and professionally

supported (Knolls & Annas, 2018). There is a direct relationship between workplace discrimination and negative job and career attitudes (Wang, 2014). Public education regarding mental illness can loosen fears and fight the negative stigma and facilitate a positive, supportive, and accepting mental health community (Knolls & Annas, 2018). Connectedness and acceptance by communities can impact the occurrence of potentially traumatic events. Beneficial public health includes enhanced education beginning in elementary, continuing throughout college with a focus on anger and conflict resolution, self-awareness and expression, and mental health education. These factors are supported by higher education institutions by attempts to create and promote student social inclusion, efforts to create a respectful accepting campus climate, education, and by promoting student engagement and transformation (Wang, 2014).

### **Mental Health and Academic Performance**

Student mental and emotional health is found to influence student learning capacity and scholastic achievement (Pekrun et al., 2006). Praditsang et al. (2015) conducted a study to determine if social and emotional intelligence was related to learning behavior. Emotional intelligence is defined in this study as to how a person handles their emotional stress and how they relate to those around them or a person's personal and social competence (Praditsang et al., 2015). Social intelligence is defined in this study as the ability to live with others in society and alter behavior accordingly (Praditsang, et al., 2015). A multiple regression analysis was used and found social intelligence to have a more significant impact on learning behavior than emotional intelligence (Praditsang, et al., 2015) Although social intelligence had a more significant impact on learning, learning to adapt supports emotional wellness.

Mental health and student perceptions of school, learning, and confidence are strongly correlated (Askill-Williams & Lawson, 2015). Mental health and human perception can strongly influence one another. Suldo, Gormley, Pupaul, and Butcher (2014) argued, cognitive intelligence is not the sole predictor of student performance and that other predictors include affective and cognitive functioning, and ability or emotional intelligence. As cited in the conceptual framework section the affective system is central to cognition and this system can represent, promote, emphasize, subdue, and otherwise interact with cognitive configurations in highly context-dependent ways. A positive relationship between emotional intelligence, measures of academic performance, student attendance, and overall adjustment to higher education have been found in a study (Ning et al., 2012). In the same study by Ning et al. (2012) students exposed to social and emotional learning during the first semester of college were found to have more control of their mental health and higher-grade point averages across multiple semesters compared to students who were not, more research, especially qualitative is needed to raise awareness and make improvements (Sutton & Austin, 2013). Studying student perceptions of teaching and learning allow improvements to be made and this may facilitate universities to include mental health education and emotional learning in required freshmen courses versus in an optional seminar or workshop.

Students with little or no mental health education are poorly equipped to cope and in a review of literature Markoulakis and Kirsh (2013) described that these students experience difficulties with concentration, motivation, decision-making, organization, stress management, and focusing resulting in students' affects lowering and negatively affected memory, attendance, attention, participation, and assessment. These factors were found to lower student confidence

and causing them to withdraw from the university experience by avoiding class and faculty interaction due to shame. Other ways these factors manifested as academic difficulties are class participation, group work engagement, assignment completion, exam preparation, focus during exams, and overall productivity (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013). Students with mental health issues are more likely to experience lower grades and have a higher rate of experiencing academic attrition (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013). Mental health issues strongly impact the odds of a student's success or failure in a university setting and the conditions resulting from mental health challenges compromise their ability to meet academic standards.

The more severe a student experiences mental distress, the more severe their academic impairment. During times of stress, the extent students engage in mental health-promoting behaviors positively influences wellbeing (Derosier, Frank, Schwartz, & Leary, 2013). Derosier, Frank, Schwartz, and Leary (2013) found behavior, adjustment, and emotional stability made the list when students reported 25 ways stress affects them. The development of mental health skills by improving student retention (Turner & Thompson, 2014). For example, students should be taught how to manage negative feelings, self-talk and thoughts to support their mental health because these items strongly impact student motivation, effort, and ability to be fully engaged in the learning process (Pekrun, et al., 2006). Mental health distress creates mental noise, which distracts and takes away from the learning process and experience. Emotions influence cognitive processes and strategies used in learning (Pekrun et al., 2002).

Positive emotions related to metacognition facilitate creative and flexible ways of thinking (Pekrun, et al., 2002). Promoting positive emotional wellbeing enhances student learning potential by opening their mind, allowing more teaching approaches to be effective,



making students more reachable, and increasing cognitive connections (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013). Quality mental health education can prevent mental health factors from causing academic impairment (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013). Overall, unmet student needs due to inadequate or minimal mental health education have been cited as the most influential factor regarding student success in learning. In brief, students who have completed education and training in mental health are better at perceiving the presence and severity of mental health illness (Granello & Granello, 2000).

Although there is strong evidence from reported findings in literature support the negative impact mental stress has on academic achievement, there is also literature that disagrees. Markoulakis and Kirsh (2013) reviewed literature from studies suggesting mental stress can enhance academic performance. In one study, the researcher gave a test to students who were experiencing high levels of stress and psychological difficulties and the students performed well, leading the researcher to conclude that these variables could enhance academic performance (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013). Markoulakis and Kirsh (2013) argued student mental health was not accurately represented because the stress level attained by the students who took the test was optimal for academic success and that the prolonged compounding stress resulting from mental health difficulties was different. A larger body of evidence in the literature supports the difference between the two and argued that the students who performed well during high-stress and psychological difficulties did not experience mental health stress to the same degree at which academic effects would occur (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013). These conflicting conclusions supported the need for researchers to clarify symptoms when reporting the diagnosis of student mental health problems. This is especially needed in studies in which the researcher

makes claims about the impact of mental health issues on academic difficulties which reflects the need for structural change in universities.

### **Mental Health Development of College-Age Students**

The ability to identify and manage emotion, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationship competencies are skills needed by college students to excel academically, socially, and professionally in life, during, and after college (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Although mental health disorders can be developed at any time, ages 18-21 is when the occurrence of specific mental health issues are more likely to develop (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011). College years are a critical developmental period when students are transitioning from adolescence to adulthood and it is also the prime time for the onset of mental health illness (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Mental health issues are most likely to pose as a barrier to academic success during this stage, which is why conducting a qualitative methods study is needed to deepen connectedness to students. During the transition to post-secondary institutions, attitude is an influential factor in determining if the student is successful in college (Elffers & Oort, 2012). Mental health issues are a problem that undermines future functions especially at this sensitive developmental age span (Suldo et al., 2014). More specifically, issues reported during college years were depression, anxiety, loneliness, stress, body image issues, substance abuse, adjustment challenges, measurement of personal attributions, learner's self-confidence, past experiences, and sleep disorders (Castillo & Schwartz, 2013).

College freshmen are the prime age for brain expansion, molding, development, and adaptation (Turner & Thompson, 2014). Learning creates changes in brain structure. Change or activation in one area of the brain can lead to activation or change in another (Praditsang, 2015).

Neuroscience supports the argument that teaching practices increase learning not student learning preferences. Howard –Jones (2009), reported multi-modal stimulus produces more brain activity more than when experiencing each mode separately. The stress hormones and transmitters can enhance memory, but only in present activity associated/related content to the event.

According to Kadison (2014), mental health is a psychological human process of content integrity, the integration of one's outer and inner life to their core. The process of finding one's whole being is part of the developmental stage most freshmen in college are confronted with as they are challenged with self-discovery, separating true desires from what they feel they are supposed to want, defining needs and visions, and finding congruency between outer life and inner life (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Due to the freedom and independence recently gained by college freshmen during a phase of transition, students seek to integrate new experiences or reshape to achieve consistency between all the components of their whole being (Bruffaerts et al., 2018).

College years are an opportunity to reach many students who are amid life-impacting transitions. For this reason, providing better mental health education is required to assist students in this process while supporting their mental health. Analyzing attitudes, motives, and student perceptions during transitional stages can help educators improve teaching and learning (Price & Bradford, 2010). Mental health education is important to teach college students because they are becoming more responsible for their health, help-seeking behaviors may be poorly informed, and may lack mental health awareness (Lumpkin et al., 2015). The effects of issues developed from mental health can be minimized through education while or before they occur. Improving mental

health education is important because college years are a time of critical development, consequences from unresolved issues can impact students for the rest of their life.

### **Structural Change in Universities Needed**

Structural difficulties and incongruences due to lack of coordination among counseling centers, faculty, and teaching in institutions regarding mental health education alienate students who are struggling and further deepens their challenges, which increases academic attrition (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013). Structural change in integrating mental health education structural reorganization is needed in universities to facilitate unity, eliminate environmental barriers, change student perspectives on the mental health education, and to improve teaching and learning to increase student support and success. Training and educational workshops are needed to inform educators on the academic implications of mental health difficulties experienced by students because some faculty are unaware and therefore unwilling or unsure how to teach about mental health (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013). For example, some students are unaware of how to manage issues related to their academic requirements such as stress management or how to manage their workload differently, these are important things to do however, in many cases students did not receive the information or education needed to offer support. Additionally, the context of the environment needs to be one that supports and retains student development (Costa & Faria, 2015).

Mental health education stigma was found to be the most influencing factor on if a college student is motivated to learn about mental health to the best of their ability and if they seek mental health assistance (Chan, 2016). Improving teaching approaches to mental health education can improve learning and can also impact personally held stigmas about mental health.

Teaching advocacy and involving students in teaching approaches, changes the way classrooms are structured. Students not only learn better in a supportive environment, they are 60% more likely to share knowledge with other students and seek further resources for themselves if ever needed (Chan, 2016). To change the structure of mental health education at universities, students must become an active part of the process. According to Dunbar et al., (2018), student-led organizations that concentrate on mental health education and awareness can increase college students' understanding, decrease stigma, and may play an important role in improving the mental health climate on campus. Researchers found when studying students across 12 universities that student-run organizations such as Active Minds were linked to an increase in perceived knowledge about mental health and a decrease in negative stigmas about mental health and education over time (Dunbar et al., 2018). Restructuring is necessary for keeping and promoting campus safe.

Students are not the only ones impacted by mental health stigma; faculty members can be too. Faculty members' quality of work is significantly impacted by campus and work climate (Chan, 2016). Both faculty and students excel all-around in supportive and positive mental health environments (Knolls & Annas, 2018). Campus climate and positive mental health environments emphasize inclusion and respect for others (Stebbleton et al., 2014). Resistance can make faculty training more difficult and significantly hinder development (Perez, 2019). Also, evidence-based faculty training programs on mental health are scarce, and incorporating one is difficult due to variations in faculty member schedules. Perze (2019) summarized a review of literature stating annual weekend training programs were not effective in fully training faculty members to

research their full potential and that training daily or two days a week minimum is a more effective way.

Faculty Senate members at a university met to discuss how to respond to recent findings from a study in which students reported needing a flexible class where student mental health and wellbeing were promoted using interactive, collaborative, and experiential learning (Sullivan, 2016). It was established that more information was needed to understand the problem and where to focus attention on once the root of the problem was pinpointed. Research on the topic was explored. From the information gathered, possible solutions were developed and tested for effectiveness in a research study. The conclusion upon reviewing the results of the study was that the first step is to use what was learned to re-teach and train teachers to create the necessary changes needed for a flexible classroom environment to be effective (Sullivan, 2016). One of the challenges is the lack of faculty training programs (Perez, 2019). Mental health education should be represented by an elected representative in the faculty and student senate to be the voice of their peers, communicate concerns and ideas, and further advocate for the mental health needs of the people they represent. Because faculty mental health training programs are scarce and this process has been effective for one institution, it may be effective in others or the one in this study.

### **Student Perceptions of Mental Health**

Beliefs, attitudes, and feelings derive from what a student perceives as logical connections between them and learning about mental health (Beswick, 2010). For perceptions to change, the individual must challenge their beliefs. Although beliefs are cognitive, they impact emotions (Suldo et al., 2014). Shapiro (2010) reported there was little literature on the biases and

prejudices students entered the classroom with and that the only way of challenging this is through student experiments and research. He found that when students draw their conclusions from experiments, the results were life alternating allowing for a change in student beliefs and perceptions. A university's public stigma outweighs student's personal stigma therefore, public stigma influences student openness to learn about mental health education, utilization of mental health service, and likeliness to converse with any faculty member about concerns. Students perceive public mental health stigma higher than their view of mental health (Gaffney, 2016). The best way to change student stigma towards mental health education is the change teaching approaches and to offer students numerous diverse opportunities for learning so they can change how they feel about it on their terms.

**Measures of mental health perceptions.** The relationship between student mental health and student perceptions of life at school can be examined using a Strengths and Difficulty Questionnaire (SDQ) and a purpose of living and learning questionnaire (PLLQ) (Bone, Dugard, Vostanis, & Dogra, 2015). SDQ asked questions about emotional and mental health symptoms, conduct problems, and pro-social skills. PLLQ asked questions about motivation, learning strategies, and coping strategies (Askill-Williams & Lawson, 2015). SPSS was used for correspondence analysis, which is a perceptual mapping technique, found SDQ scores to be closely related to PLLQ scores and a factor surfaced, reflecting a progression from mental health challenges to strengths in close correspondence with student reports about their school and experience (Askill-Williams & Lawson, 2015). Perceptual mapping is a dominate tool for spreading widely of the findings of this study and can advise the selection of programs and strategies for self-regulation of emotions and learning behaviors, developing relationships, and

supporting academic success, that is related to positive mental health (Bone, et al., 2015). It can also inform policies and practices relating to the teacher's professional development to support teacher and student potential hence, influencing the nature of experiences that shape student perceptions (Askill-Williams & Lawson, 2015).

The academic emotions questionnaire (AEQ) can be used to measure student enjoyment, ego, relief, fury, shame, uneasiness, sorrow, and boredom along with a cognitive-motivational model of achievement effects of emotions and control value theory to study students (Pekrun et al., 2011). AEQ assesses students' achievement emotions as domain-general and trait-like constructs such as test anxiety. Recent research has revealed that students' emotions are organized in a domain-specific way to a certain extent (Pekrun et al., 2011). Academic emotions predict student motivation, learning techniques, cognitive resources, self-monitoring, academic completion, and classroom behavior (Perry, 2011). Students experience a rich diversity of emotions in academic settings. Emotions influence motivation, beliefs, and expectations. AEQ offers researchers a way to assess and gain information on academic emotions, which strengthens their research finds and enhances their overall contribution to literature. AEQ offers researchers a way to assess and gain information on academic emotions, which increases student learning and heightens their contribution. Assessing this information helps educators understand student perspectives. Item statistics and reliabilities of the AEQ scales are strong, the scales can explain the internal structures of achievement emotions concerning their affective, cognitive, motivational, and physiological components. Measures of students' achievement emotions must consider emotions component structure, the differences between discrete emotions, and the differences between emotional experiences over diverse academic settings (Pekrun et al., 2011).



**Attitudes during transitions can influence academic success or student drop out post-transition.** Mental wellness has an impact on student attitudes towards college and influences their learning potential. For this reason, learning about student perceptions and affect regarding learning about mental health is necessary and to provide information on how to approach and address barriers to learning about mental health. A positive relationship between emotional intelligence, measures of academic conduct, student attendance, and overall adjustment to university settings have been established in several studies and acknowledged by most higher education institutions (Ning et al., 2012). Cognitive intelligence is not the sole predictor of student performance; there are other predictors including affective and cognitive functioning, affective ability, and emotional intelligence (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). There is a positive relationship between emotional/mental wellbeing, measures of academic grades, student attendance, and overall adjustment to college settings, which places an emphasis on further developing practices in teaching students about mental health to better meet the needs of students (Ning et al., 2012). Mental health issues are most likely to pose as a barrier to academic success during this stage and student attitudes are an influential factor in deterring if the student is successful in college (Elffers & Oort, 2012).

During the transition to post-secondary institutions, attitudes critically determine if the student is a school success or drop out after transition (Elffers & Oort, 2012). Student mental health learning can be impacted by attitude and attitude that have been impacted by how much a student knows or is learning about themselves. Attitudes were described by students as coming from exposure to professional careers (direction), parent education level, socioeconomic status, social network, and perceived ability. In another study, Price and Bradford (2010) investigated

why students enroll in college and investigated their attitude to gain a better understanding using an anonymous questionnaire with a Likert-type scale. The results showed analyzing attitudes, motives, and student perceptions during transitional stages can help educators make better decisions on strategies for the course (Price & Bradford, 2010). Findings were that student attitudes towards class mirror the consumer to product relationship. Other findings from similar studies reported fear of failure, time management, few relationships, financial stress, low self-confidence, and poor coping skills to be student barriers to learning were reported student stressors (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Attributes from past experiences may shape student attitude toward learning expectancies and a sense of learner confidence. This pre-existing experience shapes student attitude toward learning expectations. Self-measurement of ability and capability, experiences, social environment, and involvement of others are additional influencers.

### **Learning Preference and Learning Style**

Learning preferences exist, but there is no evidence to support the widely accepted notion that it is a trait. Learning preferences are a developmental and biologicals set of personal attributes that make similar instruction more effective for some than others. Students differ in what mode of teaching they feel is effective (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, & Bjork, 2009). Riner and Willingham (2010) defined learning style as simply a preference or favorite way of receiving information. It is the manner students focus on a process, internalize new information, and ultimately obtain new and different academic information formation (Honigsfled, 2006). Environmental characteristics, emotional characteristics, sociological determinants, physiological traits, and perceptual strengths, and processing style are all influencers of learning style. The four typical learning styles are visual, auditory, tactual, and kinesthetic (Pashler,

2008). One way to tailor teaching to individual student learning styles is by incorporating various teaching techniques such as technology, mind-mapping, flowcharts, hands-on activities, theatre, writing, and traditional lectures (Rogers-Estable, 2014).

Technology may be used to meet all student preferences. For example, clickers may be used for visual, auditory, tactual, and kinesthetic learners by showing a question on a PowerPoint, reading the question out loud, allowing students to physically select their answer with a clicker, and then discussing the answer (Rogers-Estable, 2014). Additionally, educators can have students repeat the correct answer out loud. Mind concept mapping may also reach all learning styles because highlight a concept and use yarn to show relationships to other main topics and present their web/map to the class, all learning styles are included (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004). Educators may also ask students to write scripts and act out certain course content. Most traditional educators lecture, use PowerPoints, and incorporate minimal technology, but it is important to use other recent research-based activities to facilitate learning for everyone (Rogers-Estable, 2014).

Learning style assessments are a popular tool, which asks students to evaluate information presented and examine what kinds of activities engage them more (Pashler, et al., 2009). However, tools to measure learning are invalid, unreliable, and falsely understood to be influenced by pedagogy (Coffield, Mosely, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004). Learning style assessments undermine teaching practices emphasize the need to apart them to a student's learning preference to maximize learning when teaching practices maximize learning not student learning preferences.

On the contrary, Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, and Bjork (2009) conducted a review of the literature and found little evidence that optimal learning required teachers to tailor their practices and suggested education institutions were better off adopting other educational practices with strong evidence bases. The widely accepted theory is that tailoring teaching style and preference to each student is needed to provide students with the best learning opportunity that lacks methodology. A student's learning preferences does not automatically guarantee optimal instruction. Some educators are misinformed, using multiple modes, outlets, and approaches in teaching is an effective way to maximize student learning. Students have learning style preferences however, there is no evidence that tailoring teaching to one style enhances learning (Riner & Willingham, 2010). Teaching practices increase learning and do not change or increase a student's learning preferences (Dembo & Howard, 2007). Matching learning and teaching style to maximize learning is a popular theory, but it lacks validity and reliability because preferences cannot be measured and reliability and there supporting evidence for this claim. Teachers should tailor teaching to a student's content background knowledge, ability, interests, and use the most appropriate way to deliver content (Riner & Willingham, 2010).

### **Implications**

Shifts and changes in society are reflected in higher education institutions and educators must continuously study students and evolve practices accordingly to effectively meet the needs of students. Because higher education institutions are more diverse than ever before, there is a need to tailor teaching practices to make them as individualized as possible. To tailor education to the specific needs of students, an understanding of the aspects of the lives of students must be gained (Beiter et al., 2015). Faculty may not have the proper training or knowledge to provide

precise education specific to student needs (Beiter et al., 2015). Interviewing allows all students across diverse populations of students an opportunity to not only be heard but for their uniqueness to be accounted for.

Learning about student perspectives on learning about mental health using a case study with interviewing will provide rich meaningful insight specific to all students in a way that would not be possible using any other technique. Students have different levels of motivation, different attitudes about teaching and learning, and different responses to the class environment and teaching strategies. The more teachers understand individual differences among students, the more chance they have of meeting the diverse learning needs of more of their students (Felder & Brent, 2005). For this reason, learning about student perspectives on teaching and learning about mental health would assist educators in creating teaching techniques that are blended to reach all learners (Ofek, 2016). Because students who attend a mental health education workshop during the first semester of college have more control of their mental health and higher-grade point averages across multiple semesters compared to students who did not attend, learning more about student perspectives could improve teaching and learning to further improve the success of workshops (Ning et al., 2012).

Potential implications of this project could be used for an educator developmental program, where the information gained from the project will be shared, discussed, taught, and be put into practice. Potentially, the future program may contain development sessions for educators focusing on key principles such as gaining a better understanding of student perceptions on learning about mental health and better ways to teach mental health to better meet student needs. These principles will be developed based on the project results. One session may be on assessing

and addressing the educator-student expectation gap. Based on the information learned about student perspectives of learning about mental health, another session may be on identifying, addressing, and preventing resistance in hopes of preventing potential barriers to learning. Another session could be on learning styles and matching teaching style to individual student preferences. The principles and objectives of the sessions will be dependent on the project findings.

### **Summary**

First-year college students enrolled in the university experience course discussed stressors and variables related to mental health wellness which have affected their academic success and overall wellbeing. These challenges were described as critical areas of need and identified as barriers to academic success. I addressed a gap in practice from this study by using an underexplored case study design with semi-structured interviews and a student writing prompt to learn about student perspectives on learning and teaching about mental health to improve teaching approaches. The purpose of the study was to learn more about student perceptions of teaching and learning about mental health to more effectively address the problem described in this study and meet the needs of students. Research provides a strong understanding of the development of perceptions and the effectiveness of using student-centered teaching approaches. The information gained will further current knowledge about student perceptions on teaching and learning about mental health allowing more effective teaching approaches, techniques, and training to be developed.

There is a long history of evidence regarding the relationship between student mental health and academic achievement however, education institutions have only recently started

paying attention. The mental health education, resources, and support concerns were reported as a barrier to academic learning and performance on both a national and local level. Debellis and Goldin's (1997) approach will be used to guide the study. Although some conclusions will be made, the results of this study cannot be generalized on a national or global level until more studies are conducted at other universities throughout the world. Because the use of qualitative research methods to study student perceptions on teaching on learning about mental health education is nonexistent in the literature, this study may facilitate researchers to conduct similar studies at other universities. By comparing results, similarities and differences may be recognized allowing potential generalizations to be made. Transferability depends on the numbers on studies conducted which are like this one and on how congruent the findings are to the results of this study. The following sections describe the research methods, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and discuss the ethics and other processes involved in conducting this study.

## Section 2: The Methodology

The administrators of the first-year experience department were uncertain of how to respond when students reported poor mental health education as the most significant barrier to their academic success and learning. The purpose of this case study was to gain insight about student perceptions to advance educators' understanding on how students experience teaching and learning about mental health and on how they could be experiencing it differently to possibly implement changes that will improve educator training, approaches to teaching, confidence, delivery of content, knowledge of student resources, and the educator-student relationship. This section will open with an overview of the research questions then proceed with descriptions of the research methods, design, the participant selection process, data collection process, instruments, analysis, and results. Justification for the research design selected will be explained and the section concludes with a discussion about the limitations and ethical considerations of this study.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that framed and guided this study involved learning about the perceptions of first-year college students enrolled in a university experience course at a local four-year college in teaching and learning about mental health. Research questions included:

RQ 1: What are the perceptions of first-year students enrolled in a freshmen experience course at a local 4-year college regarding their learning about emotional wellbeing?

RQ 2: What are the preferences of first-year students enrolled in a freshmen experience course at a local 4-year college regarding instructional strategies while learning about emotional wellbeing?



The research design selected was derived from the research questions, which I wrote to address the problem in the study (Patton, 2014). The case study was the qualitative research design used in this study. The purpose of a case study was to understand an individual's experience using high inquiry and empathetic understanding (Thorne, 2016). I will discuss details about the research design, approach, and rationale in the following section.

### **Research Design, Approach, and Rationale**

First-year students enrolled in a university experience course were asked to rank five areas of concern in numerical order of importance with one representing the least and five representing the most important. Administrators were unsure how to respond when the area of concern with the highest average and mode was mental health education. Students identified mental health education as the most significant influencer of academic success and as a barrier to learning. Still, this was also identified as the area of concern having the least university resources or attention. The lack of understanding of student perceptions of teaching and learning about mental health education was evident by the limited number of qualitative studies conducted on the issue from the perspective of the student. This study targeted a gap in the literature and a gap in practice. Qualitative research data were collected in the student's natural setting, which aids researchers in interpreting a phenomenon because it is being examined in the same context in which students give meaning. This methodology was selected for this study because the goal was to further current understanding of student perspectives on teaching and learning in a setting by understanding individual student experiences. Context and empathetic understanding were essential for adapting, improving, and creating positive changes to facilitate and advocate for better support for students while supporting new theories from the emerging data (Leech &

Onwuegbuzie, 2007). To allow findings to develop purely from the students, inductive reasoning and an inductive approach were used because it allows new theories to be generated from the information being gathered or the emerging data (Hancock & Algozzine, 2015).

Although there are numerous study designs falling under qualitative research methods, a case study was chosen as the best design to learn about student perspectives on teaching and learning about mental health, as it relates to their experience and ultimate success as a first-year college student. A case study is a detailed investigation of a current issue and allows researchers to learn about an individual's experience (Thorne, 2016).

### **Justification of Research Design Selection**

Due to the fact teaching and learning about mental health education has not been studied from the students' perspective in a case study fashion, there is a gap in literature and practice. Therefore, the rationale for using case study design was to contribute to literature from the new information gained by studying the perspectives of students on a deep, personal, and at a meaningful level. Studying students in the natural context of the phenomenon is used to gain rich, individualized, and valuable information (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Contextual, meaningful, and personal understanding offers additional detailed information to surface which can be used to assist quantitative researchers in maximizing their understanding of research findings so adjustments to current practices can be made.

Case study design studies allow for a holistic view of a phenomenon, which is not possible using quantitative methods and allows students to be studied within the natural context of the phenomenon where rich, personal, and meaningful information can be used (Morgan et al., 2017). Case study design places an emphasis on deriving meaning from students directly,

allowing results to be unique across everyone. Case study research is focused on an empathetic understanding of an individual experience instead of explaining or naming. “Contrary to approaching participants with a theory, or hypothesis to make meaning about participants, case study research design allows meaning to emerge from individuals” (Yin, 2017). This was important because findings in this study were developed from understanding participants, participants guide conclusions versus making a theory or explanation fit participants, or making the participant fit the theory or explanation.

The use of interviews and journals to gain information was the most appropriate method when collecting information on potentially sensitive topics (Yin, 2017). I used Semistructured interviews in this case study because unlike other designs that are constrained by the inability to establish the necessary research conditions, it offered a greater range of opportunities for topics allowing specific phenomena to be studied (Yin, 2017). Interviews and student writing prompts provided the freedom to allow any findings or meaning from the study to develop and surface from the participant instead of from an existing theory. Creswell (2012) recommends interviews because the information collected to address the research questions requires a deep level of understanding and learning from the student. Researchers and education institutions gained benefits from this case study, not possible using qualitative research methods (Yin, 2017).

Using semistructured interviews were the best design for this study because I could design questions to attain precise information and respond empathetically to each participant. Case study design offers flexibility to alter interview questions depending on student affect during and throughout the interview (Hancock & Algozzine, 2015). Meyer and Mata (2014) stressed the importance of considering affect when studying students’ health in relation to their

learning because it reflects the students' experience being interviewed and presents the underlying expression of evaluation. Affect is an internal representation and defined as the attitudes, interests, and values students exhibit regarding school (Popham, 2018). Reading students' affect was beneficial to understanding and providing a deeper understanding of student perspectives and their experiences. Because affect was read during the interview process, I could alter the wording of questions and/or ask sub-questions which provided more detailed and personalized information regarding student perspectives (Popham, 2018). I observed student affect during the interview, which allowed additional information to be gathered about the way the students were feeling when they shared their experience and reflected how they felt about sharing providing additional insight. Semistructured interviews were ideal to use for this study because it granted me freedom, power, and flexibility to be sensitive and respond to student affect by adjusting questions accordingly and I provided resources if the interview triggered strong emotional distress. The resources provided included the number for the counseling center, an emergency 24-hour number for the counseling center, an off-campus mental health hotline number, and web addresses for online services and counseling. In addition, the number for my research faculty advisor was also provided.

### **Additional Research Designs Rejected**

A mixed research method design would have been a unique and valuable contribution to the literature because using both quantitative and qualitative methods increases the strength of the study because each method supports the other. However, I made the decision to focus more heavily on gaining qualitative research data to have a deeper understanding and a higher level of inquiry to address the research questions.

Other research methods were considered for this study but did not offer the breadth and depth of information supplied by interviews. Quantitative research is used to test theories instead of developing new ones from emerging data and utilizes statistical measures to determine if results indicate significant changes when variables are manipulated or added (Chyung, 2015). Results from quantitative studies are shared by presenting charts and/or tables and are not used for this study because the research questions cannot be answered by comparing results between groups or across individuals.

I considered other types of studies that collect qualitative data such as ethnography, focus groups, survey research, narrative inquiry, and phenomenological research. Although ethnography and case study are both in-depth research designs used to study people or groups, each approach is different. An ethnography research design was not the best method for this study because it is primarily used to study cultures or ethnic groups and emphasizes the process used to gain the information attained (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Also, an ethnography research design was not the best design to use in this study because of the extended cost, time, and experience recommended to use it. Researchers using ethnography research design were recommended to have several years of extensive experience across varying domains, did not meet the criteria.

It was determined a survey research study was not the best choice because it is concerned with individual opinions or definitions of or about policy issues such as school uniforms or what abusive behavior versus gaining a deep understanding of a participant's perspective on a personal and sensitive issue (Creswell, 2012). Also, in survey research quantitative data is collected, which would not provide the unique detailed information needed to answer the

research questions. A narrative design would not be appropriate for this study because it focuses on micro details and not broad themes and is used to analyze stories often from historical accounts (Yin, 2017).

Both case study and phenomenological methods use purposeful sampling (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). In phenomenological methods, the focus is on getting below the surface of people's perceptions to find the essence of the phenomenon or the shared lived experience of a group of people (Padilla-Díaz, 2017). In a case study, the focus is on developing an in-depth description and analysis of a case (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological research was close to the ideal choice in this study, but it is focused on determining the essence and meaning of a shared lived experience or phenomenon across multiple people. I was seeking information about student experiences; however, I was concerned with textile or structural descriptions. I was concerned with a better understanding of college students' perceptions of a course subject to address the problem and improve learning. Although phenomenological methods were a strong option, the nature of the problem in the study and research questions aligned more with the case study, and this method gave me appropriate information needed.

Phenomenological researchers collect a wealth of information from groups of people who experienced a phenomenon or share a lived experience then the essence of all the data as a whole is identified, reducing the quantity of information. The focus of the phenomenological interviews is on describing the meanings of the experienced phenomena (Padilla-Díaz, 2017). The focus of case study interviews was to study a program or more than one person to gain an in-depth understanding of the case(s) (Worthington, 2013). In phenomenological studies, data is analyzed using significant statements, textiles, and structure descriptions, and by determining the meaning

(Padilla-Díaz, 2017). In case studies, the description of the case(s) and case themes as well as cross-case themes are used to analyze data (Worthington, 2013). The organization of research outcomes for phenomenological studies is on reporting how the phenomena were experienced using significant statements and discussing the meaning of themes (Padilla-Díaz, 2017). In a case study, the organization of research outcomes is on providing an extensive description of the case followed by key themes in the case (Padilla-Díaz, 2017). The main data collection method in phenomenology is long and intensely personal interviews and the researcher may have to conduct several interview sessions with each participant (Worthington, 2013). Due to the intensity and length of time involved with phenomenological studies, Worthington (2013), recommended the researcher have several years of experience and proficient interviewing skills to use this method (Worthington, 2013). My competence and experience are limited, therefore, using a design where coding can be used to analyze data proved to be a more appropriate, responsible, and ethical choice. Following this information and the recommendations, a case study was selected (Wilson, 2015).

Using a focus group was not be ideal for this study because it broadens information attained, and is less personal, which was opposite of the detailed and personal information I received in this study. Group dynamics in focus groups may threaten the study's validity due to unexpected conflicts and group dynamics such as power struggles among members are quieter students being equally represented (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Finally, focus groups are more difficult to analyze and require more time. In short, the research design selection was based on the research questions and it was the best fit for me as a person, which Bryman (2015) argued is as equally important when a design decision is made.

## **Participants**

### **Gaining Access to Participants**

After the Institution Review Board (IRB) at Walden University approved the study, the director of the center for student success and first-year experience provided me with student email addresses and granted me permission to contact students. An introductory letter email was sent to students where I introduced myself and gave a brief overview of the research study. A flyer was attached to the letter where I explained my need for volunteers and described the important role participants play in research studies. A \$10.00 Amazon gift card incentive for participating was advertised on the flyer. I provided my contact information and interested students contacted me and scheduled a meeting where the consent form was signed, and the interview was conducted.

### **Purposeful Sampling**

I used purposeful sampling by selecting participants from a population of first-year students enrolled in a freshmen experience course for 18 weeks at a local four-year southern university (Hancock & Algozzine, 2015). The rationale was because this population contained students with the richest information to the problem being addressed in the study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2015). The problem originated, was identified, and existed in this population of students. Cases that offer data that most thoroughly answer the research questions should be identified (Yin, 2017). Participants were 18 years old or older and mentally and cognitively fit to sign the consent form. Participants were enrolled in the first-year experience course. The sample size was small, 9, due to the nature of the research method selected. Because semistructured



interviewing is the researching method, there was a high level of inquiry involved, hence the reason for having a smaller number of participants (Spaulding, 2014).

### **Participant Protection**

Specific measures were taken to protect participants' rights including confidentiality, informed consent, and protection from harm. I followed all ethical guidelines outlined by the IRB such as seeking permission from participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). All IRB guidelines regarding informed consent and protection of participants from physical, social, legal, and economic harm were followed (See Appendix D). Participants received complete disclosure and openness regarding the details of the study. Students signed a consent form as a requirement to participate. Consent forms signify an agreement between participants on the terms of the study and the participant's understanding of the nature and conditions of the research study. The consent form emphasized the participants' right to be informed on the study outcomes, the right to confidentiality except in specific circumstances, and the right to withdraw at any point without negative repercussions (Creswell, 2012). Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any point with no repercussions and were reminded of this during the interview. To protect, participants were required to be 18 years old and mentally fit to give consent will be accepted, as this was a requirement (Nwanne, 2018).

Due to the increase of self-awareness and possible revelations potentially triggered by or resulting from the interview process, participants may experience some stress initially followed by significant benefits (Hewitt, 2007). All participants were safe and protected from physical, emotional, mental, financial, and social harm. However, I had resources prepared in case of an emergency or if strong emotions were triggered. Depending on the situation, emergency

personnel could be contacted and the participant was provided with a pamphlet which included the number for the counseling center, an emergency 24-hour number for the counseling center, an off-campus mental health hotline number, and web addresses for online services and counseling. Also, the number for my research faculty advisor was also provided. This was done to conduct purposeful ethical research (Hewitt, 2007).

To protect confidentiality, I will keep all information about students will be locked in a filing cabinet behind a locked office door. Participants were given the power and freedom to determine and choose a fake name to conceal their identity from others. Student names were changed to protect student privacy and I used a secure computer program called Nvivo to analyze interview content. I used data collection protocols to assist in keeping the study within appropriate boundaries.

Students were treated with respect by granting and respecting their autonomy, had the right to discontinue, and their confidentiality was protected. Additionally, limits to confidentiality were discussed. Autonomy is the capability to think, decide, and act based on thought. Losing autonomy is detrimental to participants. When autonomy is lost control over how students are being interpreted is also lost and they are at risk losing control over their self-identity (Hewitt, 2007). To promote autonomy, participants were allowed to choose the date and time of their interview, their code name, and if they wanted to withdraw or not. Students had the right to cancel or withdraw from participation at any time without any consequences. Additionally, I encouraged students to ask questions and tried to promote a sense of freedom.

## **Researcher-participant Working Relationship**

Researcher values, beliefs, and life experiences influence the construction of research questions, data collection, and interpretation of findings (Bryman, 2015). I practiced reflexivity continuously by being self-aware of my experiences, reasoning, and overall impact during the duration of the study. Knowing myself, being open, building and situating knowledge with others, integrity honesty, power balance, and ethical dilemmas are primary to qualitative methodology (Råheim et al., 2016). To conduct ethical research, I practiced self-awareness, acknowledging and disclosing my research bias, rapport with participants, respected autonomy, avoidance of exploitation, and confidentiality (Hewitt, 2007).

Upon accessing participants, it was necessary to establish a positive researcher-participant working relationship through adherence to ethical practices (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The role of the researcher and the researcher-research participant working relationship was to conduct an ethical study while protecting participants and benefiting their lives. I took positive measures to establish a positive researcher-participant working relationship because this was an important aspect of research (Patton, 2012). There was a critical power imbalance in the researcher-researched working relationship that was accounted for and treated with sensitivity. The consent form was the main method used to establish a researcher-participant working relationship. This form was an agreement between the participant and me on the terms of participating in research, the nature of the study, limits to confidentiality, participant rights, and the right to withdrawal at any time without repercussions. Data collection protocols assisted in keeping the study within ethical and appropriate boundaries.

### **Data Collection Process**

The pre-determined systems I used to keep track of all the data collected and to record and process emerging understandings are included but not limited to a researcher journal, an audio recorder, and Nvivo. All data sources are reflected in the researcher journal and this also includes the observational and writing prompts. Also, my laptop and the computer program Nvivo were used as needed.

After gaining approval from the IRB, I received consent from the program director of the first-year experience to contact students using their email addresses, where an introductory letter about myself, and the research study was outlined. I attached an informational flyer on participating in research studies where I described my need for participants. I provided my contact information and requested those who were interested to contact me to schedule a meeting with me to review the study, sign the consent form, and conduct the interview. A \$10.00 Amazon gift card was included as an incentive to participate in the study and I disbursed the gift cards after the consent form was reviewed and signed. Copies of the consent form were offered to participants prior to the interview and could be emailed to the participant if they preferred an electric copy over a hard copy.

When participants arrived for the interview, I reminded them about the nature of the study, the confidentiality of their identity, explained their right to withdraw at any time, and gave them reminder that the interview was audio recorded. The interview followed a protocol to stay on topic and within boundaries. Interviews flowed like a conversation and started with warm-up questions followed by target questions. After the target questions were asked, “cooling off” questions were used to conclude the verbal portion of the interview. Last, students participated in

a writing prompt using the pencil and paper provided. Participants were asked to summarize the information or reflections they shared in the interview in a single paragraph or a few sentences. Field, observation, reflection, and process notes were taken throughout the study and kept in a research journal. The research journal included an observation checklist conducted from my first interaction with each student until the last. The audio recording, writing prompt, and research journal was transcribed for data to be analyzed. All data were locked in a computer with a password in a locked briefcase behind a locked door throughout the study. I will keep the data secure for five years then the data will be destroyed at the five-year designation.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

The instruments used in this study I designed to target the problem by addressing the research questions to gain significant, accurate, detailed, and meaningful data to maximize understanding of student perceptions of the teaching and learning of mental health constructs. Each data collection instrument is discussed further in this section. Each instrument was designed to gain information about student perspectives on mental health education and learning. I used multiple data sources to give students multiple outlets and opportunities to disclose, express, and communicate in a way that is best for them. Including multiple data sources was necessary to triangulate data and to increase the overall validity and reliability of the results, data interpretations, and instruments used. Data triangulation was increased by increasing the rigor of data analysis by assessing the integrity of the inferences that I drew from, which should be from more than one source (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). In this study, I collected data from multiple sources including interviews, the student writing prompt, and the researcher journal combined with the observational checklist.

## **Semistructured Interviews**

Semistructured interviews were used to learn about student perceptions of learning about mental health education. The questions I created for the interviews were derived from the research questions. Having open-ended interview questions allowed me to create a one-on-one experience, which increased the depth and richness of responses in comparison to structured interviews (Alaawai, 2014). Open-ended questions were recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (2007) when using semistructured interviews because it increases the study's reliability.

Semistructured interviews gave the researcher more control by allowing the researcher to pre-plan questions to focus precisely on the target subject, evaluate characteristics that influence responses throughout the interview, clarify questions, ask questions to more accurately understand the participant, zoom in or circle back to important responses by adding follow-up questions, and read the participant to alter the way questions are delivered (Alaawai, 2014). The researcher's attitude and delivery influence the way participants respond (Alaawai, 2014).

Interviewing participants created rapport and a personal experience, which helped students feel more comfortable and at ease. These encouraged students to share more freely, and generated more insightful responses, especially on sensitive topics (Alaawai, 2014). Semistructured interviews occurred in the students' natural environment; therefore, the context was personal to participants and the researcher and the potential to represent the complexities found in the data gathering process (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). I used an interview protocol and designed questions to acquire information about the problem and research questions.

### **Student Writing Prompt**

I used a student writing prompt upon the conclusion of the interview as a written closing question and asked participants to summarize and reflect on the content discussed during the interview, their experience, and on revelations made, expansion of learning, or increase in self-awareness or regulation. I requested each student to write one paragraph. One of the characteristics of ethical research is to provide benefits to the participant and reflective writing offered real academic and mental support by allowing students to process thoughts, explain their perception, share what is the most important to them, make sense of an experience, and share their individuality freely (Chen, Yu, Zhang, & Yu, 2016). The writing allowed students to truly be heard by expressing their interpretation of an activity, experience, or subject material and furthers researcher understanding about student perceptions. The writing was beneficial because it gave students another opportunity and multiple outlets to communicate. The journal prompt may be helpful to students who are struggling to find the words to answer a question, nervous, presently trying to organize or process their thoughts, or who get off track easily (Hancock & Algozzine 2015).

Just as observations allow researchers a window into what a participant is doing or displaying in comparison to what they are saying, writing is a window into what a participant is thinking, how they are making sense of an experience, and their impression or perception about something (Taniguchi, Suehiro, Shimada, & Ogata, 2017). Taniguchi, Suehiro, Shimada, and Ogata (2017) conducted a case study to propose a novel method to identify common topics and student impressions from student writing prompt. The researchers identified what they called, weekly keywords, by scoring noun words with a measure based on a TF-IDF term weighting

scheme, then analyzing co-occurrence relationships between extracted adjectives and words (Taniguchi et al., 2017). This construction of a document made the term-weighting measure they created an account for words specific to the present content or weekly keywords, so words with the highest weights are weekly words or student impressions. The researchers used one of the topic modeling techniques, non-negative matrix factorization on co-occurrence relationships, to allow hidden impression topics to surface. The results proved conceptual keywords surfaced and four significant impression topics were identified. This study proves analysis methods can be applied to collectively understand the impressions of students from writing and can be applied to this study (Taniguchi et al., 2017). Writing can be used not only as a strong source of data but can also assist in identifying hidden impression topics participants may be unaware of, which are being missed (Taniguchi et al., 2017).

The writing prompt was a general reflection question asking students to summarize the content of the interview and to share their thoughts. The reason for this was to provide both the student and the researcher a second opportunity to review information about the same questions to increase validity, congruency, and to triangulate data. Using a writing prompt helped counter mental and other exhaustion during the interview (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). In addition to the interviewing, the writing prompt served as an additional outlet for students to express themselves in another way besides on-spot verbal communication by engaging in expressive reflective writing to emphasize their thoughts (Hancock & Algozzine, 2015). Yin (2017) acknowledged writing prompts as a source for strengthening research analysis, accuracy, credibility, validity, and internal consistency throughout the study and advised researchers to include writing prompts in research, which, was done in the study (Yin, 2017). The writing



prompt benefited participants, increased accuracy of interpretations, supported other data findings, allowed students another outlet to express themselves, and furthered my understanding of each participant.

### **Research Journal and Observation Checklist**

The research journal was used to record field notes during the interview, after the interview, during the coding process, and throughout the entire case study. An observation checklist was used as a technique of data collection in this study and guided the field notes by listing what to attend to. The observation checklist was kept in the researcher journal, and additional notes made during and after completing the checklist were documented here as well. An observational checklist self-created was used in this interview.

Observation is a strong source of data collection because researchers can see what participants do, feel, and think in comparison to what participants say they do (Morgan et al., 2017). Observations were used to triangulate data. It was a potential window to examine the unsaid, unaware, and unwilling side of participants. The research journal also contained notes made from the student writing prompt and offered an organized and dated place to document or take notes, write down reflections, record observations, record critical incidents, and to describe the context in which coding decisions were made with students' disclosures, natural environment, descriptive experience, interpretations, perceptions, and any other content shared during the interview. Responses to the observation checklist were focused on examining the unique personal qualities each participant brings to the interview, including personal presence, clothing appearance, physical appearance, the colors they wear, openness, and various other items (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Participant code names were used. After researching different

observation checklists, I decided to create my own. The purpose of the checklist was to make general observations and to keep me focused on the individual. I referenced my general knowledge from my counseling background to determine what to observe because the general intimate setting, process, and focus on the individual is like that of a counseling session (Nelson, Onwuegbuzie, Wines, & Frels, 2013). Similar conditions such as undivided attention and unconditional positive regard are applicable to both settings.

Recording field notes throughout the study allowed me to keep a running record of the context of their impressions, the environment, behaviors, nonverbal cues, and coding decisions not available with audio recordings (Afdal, 2016). Field notes were a useful source of information to reference that fills in the gap in time between observations, interviewing, transcribing, and coding (Morgan et al., 2017). Situational factors were important to consider where analyzing data and field notes can aid in limiting memory, environmental, and nonverbal bias (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Finally, the research journal was used to document any critical incidents. Critical incidents are defined as a sudden event that has such a strong impact on an individual that they are taken outside of their everyday experiences and become unexpectedly upset, enough that they are unable to control themselves (Afdal, 2016). A person experiencing a critical incident may have difficulty coping. In an educational setting, or as experienced by an educator, critical incidents can simply be described as an epiphany moment. Identifying critical incidents aids in professional development. Research journals are the pre-text to textbooks and are the core source or foundation of which texts books eventually derive from (Afdal, 2016). This was used as a source for personal reflection and to aid in raising my self-awareness, improve my ability to identify potential bias within myself, and facilitate self-growth, self-

actualization, and self-awareness. Researcher journals served as a designated place for thinking about the way I think, and the decisions made and allowed reflection upon metacognition.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Rigor was improved by disclosing factors which influence the researcher-researched relationship such as age, appearance, social class, inequalities of power and knowledge, and environment. The role of the researcher was to protect participants from harm and benefit their life. The researcher's role was important to establish because the researcher is actively involved in the social construction of the research (Hewitt, 2007). Researcher values, beliefs, and life experiences influence the construction of research questions, data collection, and interpretation of findings all influence study outcomes (Bryman, 2015). I established a professional researcher-research participant relationship in this study. Upon accessing participants, it was necessary to establish a positive researcher-participant working relationship through adherence to ethical practices (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). A researcher-participant relationship consists of one individual collecting data and the other supplying the data. Due to the power imbalance between the researcher and participant, researchers must work to establish a collaborative relationship. A collaborative relationship involves trust and the participant is viewed as a colleague instead of a subject. The support and confidence of participants are needed to complete research studies and both the researcher and participant should mutually benefit from the study to establish a positive working relationship. Rapport is needed to establish a positive working relationship and it can be built with participants by being open, accommodating, interested, and avoiding barriers between you and them (Raheim et al., 2016).

Research is primarily the business of knowledge construction. The researcher is engaged in producing knowledge. Reflexivity in research requires a deep process where the researcher scrutinizes their role, decisions, and actions in the study (Guillemin & Gillam 2004). This is an active process that requires scrutiny, reflection, and interrogation of the data, the researcher, the participants, and the context that they inhabit (Chen et al., 2016). Reflectivity urges researchers to reflect in relation to interpersonal and ethical aspects of research practice, not just the epistemological aspects of rigorous research. Reflectivity is important in qualitative research to prevent bias. The researcher journal was used to reflect on the data being collected and on how and why each decision was made. The journal was also used to reflect on, and track thought processes to support unbiased ethical research.

I graduated from the same local four-year southern university as the study, in 2013 and last taught the course and population being studied in 2013. There was no current active relationship between the students and the researcher. I was not attached to the local university and have not been for four years, therefore, there is a limited and absent conflict of interest. The threat of conflicting role expectations was minimized because I did not know the participants, have an existing relationship with them, and have not taught them. I was there to listen empathically, build appropriate alliances with students, strive to interpret data accurately to make advances in teaching and learning to better meet student needs and improve their lives, and to work continuously to stay on top of current issues and trends to contribute to current knowledge.

### **Data Analysis**

Following the interview, the audio was carefully transcribed from the recording device to an electronic document. Additional notes were taken in the researcher journal such as field,

process, and reflection notes as well as an observation checklist for students' nonverbal behavior, body movement, blinking, facial expressions, eye contact and movements, changes in voice, volume and tone, breathing, and moments of silence. These nonverbal variables were important to observe because they may be correlated, reflective, or opposite and inconsistent with a participant's verbal communication (Afdal, 2016). Comparing verbal and nonverbal communication can reveal conflicting information. For example, a participant may say they enjoyed their experience learning about mental health yet rolled their eyes, looked away, frowned, exhaled loudly, or crossed their arms and turned their body away from the interviewer. It is important to recognize incongruencies between verbal and nonverbal communication in participants because this observation provides researchers with an opportunity to seek clarification or address discrepancies. Nonverbal communication behavior generally provides more authentic information and insight than verbal communication (Sutton & Austin, 2015). In other words, nonverbal behavior may be more reflective of how a participant truly feels than verbal behavior.

The document containing the transcripts from the interview document was uploaded into Nvivo, a computer program used to assist with thematic analysis and data coding. Five themes were created from 25 codes. All data were coded for thematic analysis, enabling the researcher to understand each participant's perspective (Sutton & Austin, 2015). In addition, coding assisted in identifying topics, issues, similarities, and differences that were revealed in interviews.

Researcher values, beliefs, and life experiences influenced the construction of research questions, data collection, and interpretation of findings all impacted study outcomes (Sutton & Austin, 2015). To keep the information as accurate as possible while transcribing, I avoided

grammar changes, pronunciation changes, or simplifying data to prevent misinterpreting students and taking away from the raw essence of the participant (Hewitt, 2007). Making changes to the content of interviews while transcribing allows the researcher's perceptions and decisions to influence the data which will be analyzed. The more a researcher's perceptions and decisions were allowed to surface and influence the transcribing process, the more data that is potentially subject to misinterpretation (Bryan, 2015). The rationale for transcribing participant interviews using their exact words without filtering content is to respect participant autonomy, refrain from simplifying or downplaying emotional aspects of participant experiences, and to avoid researcher bias resulting in distorted interpretations. If a participant's shared experience is misinterpreted, they risked losing control over their experience and self-identity (Hewitt, 2007).

Data were coded first by grouping, organizing, or chunking of small pieces of content at a time. Little by little, each chunk of content was compared in similarity to the previous one. Data were organized into meaningful categories or groups of information and each chunk was given a name or code reflecting the overall theme of the included information. These names or categories assisted the researcher in identifying patterns, themes, and relationships. This was done with the content of each participant's interview transcript. The way information was grouped or chunked was determined by what the participant said the most and organized according to the topic (Peterson, 2017). The codes and themes were also developed from the research questions and framework of the study. Once the content of each participant's interview was chunked or grouped, similar chunks and groups were combined and five overall dominant themes surfaced from the merge.

Nvivo was used to find common or shared words, expressions, emotions, body language, and other patterns, themes, and commonalities for each participant's individual data as well as across the entire population of participants being studied. When data were analyzed using Nvivo, items were determined such as constant comparison, content analysis, calculating word counts, and identifying the keyword in context (KWIC). The QRS International (2017) reported using Nvivo for coding and identifying themes, reduced researcher bias, and other threats to validity by managing data and allowing for easy comparison and checks.

Member checking was used by reflecting the content of each data stream to the participant allowing them to review the summary of the interview and writing prompt to give them the opportunity to confirm the content and interpretations or to clarify discrepancies. Member-checking was completed after the interview and writing prompt and summaries and quotations from the meeting were emailed. Reflexivity research implied that the researcher should continuously take stock of their actions as well as their role in the research process and this should be analyzed and surveyed to the same extent as the rest of their data (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). The member checking process promoted agreement between the participant and by giving them an opportunity to discuss or clarify information throughout the data collection phase. Member checking leveled out the power imbalance between participants and the researcher by allowing me to return power to participants by returning responsibility to the participant and placing them in control over decision making to verify information, reject it, or revise it. Member checking was a significant benefit to the participants during the study and will be in life after college because it facilitated deeper thinking and reflection, assist in clarifying

thoughts and impressions, and facilitates growth and self-actualization (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). These potential benefits can have positive effects on mental health and encourage self-growth. There were no known discrepancies found through the member checking process. If discrepancies were to occur, each one would have been resolved by reviewing and discussing it with the participant to receive clarity. In addition, content from my research journal would have been reviewed to understand and evaluate my current mindset and reasoning upon making an inaccurate interpretation. Each data source would be examined again to revisit information then the information from across each data stream would have been compared to reveal additional information and to allow additional inconsistencies to surface (Yin, 2017). The purpose of using multiple data sources in a study is to triangulate data and compare data sources for consistency (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Unresolved discrepancies would have been reported in the limitations section (Creswell, 2013).

After the participants completed the student reflection writing prompt with pencil and paper, they listened to the researcher's verbal summary of their writing content and were given the opportunity to confirm or disconfirm the accuracy of the summary. There were no discrepancies or participant disconfirmation of the summary of the writing prompt content. If a discrepancy did occur the same steps discussed in the interview section would be taken. Each writing prompt was transcribed manually and uploaded into the computer program Nvivo. The same procedures for coding interviews were applied to the writing prompt. The writing prompt was an independent data collection source over the same questions being studied in the interview, however, writing potentially allowed other forms of expression and hidden impressions to surface (Taniguchi et al., 2017). Writing can be used not only as a strong source



of data but can also assist in identifying hidden impression topics participants may be unaware of, which are being missed (Taniguchi et al., 2017). Students should be given numerous opportunities and modes for self-expression in a student-centered, one-on-one environment to share their thoughts, beliefs, self-reflections, and reasoning freely and on their terms (Hancock & Algozzine, 2015). The writing was beneficial because it gave students another opportunity and outlet to organize thoughts and feelings, and a way to communicate. Writing the journal prompt may be helpful to students who are struggling to find the words to answer a question, nervous, presently trying to organize or process their thoughts, or who get off track easily (Hancock & Algozzine 2015).

These results were compared to the interview and across each instrument used in this study and analyzed for congruencies, differences, and inconsistencies. The themes which emerged from the writing prompt were compared to the themes identified in participant interviews to examine the congruency of themes between the two data sources. Because the writing prompt was a reflective summary of the interview, the emerging themes were consistent with the themes identified in the interview data thematic analysis. The student writing prompt can counter issues such as mental exhaustion by providing an additional outlet for not only communication but to use to compare to other data sources to assess consistency (Yin, 2017).

Relevant data from the researcher journal such as field, process, and observation notes were transcribed manually and reviewed for accuracy. Notes from the researcher journal including observation notes which were read out loud to make an audio recording and then audio recordings were transcribed. The quality of the transcripts was ensured by comparing them to the audio recording of the notes twice. The manual transcripts were uploaded into the computer

program Nvivo along with the observation checklists. Transcripts were organized into meaningful categories or groups of information and each chunk was given a name or code reflecting the overall theme of the included information. The way information was grouped or chunked was determined by how the transcripts were organized according to similarity (Peterson, 2017). A code was given for each group of similar information. Then, coding was used again to assist in identifying topics, issues, similarities, and differences that were revealed in interviews. Codes were analyzed for themes. The thematic analysis enables the researcher to understand connections and themes within a data source as well as themes across multiple data streams (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

Observation is a strong source of data collection because researchers can see what participants do, feel, and think in comparison to what participants say they do (Morgan et al., Pullon, Macdonald, McKinlay & Gray, 2017). Observations were used to triangulate data and can be referenced to evaluate incongruencies or gaps in data (Sutton & Austin, 2015). It was a potential window to examine the unsaid, unaware, and unwilling side of participants. An observational checklist was used and compared to the data from participant interviews and the writing prompt. The observational checklist recorded nonverbal behavior and was used to compare the consistency between participant verbal and nonverbal communication. Verbal and nonverbal communication is important to observe and compare to determine the overall consistency of data (Afdal, 2016). An observation checklist is a useful tool to aid researchers in this comparison by highlighting key nonverbal behavior communication points for researchers to easily evaluate. The observation checklist strengthened the findings of this study. In this study, the observational checklist supported the findings of the other two data sources by showing

consistency between participant verbal and nonverbal communication such as a facial expression matching the tone and feel of the content participants shared.

The research journal provided data on the context of the environment along with other notes. Field notes taken were a useful source of information to refer to that filled in gaps in time between observations, interviewing, transcribing, and coding (Sutton & Austin, 2015). I used the research journal to control personal bias by keeping a live record of feelings, thoughts, and reasoning behind every decision made through the entire research study. I used the research journal to write down thoughts before and after encountering each participant and throughout the coding and data analyzation process. A research journal is an effective tool for researchers to reflect on the study, record field notes, control and understand potential biases impacting the study, and for self-reflection, all of which support professional development (Afdal, 2016). For these reasons, I included the research journal in the coding process. Situational factors are important to consider and record in a research journal when analyzing data and field notes can aid in limiting memory, environmental, and nonverbal bias (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Situational factors can be psychological, physiological, environmental, atmosphere, societal, or any external factor that surfaces when interviewing a participant (Rennick-Egglestone et al., 2019). Situational factors can strongly influence the extent to which students are willing to participate in an interview (Steg, Bolderdijk, Keizer & Perlaviciute, 2014). It is important to limit situational factors because it can influence the researcher, participant, and impact the outcome of the study. I compared different data streams to one another to evaluate consistencies and incongruences. The rationale for this comparison included the evaluation of the accuracy of findings and to triangulate data. Including multiple data sources was necessary for the triangulation of data and it

increased the overall validity and reliability of the results, data interpretations, and the instruments used (Ryan & Bauman, 2016).

Data triangulation was increased by increasing the rigor of data analysis by assessing the integrity of the inferences discovered, which should be from more than one source (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). I compared the conclusions made by the researcher journal to other data sources to evaluate if the journal was congruent with the findings of other data sources. Comparing data streams allows missed discrepancies to surface and if each data stream is congruent with the others, this can strengthen the reliability of study findings. Inconsistencies in findings across data streams can weaken the validity of the study's findings (Ryan & Bauman, 2016).

### **Accuracy and Credibility of Data Findings**

Many efforts were made to increase the accuracy and credibility of data findings from this study. QRS International (2017), reported using Nvivo software program for coding and to identify themes reducing bias and other threats to validity by managing data and allowing for easy comparison and checks. One approach was to triangulate data. Triangulation is increased by increasing the rigor of data analysis by assessing the integrity of the inferences that one draws from, which should be from more than one source (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). In this study, I collected from multiple sources including interviews, the student writing prompt, and the researcher journal combined with the observational checklist. The reason for having multiple data sources was to triangulate data and to gain as much information as possible from different places to enhance and support the accuracy of interpretations (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). The purpose of the observational checklist was to assist me in staying focused and on track. Using

multiple data sources may reduce researcher bias, misinterpretations, and increase the accuracy and credibility of study findings (Ryan & Bauman, 2016).

**Triangulation.** Additionally, methodology triangulation is defined as having consistency among qualitative research method traditions and researcher triangulation is defined as having consistency between researchers (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). The methodology of this study, and the procedures it follows, was consistent with other studies, which follow the same tradition. Methodology and researcher triangulation are established in this study using member checking and interrater reliability to establish internal validity and reliability. Interrater reliability followed by using Kappa Cohen to calculate the level of agreement on themes between researchers builds reliability and internal consistency, which supported the accuracy and credibility of the data findings in this study. Accuracy and credibility of findings were additionally supported by allowing students to review transcripts of the interview, researcher summaries of the writing prompt, an observational checklist, and researcher journal through member checking (Creswell, 2012). I used interrater reliability to triangulate data and establish credibility and reliability by measuring the degree of agreement on codes and themes between the researcher and the participant (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Reflexivity urges researchers to be reflexive in relation to interpersonal and ethical aspects of research practice, not just the epistemological aspects of rigorous research. I used reflexivity and accessed my research journal to understand where differences may have rooted by examining my notes on the participant during and after the interview, as well as my process notes and self-reflection as a professional researcher.

**Member-checking.** I used member-checking by reflecting content to students following the student writing prompt reflection. Member-checking was also used by reflecting content to

students after completion. This process promoted agreement between the researcher and the participant by giving them an opportunity to discuss and clarify information reflected from the interview and/or writing prompt which enhances the researchers' understanding and increases the validity of the findings (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

I engaged in reflexivity concerning self-bias in the field notes. I accessed my researcher journal to understand where differences may have rooted by examining my notes on the student during and after the writing prompt. An explanation of discrepancies and differences through these processes would have been reported in the limitations section (discrepancies, credibility, and accuracy) of this paper along with possible explanations but none existed. However, the participant sometimes would add on to reflections or paraphrasing. If any discrepancies did occur, it would have been documented in the researcher journal and I would have review notes to understand why it occurred and seek assistance if needed to handle necessary incidents.

### **Addressing Discrepancies**

Discrepancies or negative case analysis is a final way to maintain credibility and involves researching data that may disconfirm or disprove research evidence that does not support the research findings from the emerging data. Although discrepancies may seem to negatively impact the initial credibility of research studies, there is greater credibility to be earned from disclosures. Being upfront and reporting discrepancies shows honesty and increases the reader's trust, which increases the integrity of the study and accuracy of the data findings; it is critical that the researcher is open, honest, and forthcoming with this information as doing so increases the researcher's credibility (Creswell, 2012).

## Theme Descriptions and Supporting Factors

### Theme 1: Impact and Experience

**Class group discussions viewed as the most meaningful takeaway.** Regarding the first interview question, the theme revealed students perceive class group discussions as the most meaningful takeaway. A collaborative or peer learning model was used in this course and each learning activity implemented provided students with the opportunity to gain a new unique learning experience within a social context. One common activity in collaborative or peer learning used discussion group. Discussion groups provided students with a sense of belonging, support, and facilitated unity or a team approach among students. The class environment served as a strong and supportive foundation and aided in helping students personalize learning content individually and collectively. The class environment provided the ideal conditions needed for learning to be enhanced. The experience students left the course with would not have been the same without the implementation of the peer learning model activities which is founded on establishing positive social learning environments and places an emphasis on learning collectively as a group and connecting to one another (Radovan & Makovec, 2015). These connections aided students in applying course content to their personal life and the more students believed course topics to be useful and connected to real-life situations, the more intrinsically motivated they became to learn (Sandilos, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cohen, 2017). Personalizing learning enhances students' information retention capacity and intrinsic motivation (Le, Janssen, & Wubbels, 2018). This was supported by the reflections on a participant named Tiny during the interview.

There is a lot going on, we are just freshmen trying to take it all in and while doing group activities to practice what we learned in lecture and to hear someone else going through the same thing as you and seeing we are all going through the same things really clicked with me. This made me want to learn more in class and do my work because the bond we all had in group was there because of the stuff we were learning in class. If this stuff didn't exist, there would have been anything to connect with others about.

Tiny thought the course content was the only reason she felt connected to others and that this sense of belonging made them feel accepted which encouraged them to contribute through sharing. This reflected her intrinsic motivation to work hard and this is evidenced by her statement about wanting to learn more to contribute her part to group discussions and activities as well as to keep a connection to peers. Peer learning experiences such as in-class group discussions as evidenced in Tiny's reflection can change the nature of learning to be pleasant, beneficial, and meaningful while learners become more positive and deeply involved (Mustafa, 2017).

Another participant, Cookie shared a similar reflection, "this class didn't seem like as much work as other classes, I dreaded this class the least". The participant's positive reflections of the course likely resulted from internal motivation which was driven by their positive perception of the course and their experience. Radovan and Makovec (2015) conducted a study to identify which factors determine internal motivation and found that student perceptions of a course and of the relevancy of course content to real-life situations to be determinants of internal motivation (Radovan & Makovec, 2015).



Listening to peers make contributions to group discussions and perceiving those contributions as valuable, relevant, and applicable to real life, while knowing it will soon be ones' turn to contribute, may create anxiety or pressure. John shared, "there was a little pressure to do reading assignments and listen to lectures because you knew you'd be talking in group or doing an activity, but it wasn't bad. It was a good kind of pressure and I think it was good for me." Most students perform well when there is a small amount of pressure which is healthy if they authentically believe in the content is relevant.

Most students reported an increase in self-awareness and awareness of others from the course. Learning, discussing, and doing activities on course content in a group setting, personalized learning, and was a positive learning experience for participants. From the interviews, students reported an increase in self-awareness and awareness of others, an increase in sensitivity or awareness of their emotions as well as the emotions of others. Some gained lasting friendships from the course. The routine of having a stable supportive social learning environment gradually decreased social anxiety in some students. A participant reported becoming less sensitive and responsive to anxiety in social settings from the continued exposure of peer learning. One participant, Ace, had such a positive learning experience in the course, it changed his life. Ace stated,

I always get nervous walking into classes or the student union for lunch where there are a lot of people. Unless I drink, I can't converse with people, I get anxious. I would say this class was uncomfortable at times and at times I couldn't relate, but I noticed my anxiety started decreasing slowly after every group discussion. They taught us ways to converse

and how to relate to other students without a party or use of a substance in an academic setting in addition to how to communicate using a conversational tone.

Social anxiety is one of the most commonly reported mental health concerns (Praditsang et al., 2015). Students discussed their transition from the point when they first entered a classroom full of people who seemed so different from them to the point when they realized that they were all more alike than different. With time and after having opportunities to connect to peers during learning activities, students realized everyone in the course was going through the same things and were bonded by that alone and could all grow together. Students gained a deeper understanding and more patience with others by sharing personal experiences, thoughts, and ideas, and feelings allowed for rich, impactful, and meaningful group discussions about mental wellness. A deeply positive or negative learning experience is something students take away with them and continue to apply to their lives, like Ace. Being open and accepting towards others, sharing information with others, and while relating and giving support to one another creates a relationship. Relationships matter, learning is maximized when students are invested on a personal level versus strictly remembering information for a test (Mustafa, 2017).

#### **Student preference for peer learning, class discussion, and group activities.**

Regarding the second research question on learning preferences, most students reported preferring a learning environment that reflects the one in the experience course. Peer learning is the process in which learners acquire new skills and knowledge through active listening and supporting equal or matched students (Le et al, 2018). This environment is preferred because it is more involved on multiple levels and learning from and with peers makes information more meaningful. Students develop internal motivation which is the most significant prerequisite

needed for learning (Radovan & Makovec, 2015). In response to the learning environment of the course, one participant, Ruffles stated, “I think we should be like this and we should spend more time doing”. When asked, Ruffles clarified “it” meant “classroom discussions that is.” When asked to clarify what “it” meant the reply was “the classroom discussions that is.”

In addition to personalizing learning, students valued learning from peers more than learning from instructors because the bond and connection made from sharing, relating, and discussing things with others created a supportive positive team environment (Mustufa, 2017). Patagonia stated, “I learned more from my peers than the teacher because their insight and what is shared is more personal, interesting, and relevant. I think peers have more genuine and relevant information and overall better information or their direction is better than the teacher’s”. Similar insights were shared by Ruffles.

I got the most out of group activities and discussions because I like learning from others, and you get better information that way than compared to a teacher. It’s more relevant and I am more interested in what they are saying because we connect. I think more classes should be like this and we should have spent more time doing it.

The reason these participants preferred learning from their peers versus instructor is that they believed that peers are more relevant and relatable. When engaged in peer learning, information becomes more personal and a student’s perception of the learning experience is likely to be positive (Le et al., 2018).

**Opportunities.** There is an opportunity to further develop students mentally, socially, and professionally through using peer learning. The new activities or possibly revised former activities will be based on the most relevant mental health topics as reported by the student and

will apply the techniques, tools, and education specific to the topic. Adapting activities to relevant course topics identified by students allows educators to improve teaching and learning about mental health by applying techniques in a manner that is the most personal to students. Many students mentioned the course requirement to schedule and meet with the instructor five times throughout the semester. Students reported the course requirement to be significantly helpful to their progress and a means of support. Also, meeting with instructors provides students with accountability which may increase student self-regulation.

In response to what they took away from the course, one student was stunned to come to the conclusions that instructors are on your side and will help you if you take the time to meet with them, they will tell you what to do or give your ideas on what to try and do differently and or offer resources for more serious assistance. The student also added that teachers will match your investment of time and energy you put in to do well in a course. It is up to each person to take responsibility for what happens in a course, figure out what they do and do not understand, determine what they need to get to where they want to be, and to set up a good relationship with the teacher. Ace stated,

the more a student develops a healthy relationship with teachers, the more positive a teacher will respond and invest back. This is talking to teachers for support and having a genuine relationship with them and including them in your experience versus ‘when is the next test’ or ‘I am not happy with my grade on the test’. With a full understanding, they can more likely help you or give you input on your progress or give you advice on how to meet your goals.

Working with teachers and establishing an alliance can positively build student accountability in a positive way if meetings are regular. Having accountability increases student self-regulation and this self-insight is necessary to develop and progress both academically and mentally (Bruffaerts et al., 2018).

There is an opportunity to build a foundation for a positive and supportive campus climate starting with freshmen. The unity of a class offers student support and encouragement, which supports their mental health and supporting mental health supports academic progress and learning capacity by decreasing distracting thoughts or mental noise during learning (Stebleton et al., 2014). Campus climate is a significant influence on a student's mental health. What is or is not acceptable or tolerated in the community of campus is its climate by certain groups. This class could set the tone for what a positive and supportive community feels like and may prevent students from making bad decisions because of the unity they experience in the course. Educators could take advantage of the class and use it as an opportunity to use activities or information to build a strong foundation for a positive, respectful, warm, supporting, and inclusive community in each student. This could set the tone of the campus climate and carry over to the next class of freshmen. Cookie stated,

I didn't know what to think about certain topics at first but then I realized maybe some people did not know anything about mental wellness growing up or they weren't supposed to talk about feelings and stress. Some people don't even know what is normal and right or not when it comes to trying to be friends with people because they want to be a label so bad, they don't think about it. So, I am glad they are hearing about it.

Universities should attempt to create and promote student social inclusion, efforts to create a respectful accepting campus climate, and promote student engagement and transformation (Sullivan, 2016). Campus climate is explained as the current attitudes, behaviors and standards of faculty, staff, administrators, and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential (Knolls & Annas, 2018). Rebel shared “I feel like the way the class felt and the energy was different than other classes or than being at the union and I think it was positive. We were all in the same class and freshmen, so everyone was on the same boat. I wish the rest of the school was like that.”

Increased self-awareness and awareness of others was a major benefit of the class as reported by students. More in-depth learning activities to increase student self-awareness and awareness of others can be developed to break down the negative stereotyping of others and to promote positive coexisting among all populations of students (Juvonen et al., 2019). Future activities could be focused on assigning a problem or task to a group of students to encourage unity among diverse students by sharing a common purpose or goal. Other activities could include using games to challenging assumptions, labels for people, and prejudices (Knolls and Annas, 2018). Not only should cultural, ethnic, social, and religious assumptions or labels be challenged but also discriminating against others for their political views (Juvonen et al., 2019). It is important to take advantage of the opportunity at hand to promote social inclusion among students because inclusion is a determining factor of campus climate and campus climate can have a significant impact on academic success. Social inclusion supports a positive campus climate and a positive campus climate supports student perseverance, prevalence, degree attainment, and academic accomplishments (Knolls & Annas, 2018). A group of diverse fearful,

nervous, anxious, and pre-determined mindset individuals could turn into an inclusive, supportive, and kind community. The goal is to teach students their beliefs, assumptions, views, and ways of treating people is not always correct and to recognize differences in style, religion, political beliefs, and other issues should be respected, even if they do not agree.

The course has a strong impact on positive social change by promoting social inclusion and respect for others by providing a supportive, sincere, and healthy learning environment.

### **Theme 2: Topics, Activities, and Tools**

This theme also addresses both research questions. These are the most relevant topics discussed in the course, or topics students related to the most: social anxiety, healthy sleep schedule, anxiety, time managing, stress managing, transitioning to college, loneliness, fear of failure, feelings of being overwhelmed, goal setting, and tools for managing and coping with these challenges. In the mind of a student, this is their perception of the most important subject matter, and what they prefer to learn about. The most effective tools students learned were yoga, deep-breathing techniques, time-managing, goal setting, prioritizing work and creating lists, meditation, listening to music, unplugging electronically to take a break, taking “me time”, driving, writing, journaling, acknowledging the stressor, “letting it out” or crying if you need to, doing something for themselves like getting nails done, increased self-awareness, increased awareness of others, reflecting, social interaction and communication techniques, and using the teacher and peers for support.

Educators should use meeting time with students to identify variables influencing learning. Variables hindering learning may be academic or mental. Rapport with students is

needed to have meaningful productive meetings, which can be built with students by being open, accommodating, interested, and avoiding barriers between you and them (Raheim et al., 2016).

There is an opportunity to personalize learning and focus more on present issues. Gaining feedback on student perceptions of the most relevant issues discussed or tools learned, will allow educators to further develop resources being taught, and to spend less time on less relevant topics as reported by students and more time on more relevant issues and class activities. Ferby explained, “I think the teacher needed to spend her time more wisely on the topics she lectured on and spend more time on the issues we are going through or facing”. Spending more time and going more in-depth with topics and application skills or tools and less on the rest will increase student learning because students hear and learn more about subjects which are more relatable to them.

For example, Ace stated his social anxiety slowly decreased after each group discussion and how social skills and ways to communicate comfortably with peers and teachers were taught. Social anxiety or fear was reported by every single participant except two. This is an opportunity to create class activities where students take turns all at once going desk to desk and conversing with a classmate to challenge social anxiety and apply tools learned to manage them. Also, some of the ways to converse with peers can be applied such as talking about hobbies. The purpose of having ideas to talk about is to help the student feel more comfortable by having a thing in mind to talk about and conversing on something like hobbies will encourage a positive social exchange, decreasing social anxiety. Ace also stated certain terms like social anxiety should be re-named due to negative stigma, there should be less focus on terminology and more on the activity. Ace also stated issues should be discussed from more than a mental health perspective



and other alternative explanations should be given to make students feel “less weird” or “less like something is wrong”. For example, videos on social anxiety or describing what it is or how it is caused by personal insecurities or fear should not be it. Teaching should also include a biological explanation, for example, as Ace stated, “this is what happens in your brain when you feel social anxiety and how it communicates to your body causing an increase in heart rate, shaking, shuddering, excessive blinking, or sweating”. Teachers should use different approaches and background knowledge on subjects when teaching to avoid attaching a stigma to information that hinders student learning such as what Ace may have experienced (Shapieo, 2019). Students best learn and draw their conclusions about information when teachers use multiple modes of practice, reference multiple varying knowledge bases, and provide students with multiple outlets and opportunities to learn (Beiter et al., 2015). Interviewing participants like Ace, created rapport and a personal interview experience, which helped students feel more comfortable and at ease. The recommendations mentioned earlier on how to create rapport with students encouraged students to share more freely, and generated more insightful responses, especially on sensitive topics (Alaawai, 2014).

Students who are involved in peer learning activities develop high levels of personal and professional skills, expand their subject learning, improve their grades, and their relationships and intercultural awareness is enhanced (Mustafa, 2017). Students who experience interactive or peer learning perform better, improve logical thinking abilities, and positive learning outcomes (Chen, 2018). Peer learning supports a sense of belonging among students and improves academic confidence. Friendship development is supported, greater confidence in social

integration and more participation in the community are other benefits of peer learning (Mustafa, 2017).

### **Theme 3: Overall Perceptions, First Thoughts, Emotions, Attitude, and Effectiveness**

This theme addresses the research question number one directly. Most students were initially excited when they became aware of mental health education being a course objective. John was especially eager and stated, “I am just really glad they have come to realize how serious it is and that it is something we deal with. I am surprised they even are open enough to make it part of the class.” Although prior to the class start date, John was excited, he said it changed to anxiety when he walked into the classroom the first day. John said in the interview “After walking into the classroom people weren’t as closed off as I thought they would be and then after that, they weren’t as quiet towards me as I thought they would be. I was pleasantly surprised, I am different”. John was anxious that people would not accept him and was fearful when speaking but was looking forward to learning about it. Due to the influence of social inclusion on campus climate, and the influence of campus climate on academic prevalence, universities consistently seek ways to promote acceptance and social inclusion (Knolls & Annas, 2018). As John reflected, social inclusion and acceptance is something both universities and students are concerned with. Social inclusion does not promise academic success, but social exclusion absolutely compromises academic performance (Juvonen, Lessard, Rastogi, Schacter, & Smith, 2019). The social exclusion increases negative mental thinking and behaviors which interferes with learning.

Two students stated teachers should change or rename terminology because of the negative stigma and believed alternative information such as genetics or brain and body activity

should be included to avoid focus being solely on the term and “what is wrong with you.” People can become socially discriminated against because of mental health stigma and instructors should be attentive in avoiding placing stigmas on topics by paying attention to the use of terminology (Rudic & Dannells, 2018). Teachers should reference a variety of knowledge bases when teaching (Shapieo, 2019).

All participants but one felt comfortable, supported, unity with others, connected, and part of a family. Students thought the objectives were relevant and related to them and their personal life. Ruffles said, “I was able to immediately relate what we were learning about to my roommate who didn’t grow up talking about mental health and does not know anything about it or how it relates to overall health. I have a better understanding of her and more patience”. Students reported increased self-awareness and awareness of others, increased sensitivity or awareness of emotions of self and others, and an increase in sensitivity when responding to the emotions of others because of peer learning. Due to the fact the information in the course was personal to Ruffles, she could retain more information and maximize her learning. The increase in self-awareness and awareness of others from peer learning experiences has increased the ability of students to self-regulate (Radovan & Makovec, 2015). Skills gained from the course such as self-regulation, benefits students outside the context of the class. Students who self-regulate are more likely to thrive academically and graduate.

#### **Theme 4: Environment and Teacher**

The theme of the class environment and teacher was strongly present in both research questions. When learning about mental health, students perceived the classroom environment as supportive and comfortable. Some students reported the teacher as kind and qualified, however, a

few reported their instructor was not confident or knowledgeable and believed they would benefit from more training on classroom activities. Student perceptions of the classroom environment are correlated to their academic achievement (Sandilos et al., 2017). A few participants discussed not liking it when the teacher intervened or interrupted conversations. Two participants believed not enough time was spent on mental health issues and that the timing of these course lectures and activities should be the first few weeks of class because students are already experiencing stress. One student suggested scheduling mental health lectures and activities during the start, middle, and at the end of the semester when students are the most impacted by stress and potential poor mental wellness. This suggestion is supported in the literature, Peterson and Densley (2019) recommended universities give as much focus, energy, resources and attention as possible to conducting mental health interventions, conducting assessments, and working mental health support resource tents during the notable periods of high-stress when students are the most vulnerable and at risk for a significant mental health problem to surface, during mid-terms and finals. High-stress periods such as the end of the semester is when 70% of perpetrators committed violent acts such as mass shootings (Paolini 2015).

Socially, collaborative learning creates social supports for students, establishes a mutual understanding between teacher and students, and provides a positive environment for practice and cooperation (Mustafa, 2017). Collaborative learning is only successful when instructors are involved in the process, intentional with in-class activities, ask questions, respond to students, and correct current misunderstandings (Le et al., 2018). Most students in this study preferred collaborative or group learning and all but one preferred having desks arranged in a circle.

However, one student reported feeling that the seats in the classroom were too close together and that there were too many people in the class. It is necessary to take this student's report into consideration to accommodate their needs because their perception of the environment influences motivation to learn and academic achievement (Bruffaerts et al., 2018).

Instructors should avoid attaching a stigma onto mental health subjects because of the impact that students' perceived negative stigmas can have on their motivation to learn about mental health and seek resources (Shapieo, 2019). One student reported feeling awkward when trying to connect to others during a group discussion about mental health topics because they could not relate personally to the problem. This student suggested that if group activities focused on solutions and responses to a problem instead of on the problem itself, students would not be on the defensive and distracted trying to avoid identifying with the problem. It may be easier and safer for students to connect and relate to others on a solution to a problem than on the problem itself (Radovan & Makovec, 2015). According to the literature, students learn more and retain more information when they can connect personally with others and the subjects are perceived as relevant to their daily life (Mustafa, 2017). The more personal and relatable information on mental health topics is to students, the more the student held negative stigmas about the topic are reduced. Focusing on self-care versus the problem may make mental health learning more relatable to students which decreases the influence of perceived negative stigmas on learning (Radovan & Makovec, 2015). One suggestion made by several students was for instructors to focus less on terminology, dates, and names of people and to focus more on classroom activities and group discussions. Instead of focusing on terminology and other factual matter, Ace suggested that when more than one student reports feeling a specific way, instructors should

teach skills which target overcoming that specific issue, such as social anxiety, and tools on how to control it more effectively. Solution-focused teaching practices may be more effective than problem-focused practices due to the negative stigma attached to focusing on mental health problems. Teaching practices are the most effective when they focus on solutions to the most predominant and relevant issues faced by students (Radovan & Makovec, 2015). Assessing student needs and listening to them with the intention of gaining a deeper understanding is needed by instructors to determine where time and energy should be focused on during class time (Bruffaerts et al., 2018).

There is an opportunity to improve teacher training and confidence to increase the quality, effectiveness, and assertion of class activities. Teaching a class of students how to meditate or do other helpful activities to support, control, and cope with issues may put educators in the spotlight. To be the most effective, teachers must not only be knowledgeable about the activity, but confident in themselves and their teaching ability (Meyer, 2018). Teachers must genuinely believe the tools they demonstrate are effective to be applicable and get students to truly buy into what they are doing. One participant, Ferby experienced projected stress from an instructor who appeared fearful, nervous, and uncertain of themselves daily to such an extent, the classroom environment was tense that a student began feeling stress and anxiety while in the class. Just as educators' study and observe students, students observe them. Ferby suggested, "Everyone has different instructors but some need to go practice or get more training because they don't know what they're doing, and when they are nervous it makes me nervous". Poor teaching confidence is noticeable to students and teacher inadequacies may hinder student learning and participation because students will have no reason to believe the course content

being presented is credible when the instructor is not (Fraser, 2018). A teacher's demeanor can have a negative impact on students who are sensitive or empathetic. For example, if a teacher is anxious or depressed, some students cannot help but feel the anxiety or depression as if it were a part of them. Ferby stated feeling fearful, anxious, and nervous on some days of class during the interview, this was also how she described her instructor to be. Overall, more participants reported believing that the teacher was responsible for making the class comfortable and setting a positive, inclusive tone. Providing this type of environment is an important responsibility for teachers because student motivation to learn is significantly impacted by their perception of the classroom environment (Fraser, 2018).

Sometimes teachers need the training to boost their teaching confidence and feelings of credibility. An educational seminar can provide some support for the teachers and can be used to ask questions, update instructors on changing, revised, or new research and practice, assist instructors in accepting and implementing policy changes. Ice breakers and activities could be used to connect instructors to one another, and for bonding. Being comfortable with co-workers is important because instructors will practice presenting class activities and tools to one another such as deep-breathing, meditation, creating stress webs, sculpting, and sand tray. Practicing activities while using co-workers as mock students allows teachers to gain real experience mimicking the classroom environment (Fraser, 2018). Practice will aid in educators' teaching confidence.

Just as students experience social or performance anxiety, teachers experience anxiety when demonstrating tools such as sculpting, yoga, or making a presentation. Most students

would like to see a continuation of the course, determined the course was effective, perceived the learning environment as positive, and took away meaningful life-changing experiences.

A few additionally reported that the teacher needed more training to be more assertive and impactful. One student, Red, said the teacher “did a good job, was kind, well informed, and knowledgeable, they were not confident or as effective as they could have been when teaching meditation and other group activities and it showed”. Instructor competency can have a significant influence on student progress and learning potential (Juvonen, Lessard, Rastogi, Schacter, & Smith, 2019).

Faculty or instructor competency can largely impact intentionality, which strongly influences meeting goals, depth, and the success of classroom activities such as group discussions (Le et al., 2018). For example, low attention to collaborative goals of collaborative or peer learning may cause teachers to ignore training students in collaborative skills resulting in teachers not wanting or being able to assess learning processes due to lack of training (Le et al., 2018). A lack of teacher competencies for implementing peer or collaborative learning exercises may have a serious negative impact on student learning groups because some students may aim only to master individual academic learning and neglect the importance of social interaction during collaboration (Le et al., 2018). For this reason, it is critical that instructors of this course attend a training and support function annually.

The rationale for annual faculty training is because students are continuously evolving, and in turn, hot or trending issues and topics keep changing, which changes effective proven techniques (Beiter et al., 2015). The literature supports the notion that on-going faculty training and education is necessary for teacher competency and effectiveness. Students are more



motivated to learn about topics which they perceive as most relevant and personal to them (Chen, 2018). For this reason, it is critical that educators work to stay informed on what mental health issues students are struggling with to be effective in their teaching practices, and faculty training can be used to as means for training and faculty support (Radovan & Makovec, 2015). It is important to be up to date in teaching theories, skills, applications, tools, demonstrations, and class activities always to ensure the best possible training, practice, and information can be given (Steinert et al., 2016). Faculty training can be effective in learning and practicing new teaching techniques.

Educators should be current on educational trends or surfacing breakthrough knowledge or applications to continuously adapt and evolve their teaching to support their effectiveness. When learning environments are flexible and changes or improvements can be made to a course, new current information can be applied (Sullivan, 2016). To be effective, instructors must be well informed on present research and practices to understand why changes to a classroom environment or teaching techniques should be implemented (Sullivan, 2016). It can be challenging to continue to learn new information and activities. Annual training could provide teachers with a complete understanding of why a change is being made, how it is the most significant, and how to implement it (Sullivan, 2016). Annual training could give teachers practice and boost their teaching confidence by practicing new teaching activities with other teachers (Le et al., 2018). This will help teachers come across as more assertive when demonstrating activities and increase their credibility.

Last, educators can learn how to improve the educational environment to make teaching the most effective, and to maximize learning from students. These changes are simple to make if

educators just listen and respond to student needs (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). For example, Ace stated, “the desks were too close, and the circle of desks made he/she feel uncomfortable getting in and out.” Because Ace disclosed having social anxiety, rearranging the desks was a necessary adjustment. It is necessary to take this student’s report into consideration to accommodate their needs and provide an effective and supportive learning environment (Bruffaerts et al., 2018).

Although teachers are not responsible for student learning, most students in this study reported believing that teachers were responsible for establishing a positive and supportive climate in the classroom or classroom environment. Providing a positive and supportive learning environment is an important responsibility for teachers because student motivation to learn and academic achievement is significantly impacted by their perception of the classroom environment (Fraser, 2018). Another participant explained, “I wish all classrooms used natural light, I focus so much better with natural light and just feel better”. This student’s desk was put by a window and the blinds were open to let in natural sunlight. Other items like plants can be added to improve the physical class environment. Being proactive and responding to students with a sense of urgency or practicing immediacy sends a highly positive, important message to students that they are important and a priority (Le et al., 2018). Urgency can be seen when a student displays or voices a concern which gains the attention of the teacher who then responds immediately, meeting the student’s present need (Le et al., 2018). Responding with urgency is less about what is said and more about the action or reaction of teachers. When students perceive an instructor as listening, responding, and acting, it facilitates a positive student-teacher relationship by creating rapport. Students perform better when instructors are aligned with them, collaborate with them, and when their input is incorporated (Kammel, 2016).

## **Theme 5: Recommendations**

This theme addressed the second research question about student perceptions. Parts of the theme were included in other theme discussions because the themes overlapped. Due to the overlapping of themes, portions of the content in this theme may have been included in previous sections and due to the relevancy of some of the information, it was included again but in the context of this theme. In summary, recommendations were made for teachers to avoid placing positive or negative stigmas on terminology by renaming or changing the current term. Mental health education stigma was found to be the most influencing factor on if a college student is motivated to learn about mental health to the best of their ability and if they choose to seek mental health assistance (Chan, 2016). For example, instead of calling something a “mental illness” refer to it as someone being “less mentally well”. Ace stated “there should be less focus on the terminology and more focus on the learning activity, group discussion and practicing applying tools. Due to the past, some mental health terminology and names of specific mental health problems have a negative connotation. Because higher education institutions have only recently started to pay attention to college student mental health and have been trying to catch up, this presents an opportunity for teachers to update mental health terminology and to establish new terms that are neutral (Downs et al., 2014). For example, teachers can learn by listening to students to gain a deeper understanding and create new terms together with students or by using student input. Terms created which include students as part of the process may be interpreted as more neutral than existing terms or terms created by faculty without student influence (Le et al., 2018). Working collaboratively with students enhances teaching skills by bringing awareness to ways instructors can evolve and furthering instructor understanding (Chen, 2018). Collaborative

learning increases instructor ability to meet student needs and in turn enhances student learning (Chen, 2018).

There are academic and social benefits for collaborative or peer learning. Academic benefits include the improvement of critical thinking skills, actively involving students in the learning process, and course outcome improvements (Mustafa, 2017). Peer learning contains social supports for students, creates a mutual understanding between teachers and students, and provides a positive environment for practice and cooperation (Mustafa, 2017). Although though the benefits and effectiveness of peer learning are strongly cited throughout the literature, it is only successful when instructors are involved in the process, intentional with in-class activities, ask questions, respond to students, and correct current misunderstandings (Le et al., 2018). Instructors should continuously work at staying in the loop with current research and education and consistently adjust practices to remain competent be enough to make effective decisions on teaching approaches and techniques (Kamel, 2016). Along with exerting competency in decision making, instructors must also reflect confidence, credibility, and professionalism in the classroom during lectures, while illustrating learning activities, while processing learning activities and discussions with students, when managing the classroom, and in controlling and directing class discussions. Portraying confidence is needed to establish credibility with students and to encourage students to believe in the course objectives and processes selected and applied to the course. Teachers must know thyself and address any areas of incompetence. For example, a teacher may be qualified and positive when making decisions about teaching approaches and techniques but lack confidence in carrying out these decisions in the classroom, illustrating activities, processing activities and discussions with students, managing the students and the

classroom environment, and in controlling and directing the flow of classes. Having the right education and knowledge to make effective decisions does not guarantee rapport with students, professional social skills, organizational skills, teaching skills, assertiveness, confidence, and mental collectiveness and control over the state of mind. These skills may need to be taught, refined, developed, and/or practiced avoiding being the reason peer learning was not effective.

Improving teaching approaches to mental health education can increase course effectiveness and student learning. Staying updated in training and in new or changing literature can fight negative stigmas about mental health. Other alternative explanations such as biological or physical should be given for the mental health issues discussed in lectures. Teachers should use different approaches and refer to different background knowledge bases when teaching and reference when teaching to avoid attaching a single stigma to a topic by delivering information from only one source. Not using a variety of resources on one topic or learning activities hinders student learning (Shapieo, 2019). Using multiple modes of practice, referencing multiple varying knowledge bases, and providing student with multiple outlets and opportunities to learn is the best way to aid students in drawing their conclusions on learning content (Beiter et al., 2015).

A third of the participants felt time could have been spent more wisely by having more and longer group discussions and activity time and by focusing less on non-relevant topics and more on the issues which are the most relevant, present, and persistent. Half of the participants wished the mental health topics were discussed as soon as the course started as Rebel said, “we were already dealing with and experiencing it”. Another student, Nina suggested, “the mental health education course objectives, discussions, and activities should occur at high-stress times such as the beginning, middle, and end of the semester.” Some participants recommended having

a continuation of this course or extending it into the next semester or that a follow-up course is created that students may enroll in at any time as an elective course. Some recommended no changes be made to the course. Ruffles declared “do not make any changes to the course, I completely like it the way it is. I enjoy the pace of the course and jive well with the way things are.” In summary, I derived the themes from the results of thematic analysis, and each theme that merged is supported in the literature which strengthened the validity, reliability, accuracy, and generalizability of the information of this study.

### **Summary**

I used a case study design, using semistructured interviews, student writing prompts, a research journal, and an observation checklist to conduct this study. The data streams focused on furthering current knowledge regarding student perspectives on teaching and learning about mental health education. Researchers are responsible for upholding all the values, guidelines, principles, and processes necessary to conduct ethical research throughout the study. I carefully transcribed data sources then organized the transcripts according to codes, themes, and patterns using the computer program Nvivo. The findings were validated by using several processes including member-checking, triangulation of data, peer-debriefing, interrater reliability, and reflexivity. There are significant benefits to be gained by participants, both during the study and in life after college, because of the one-on-one attention they will receive. Participation in the study may facilitate deeper thinking and reflection, improve articulation and communication when sharing or describing future experiences, assist in clarifying thoughts and impressions on past and future experiences, and facilitate self-growth. These potential benefits will have positive effects on mental health and encourage self-growth. The results addressed the research questions

and information gained was used to improve teaching and learning about mental health, increase available resources, and to enhance educator training through a position paper, recommending best practices.

## Section 3: The Project

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to respond to a problem experienced by first-year college students enrolled in the University experience course who reported poor mental health education to be a significant barrier to their academic achievement. A deeper understanding of student perspectives and preferences regarding teaching and learning about mental health education in a classroom setting was needed. However, the literature on studies being conducted from the students' perspective was scarce, most were from a teacher's or other faculty member's perspective and none included the subject of mental health education. I used thematic analysis to analyze student data collected from structured interviews, a writing prompt, and an observational checklist. Each item across all the data streams was created to address the research questions pertaining to freshmen perspectives and preferences on teaching and learning about mental health education in a classroom setting. From the thematic analysis of data, five dominant themes emerged:

- Impact and experience.
- Topics, activities, and tools.
- Overall perceptions, first thoughts, emotions, attitude, and effectiveness.
- Teacher and learning environment.
- Recommendations, preferences, and feedback.

There are policies in place to make changes to the course based on instructor feedback and perspective, although, none of these take student recommendations into consideration. The policy that exists consists of a 1-hour meeting with all the instructors of the first-year experience



course a few days before each semester begins to review course topics and objectives. In the past, weekly short meetings have been included where instructors, as a group, discussed the progress and process experiences from a professional perspective while teaching the course; however, these weekly meetings did not occur consistently each semester and have been nonexistent for up to three semesters at a time. Another focus of these weekly meetings was for instructors to ask questions about the content on the syllabus and to gain other professional support such as classroom paperwork organization tips.

Creating a project deliverable was necessary to share the results of this case study with administrators and university stakeholders and to share policy recommendations. A policy recommendation of an annual training seminar for professional development was made for instructors of the first-year experience course based on the findings of this case study. The projective deliverable was presented in the form of a position paper (Appendix A). The purpose of a position paper or white paper is to communicate study results, highlight relevant points from the literature, provide background information about the problem addressed, apply the resulting themes to a policy or program by making suggestions or recommendations, and provide university faculty and stakeholders with a concise resource or step-by-step plan (Sakamuro, Stolley, & Hyde, 2015). The goal of the position paper in this study is to make policy recommendations focused on solidifying a set schedule for weekly instructor developmental meetings to discuss current practices, review new findings or changes in the literature relevant to course objectives, practice classroom activities and receive feedback from peers, and to implement specific practices to improve the classroom learning environment, course effectiveness and impact, and student-instructor relationships. The point is to improve teaching

and learning about mental health education in a classroom setting by using a sense of urgency to deliver a well-grounded, step-by-step, easy to follow resource for faculty, which is supported by literature, and practice to facilitate faculty action and implementation.

The goal of the annual training seminar recommended was to provide instructors with support, updated resources, teaching techniques and activities, discussion about surfacing research findings and current literature, and to administer opportunities to practice techniques and activities to support teaching confidence. I designed the training seminar to share student feedback from the course, highlight key points the seminar will focus on, discuss what changes need to be made and to provide both research and literature support on why each specific change is necessary and why each solution was selected to make each change. Students' learning experience or perception of learning can be influenced by working together with instructors, instructor listening followed by faculty efforts to make an intentional resolution based on feedback, remaining updated on current research and literature, and attending annual training to practice and update teaching techniques and activities.

Presenting a position paper prompted a discussion with administrators about the first-year college student perceptions on teaching and learning about mental health education in a class setting based on the results reported in the study. Presenting a position paper or white paper is an opportunity to directly access administrators and stakeholders who have the power to make institutional changes and implement recommendations that will have a positive impact on educators, students, the institution, and the community. In Section 3, I review in detail the project rationale, description, purpose, goals, and a review of the literature. Next, I explain the project

evaluation, and I conclude the section with a discussion on the social, scholarly, ethical, and professional implications of the project.

### **Rationale**

The data collected in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis and the results in Section 2 discussed each of the five themes which emerged significant and meaningful experiences; most relevant course topics, activities, skills, and tools; student recommendations and preferences for future courses; student perception of the classroom environment, teacher, and student-teacher relationship; and overall student perceptions, thoughts, initial attitude, emotions, and expectations of the course. The purpose of the study is to share student perspectives on mental health teaching and learning to identify areas to be improved and implement changes for improvements.

Key findings led to a white paper to facilitate empathetic understanding, the development of improved teaching practices, and contribute to positive social change by improving student mental health learning, student retention, and to facilitate a supportive mental health environment. The white paper addresses the problem which students report as mental health issues being a significant barrier to learning and a strong needs area, by presenting a step-by-step plan based on the theme's findings. Based on the findings, students learn best when the material is relevant to their personal life and when social or peer learning is used to connect with and learn from others while applying course objectives to an activity (Mustafa, 2017). In addition, other variables found to impact learning is the student-teacher relationship, classroom environment, and sense of personal autonomy and freedom. Student motivation is largely connected to their perception of their learning environment (Fraser, 2018). Peer learning, such as

in-class group discussions, should power to change the nature of learning to be pleasant, beneficial, and meaningful, as learners become more positive and deeply involved (Mustafa, 2017). Peer learning allows learners to acquire new skills and knowledge through active listening and supporting equal or matched students (Le et al., 2018). The more relevant course content is to students personally, the more they learn (Radovan & Makovec, 2015).

The scholarly literature around the paper suggests annual weekend training programs are less effective than regular weekly faculty training meetings (Perez, 2019). Faculty training structures should be adjusted when needed and faculty members should participate in creating and making changes to the structure (Le et al., 2018). Although an annual training program is suggested in the white paper, weekly meetings throughout the semester are outlined along with recommended objectives and activities.

Position papers are a popular tool for presenting research findings in a professional manner across many domains. Position papers are concise, provide recommendations with a step-by-step, simple to follow, and are to read. Position papers can be viewed as a valuable hybrid document tool that only includes information that is essential for the audience to know about the study problem, background/history of the issue, and summarizes key points of information from literature relevant to the study. As the most popular choice of researchers for presenting findings in higher education, white papers have a long credible history of use and are still highly effective today (Sakamuro et al., 2015). Position papers tend to be the preferred way to receive information for stakeholders, administrators, business professionals, people in the medical field, and others (Sakamuro et al., 2015). Timewise, a position paper is brief, and the purpose is to share the study's findings. Last, I was aware of the policy the local university

already had in place. For these reasons, a position paper was used in this study to present findings of first-year college student perspectives on teaching and learning about mental health education in a classroom setting and to make recommendations for the current policy, provides easy to follow step-by-step directions and a training plan with a schedule to implement changes.

According to the qualitative checklist provided by Walden, an evaluation plan would not have been appropriate because that project is for an evaluation study. The effectiveness of the first-year student experience course was not evaluated in this study. Instead, I listened to understand the perspectives of students enrolled in the first-year experience course. A curriculum plan was not possible because I do not teach at the local university and I do not have access to the required assessments, required teaching books, or teacher login permissions to access planners, class sections, class schedules, or other necessary information for lesson planning and this does not align with the purpose and goals of the study. A curriculum plan must be detailed and planned for a minimum of nine weeks. After considering the requirements of a curriculum plan, it entered my awareness that I did not have the time to plan the number of lessons required for a curriculum plan and I did not have time to carry out a curriculum plan for nine weeks, even if I was an employee. I did not have access to the class materials; therefore, I was unable to plan or create lesson plans. The purpose of the study is to share student perspectives on mental health teaching and learning to identify areas to be improved and implement changes. Because a curriculum plan does not meet this criterion and the goals of the study, it was not the best choice.

I originally thought professional development training was ideal, however, this genre assumes that no policy is in place at all and someone may simply create one from the ground-up. Although the current policy does not include student perspectives, there is still one in place and

the same planning involved in a professional development project may be incorporated into the current policy. Professional development programs are required to be three days long at a minimum. The same objectives designed for a professional development project could be incorporated into the local university's policy except instead of over the course of three days, objectives could be covered in smaller increments throughout the semester during weekly instructor meetings. Additionally, it may have been difficult to get instructors to commit to three days with a positive attitude and a significant change in policy could potentially create resistance or barriers because there has never been a policy that strenuous in place. Incorporating objectives into weekly meetings may place a smaller strain on instructors as opposed to a summer annual training. The rationale of conducting this study and using a position paper was not simply to offer a solution to a problem, but to also make a unique contribution to the literature because studies using a qualitative approach examining student perspectives and preferences related to mental health education are limited in the literature (Kamel, 2016).

### **Review of Literature**

The purpose of the literature review conducted was to learn additional or new information about the problem being examined. I used the following databases to research the problem: Walden University's database, The University of Mississippi's database, Complete, ERIC, Ebscohost, Sage, Google scholar, Chronicles of Higher Education, and ProQuest. The rationale for using a variety of databases was to reflect a deep saturation of literature. Only peer-reviewed articles published in the last five years concentrating on college student perspectives about teaching and learning about mental health and Mental Health Education on college campuses were selected. The primary search terms used were the development of college student

mental health, college student mental health, mental health education in colleges, mental health education and college completion, mental health and academic success, college student perspectives on teaching and learning about mental health, barriers in teaching and learning about mental health, educator/ faculty member mental health knowledge and teaching competency, faculty and educator training using a white paper, white paper in qualitative research, educational white paper writing, and effective educational white paper writing that matters.

## **Faculty Development**

Like other recent popular developments and changes in university beliefs, university responsibility student mental health wellness, university practices, policies, and attention to specific topics and university contemporary issues, faculty development has only recently become favored and a trending topic. The results of this study indicated a need for various areas of faculty development in relation to student perceptions of teacher professionalism, knowledgeability of course content, activities, and discussion topics, teaching style, classroom environment, view of students and teaching, and relationship with students. Students reported their reflections on what is needed for an instructor needs to be considered a good teacher. Some students reported believing instructors should be highly positive and involved people who can engage students by genuinely getting on their level and establishing an equal partnership which is also equal in power. Some students even stated it was the sole responsibility of the instructor to engage students, establish a teacher-student relationship, control the classroom environment, demonstrate classroom activities, and confidence over peer learning and student engaging and bonding with one another. Faculty social skills regarding means of student interaction techniques, personal relationship with each student, teaching style, student- teacher role and power beliefs are variables and items which need to be continuously developed and assessed to reflect the changing of each student. Faculty would also benefit by adopting more cultural and diverse ways of engaging students and encouraging peer learning and to meet the growing needs of the most diverse population of students which higher education has ever had.

Students said they could tell if their teacher really liked them, believed in what they were teaching, was confident when using teaching tools, and demonstrating classroom activities.



Students need to see confidence and assertiveness in applying an activity or demonstrating a skill for them to buy into it and believe in it. One recommendation made by all, but two students were to have instructors meet weekly and during this meeting have each instructor demonstrate a tool, skill, or activity being used that week to the group. This will allow instructors to ask questions, practice, receive feedback, learn other ways other instructors demonstrate and build confidence. Most importantly, doing this at meetings will encourage instructor engagement and support and facilitated conversations about other related things. In addition to skill or activity demonstrations, a different person could introduce an update or change to literature related to teaching and learning practice or subject knowledge. With technology being such a vital and growing part of society, the way students are learning is changing as technology continues to advance and run the show (Rogers-Estable, 2014). Using technology or finding a way to apply it purposefully to the experience course was one of the requests and recommendations made during interviews with students. Teachers must be persistent in continuing education to consistently and effectively incorporate new technology into class lectures and activities. Students need technology to learn thus, technology should be applied with intention and purpose (Kamel, 2016).

The broad definition of faculty development is when institutions apply a wide range of activities to support faculty roles and include specific programs designed to improve the performance of faculty members in education, research, and administration (Kamel, 2016).

When referring to faculty development, there is an emphasis on the development of faculty skills in teaching, assigning learning activities, administration, conducting research, use of technology, media courses, small group teaching, and curriculum design (Kamel, 2016).

As with the surge in the number of students reporting mental health concerns and the lack of proper mental health education has increased and university avoidance of responsibility for student mental health or wellbeing outside of the classroom has decreased, faculty development has become extremely valuable at universities to support faculty roles as educators and administrators (Kamel, 2016). Faculty development evolved or came into awareness from the accumulating evidence of the ineffectiveness of the traditional ways of teaching around the year 2000 (Kamel, 2016). Steinert et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of faculty development to respond to major changes and advancements and to continue to adapt to the growing responsibilities as a faculty member. There is a need to expand the focus and consider different training methods and formats and encourage new partnerships and collaboration. The student stereotype has changed, and students are more diverse than ever in age, cultural background, and educational background beliefs. Effective faculty members must support the learning of those with diverse learning needs or preferences and develop curricula and teaching strategies applicable to a wide range of learning environments (Kamel, 2016). Additionally, there are changes in faculty member characteristics.

Faculty development activities have a positive effect on student academic achievement specifically in higher education. Implementing changes is expected to increase teacher performance and improve student learning outcomes. The development of new skills or assessments, techniques, improved ways of designing or implementing curricula, newer or changing ways of viewing the student-teacher relationship, and increased commitment to education is needed (Kamel, 2016). To increase the effectiveness of faculty development, different approaches to improve teaching have emerged associated with changing learning

theories. Four conditions are considered necessary for the change to occur the desire to change, knowledge of what to do and how to do it, a supportive work environment, and reward for change (Rogers-Estable, 2014). Features of faculty development which make it effective are the role of experiential learning, applying a new idea or skill, practicing it, receiving genuine constructive feedback on the learning skills, the value of working with peers in a supportive environment, collegial support to promote change and maintain it, the “we are in this together” team approach, the exchange of information, ideas, and practices among peers, and peer role models (Rogers-Estable, 2014). Faculty or instructor competency can largely impact intentionality which strongly influences meeting goals, depth, and the success of classroom activities such as group discussions (Le et al., 2018). For example, low attention to collaborative goals of collaborative or peer learning may cause teachers to ignore training students in collaborative skills resulting in teachers not wanting or being able to assess learning processes due to lack of training (Le et al., 2018). A lack of teacher competencies for implementing peer or collaborative learning exercises may have a serious negative impact on student learning groups because some students may aim only to master individual academic learning and neglect the importance of social interaction during collaboration (Le et al., 2018). High-quality professional training programs for faculty members have become essential to higher education institutions to compete with the continuous revolving door of change.

### **Learning Environment**

Learning environment or physical, psychological, and instructional atmosphere is vital to student success, and effects students in many ways (Fraser, 2018). Although the responsibility and desire to learn is still in the students’ control, learning environments optimize the conditions,

contexts, and ability for students to learn. A negative learning environment is a setting that adversely affects students in many ways such as low achievement, student anxiety, depression, or poor behavior. A positive learning environment is one that allows students to feel comfortable and confident as learners. The physical aspects of a classroom include items such as lighting, space, organization, cleanliness, furniture and desk layout, and anything else physical. The psychological classroom is how students feel about their learning. It is important for expectations to be clear and for rules to be consistent. Instructors must be a role model and maintain control of the classroom through patience, kind words, and actions (Fraser, 2018). Positive instructors with calm demeanors who are focused on helping students learn intellectually and socially are best. The instructional environment is the setting for which all teaching takes place. It is the pace, tone, and variety of activities used while teaching content to students. The goal is to engage learners and make content more personal so learning is maximized and will have longer-term effects (Fraser, 2018).

Student response systems (SRS) are an effective way to increase student engagement during class and promote learning. A study found students who used SRS participated more, performed better than peers not using SRS, and had a higher course outcome achievement and grades compared to peers who did not use SRS (Cohn, 2016). To prevent potential barriers such as anxiety from keeping students from participating during class, SRS can be customized and programmed to participate anonymously. The prevalence of technology in society has changed the way students learn. Technology should be incorporated into classes with the intention to engage the learners of today's technology-oriented world (Kamel, 2016). SRS is a powerful tool

used to facilitate student engagement across all diverse populations of students and has numerous applications.

### **Relevancy and Meaningfulness of Course Topics**

One of the resulting themes from the data analysis was that class time should be spent on relevant course topics and less time should be spent on less relevant topics. Students recommended that relevant topics be made a priority when decisions are made on how to distribute time across course topics. Students reported that the more relevant course material was to their personal life, the more meaningful the information became. The more personal and meaningful information is to students, the more they will learn and retain. Student motivation is largely connected to their perception of their learning environment. The most important factors of a learning environment are the students' perception of the usefulness or relevance of course topics, students' sense of autonomy, enjoyment of course topics, and teacher support (Radovan & Makovec, 2015). Student perceptions of how relatable course objectives and topics are to them as individuals are the strongest predictor of their perception of course satisfaction (Radovan & Makovec, 2015). Radovan and Makovec (2015) conducted a study to determine what factors influenced student perceptions of how related or relevant course content was to their real-life. The researchers found student levels of intrinsic motivation and intrinsic goal orientation influenced their perception of how relevant course content was to their life (Radovan & Makovec, 2015). Viewing learning as authentic and connected to practical problems determined a student's intrinsic goal orientation.

The more students believe learning to be relevant and valuable for their practical experiences, the more intrinsically motivated they feel (Radovan & Makovec, 2015). Intrinsic

motivation and goal orientation are also connected to students' sense of control over their learning. The more teachers encouraged and allowed student autonomy through the decision making and provided them with opportunities to make co-decisions, the more students believed the course topics to be useful and the higher their motivation during the course was (Radovan & Makovec, 2015). Students with higher intrinsic motivation and intrinsic goal orientation view course content as highly connected to real-life situations and more relatable than students with low intrinsic motivation and goal orientation (Sandilos et al., 2017). Student intrinsic goal orientation is correlated to perceived teacher support, feedback, incentives, and communication.

Students do the best in courses where knowledge is relevant to their real-life, learning progress, support by teachers, and where there is collaborative learning. The amount of attention and time a teacher puts toward providing student feedback, encouragement, and communication the more students enjoy the course (Sandilos et al., 2017). Intrinsic goal orientation and motivation influence students' perception of how relevant, practical, and important course content is in their life. Strong student intrinsic goal orientation and motivation combined with having the autonomy to make decisions while receiving instructor support in an interactive or collaborative environment create an ideal learning environment for student learning and success (Sandilos et al., 2017).

### **Student Interactions**

Class discussions and activities facilitate student interaction and personalize learning (Le et al., 2018). Meaningful learning from class interactions was one of the resulting themes from the thematic analysis of data. Every single student interviewed in the study identified peer learning and student interactions as the most meaningful mode of learning. The power and

learning potential of in-class discussions among students should not be overlooked. Mustafa (2017) emphasized that professors should support and supervise academic discussions among students. Exchanging information and perspectives among peers is necessary because of the rapid production and changes made to the information to catch one another up, create a more level ground among students, and to broaden learners' minds. Chen (2018) conducted a study where a student reported that collaborative learning facilitated their learning, helped them catch up to their peers, and increased academic production compared to classes without collaborative learning. In the same study when determining student perceptions of interactive, collaborative, and peer learning, most students reported having positive learning experiences (Chen, 2018). Collaborative learning was found to be a positive learning experience because it was proven to help students learn, improve teaching skills through instructor interaction with students, create a positive learning environment, and allow students to realize they were able to solve problems as a group that they would not be able to solve individually (Chen, 2018). By helping students learn collectively, instructors are given more chances to understand students' learning needs and to enhance student logical thinking, social networking, and communication skills (Chen, 2018). The results of implementing collaborative learning in this course resulted in positive learning experiences as reported by most students (Chen, 2018). The findings of this study were congruent with the findings in the literature which suggested that collaborative learning facilitates positive learning experiences, and this is evidenced by the student quotes provided in theme the description section.

Peer learning encourages meaningful learning and is effective and meaningful across all cultures of the globe. Compared to traditional learning environments, collaborative learning

provides an interesting social connection between peers and instructors (Chen, 2018). Peer learning such as in-class group discussions have the power to change the nature of learning to be pleasant, beneficial, and meaningful, as learners become more positive and deeply involved (Mustafa, 2017). Chen (2018) reported that in a group setting students realized they could solve problems as a group that they as individuals would not be able to solve. Students could work together to determine and apply effective strategies to resolve classroom activity. Learning from peers is one of the main features of the process of learning and teaching in universities. Peer learning is the process in which learners acquire new skills and knowledge through active listening and supporting equals or matched students (Le, et al., 2018).

Peer learning strategies have been associated with the development of these general and transferable skills critical thinking, intellectual thought, communication and information management skills, intellectual rigor, creativity and imagination, ethical practice, integrity, and tolerance of diversity across all realms (Mustafa, 2017). Learning in class from partners or groups improves student performance and leads to high rates of attendance by encouraging students to develop their learning to support academic success and equips them for lifelong learning by developing communication, problem-solving, logical thinking, and social networking skills (Mustafa, 2017). Collaborative learning such as peer learning can promote logical thinking ability, problem-solving skills, academic progress, and intrinsic motivation (Chen, 2018). In peer learning, connections between students are created as students engage over course material, allowing learning to become more personal. Peer learning allows students to develop skills that may be applied in future academic settings and professional life after college. Students receive the opportunity to become comfortable sharing and speaking in group settings and relating to



others, giving them a positive learning experience where the skills developed can be applied to other aspects of life in the future. Students learn how to engage one another, become a member of a group that works together, sit back and listen at times and lead at others, from the nature of the class environment and by the example set by instructors. For peer learning to be effective, students must share a common goal or task and the group environment must promote acceptance of diverse students as well as ideas (Chen, 2018). The cooperative environment of peer learning in groups reflects the environment and skills needed to be part of a healthy workplace.

There are academic and social benefits for collaborative learning. Academic benefits include the improvement of critical thinking skills, actively involving students in the learning process, course outcome improvements, and the reinforcement of the problem-solving techniques (Mustafa, 2017). Socially, collaborative learning creates social supports for students, establishes a mutual understanding between teachers and students, and provides a positive environment for practice and cooperation (Mustafa, 2017). Collaborative learning is only successful when instructors are involved in the process, intentional with in-class activities, ask questions, respond to students, and correct current misunderstandings (Le et al., 2018).

Students who are involved in peer learning activities develop high levels of personal and professional skills, expand their subject learning, improve their grades, and their relationships and intercultural awareness is enhanced (Mustafa, 2017). Students who experience interactive or peer learning perform better, improve logical thinking abilities, and positive learning outcomes (Chen, 2018). Peer learning supports a sense of belonging among students and improves academic confidence. Friendship development is supported, greater confidence in social

integration and more participation in the community are other benefits of peer learning (Mustafa, 2017).

The academic culture or culture of learning universities is dependent on the strategies which get students involved in the learning process (Chen, 2018). Peer learning has been proven to be an effective strategy as it gives fresh life to the process of learning, encourages student activity and a positive attitude, and allows teachers to be facilitators rather than being the sole source of knowledge (Chen, 2018). Interactive learning is an efficient path for teachers to establish a curriculum, a positive class environment, and for developing academic progress (Chen, 2018).

### **Publishing Research**

Reporting research study findings are important and during the process of sharing results, significant decisions are made. Sharing research findings is the point of conducting a study and is critical for advancing knowledge, growing as a field, finding and continuously adapting solutions for the betterment of all individuals and current practices, to positively influence policy changes, and to contribute or give back to society. Things to consider are how the results will be reported, where, and to whom is this information being presented (Creswell, 2013). Journal articles, dissertations, conference presentations, educational training presentations, work presentations, television, the radio, podcasts, mail, email, and the internet have all been used to present findings. When reporting results, the presentation should include an introduction, brief and relevant background information or history of the problem, a review of appropriate literature, methods, results, a discussion about the findings, study implications, suggestions for future research focus, limitations, conclusion, references, and appendices (Creswell, 2013). The

researcher must be granted permission from the appropriate persons to present research findings, distribute a white paper or position paper to key stakeholders, or distribute information electronically through email or online (Creswell, 2013).

White book is a term meaning the official publication of a government document and this term evolved to become what is called “white paper” today. The British government is credited with originating the term “white paper” in 1922 and Winston Churchill is the first well-known individual to use it (Malone & Wright, 2018). In the 1960s the term was first documented being used for a strategic company plan and not for government policy documents (Malone & Wright, 2018). A white paper is a report or guide intended to inform the reader or organization about a significant issue and presents a philosophy on the subject to help readers understand an issue, solve a problem, or decide (Nevwirth, 2015). The goal of a white paper is to help people understand a significant issue grounded in facts by sharing relevant data and suggest a possible solution. Offering a clear description of the need or problem to be solved as well as discussing the specific objectives of the proposed work needed for resolution is critical for establishing a strong connection.

The purpose of a white paper is to give readers in-depth information on technologies, practices, strategies, and applicants which can be implemented in the classroom or on college campuses. Some white papers include a step-by-step process to follow. Genres of white paper should not be centered on the content or form of disclosure but on the action needed to accomplish the solution (Malone & Wright, 2018). Types of white paper and the content will always vary because humans and society are continuously evolving. Genres undergo an adaptive transformation in contrast to speciation. All societies continuously change and evolve so do the

genres of white papers. There are different genres of white papers but most share similar formal features and characteristic substance. Some commonalities shared by white papers are primarily communicating through text, text containing paragraphs and section headings, including visuals of the new technology or solutions, distributing as a print document, content is written concisely, using an authoritative or mostly neutral voice, and applying perspectives with a user-oriented focus (Malone & Wright, 2018). Most white papers identify a problem, support the problem claims with research, and discuss a proposed solution in detail. White papers use education to persuade and describe the proposed solution. It is important to discuss how the new idea is different from all other existing ones and to support it with relevant data (Malone & Wright, 2018). White papers are highly effective and considered to be the most influential forms of business/company collateral (Malone & Wright, 2018). Seventy-six percent of people have used a white paper in their decision-making efforts (Malone & Wright, 2018).

### **Using a White Paper to Present Findings**

When conducting a literature review, the popularity of using a white paper across many sectors such as government, healthcare, business, social science, and education (Creswell, 2013). White papers are strong tools when they are grounded in research, organized, persuasive, well presented, target the appropriate audience, and unbiased. Presenting an outline and goals could aid researchers by focusing and being intentional when presenting. Potentially, when delivered correctly, white papers can convince, prompt action, and motivate change if the information is credible (Rotarius & Rotarius, 2016). A cooperative tone, which is unbiased, is necessary for the successful delivery of white papers (Painter & Clark, 2015). An outline will be used to organize the presentation to facilitate understanding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The suggested

quintessential outline for a position paper according to the AIC Position Paper Guidelines is Introduction, problem statement, background related to the issues at hand, solutions/recommendations, conclusion, and finishing with references.

The general guidelines for the composition paper according to Sakarriuro, Stolley, and Hyde (2013) includes an introduction to the local and global problem, a brief background of the problem presented in the study, a relevant history summary, presentation of findings, and recommendations. Information should be presented in a way that engaged in the audience and their beliefs will be used to increase their knowledge more personally and to persuade them to act on recommendations for the organization (Rotarious & Rotarious, 2016).

The key to creating a successful white paper and achieving the desired outcome before implementation begins is when the problem was first presented. From this starting point, the researcher should identify all causation factors leading up to this point and work to understand each one and how they are related or not (Mirijanian, 2018). This is critical because causation factors can become predictive factors if accurately identified and if the appropriate information about each one is attained (Mirijanian, 2018). To determine causation factors and gain this level of insight, using a qualitative approach is necessary. All the research questions, literature used and cited, and questions used in the data collection should address one or all the causation factors. From this, precise, detailed, and tailored recommendations have been made, which will be highly effective (Mirijanian, 2018). Presentations should target the audience specifically as well as the key stakeholders and a cooperative tone that is unbiased should be used (Painter & Clark, 2015). If written correctly and persuasively, white papers are highly effective, easy to follow, include visuals, videos, graphics, and or audio to present information (Nevwirth, 2014).

Reports given to administrative leaders and policymakers should be distributed to key stakeholders. A white paper is the best platform for delivering study results, offering a solution, and for incorporating relevant literature (Creswell 2012). If supported, the white paper will be circulated to be appropriate administrators and stakeholders following the presentation via email.

### **Project Description**

#### **Needed Resources**

The department for first-year experiences could provide instructors with a monthly subscription to an educational research magazine that focuses on higher education to increase awareness and learning. Reading a hard magazine at home may provide instructors with a zero effort and pleasurable way to stay connected to the field, continue learning by staying informed and aware of trending topics, changing practices, and updated research. Supporting instructor interest in the field could motivate them to be a better teacher and become a contributor to the field. A journal article could be used as a resource for weekly instructor meetings. If each instructor is given a subscription, it will give instructors something to discuss in the weekly meetings and may encourage more intellectual conversation.

Certain classrooms outside of the instructors' teaching center have zero technology resources available to aid in lectures or learning activities. There are many sections of the experience course, and classes are in various buildings throughout campus. Some classrooms have not been upgraded since the early 2000s and some do not have a computer, tv, or projector at all. Only updated classrooms that allow for various forms of technology to be used in teaching should be selected when making classroom reservation decisions. Updated classrooms are needed to implement policy changes regarding more use of technology in teaching and

classroom activities. Some instructors may not be as up to date as others in technology, presenters are needed, who specializes in educational technology in the classroom, to visit annually.

Lastly, instructors' mental and emotional support should be provided throughout training because some may feel overwhelmed by their workload, learning topics, lack of teaching confidence, or may have anxiety and fear when teaching. Building teaching confidence is completely absent from the current program and is necessary to support instructor development and a sense of competency. There is a need for better communication among instructors as a group. A group messaging chat should be created for support and to connect and unite instructors who are out of contact with one another. Establishing inner instructor communication is likely to have an impact on the weekly instructor meeting attendance.

### **Existing Supports**

The center for the university experience program is equipped with a small library, printers, computers and laptops, private rooms, various sizes of meeting and conference rooms with large tables to seat groups, projectors, and other technology to use or incorporate into meetings such as clickers. There are a small kitchen and vending machines to accommodate staff. Instructors each have their own office or private room in the center. The center is one of the newest and most advanced at the university. Freshmen account for nearly half of the entire undergraduate student population at the university and this is reflected by the department budget. The department is consistently looking to bring in resources and stay on top of research and practice. The budget is there to bring in specialists to present during some weekly meetings or at

the annual day training. In addition, the department could invest in policy recommendations and provide instructors with resources.

### **Potential Barriers and Solutions**

I anticipate some potential barriers in presenting my research project at the local university, as there could be an instructor or faculty resistance. Resistance is a common barrier when an outsider comes into a facility making claims or assertions about things that need to change including a need for more involvement and work from employees. Asking employees for a significant time commitment and energy to participate in weekly meetings while making structural, content, and organizational change to something that has been functioning as is needs well-grounded and supportive reasoning.

The local university has had challenges with the freshmen population since 2007 and has created its own department in an attempt to aid students and get control of underlying problematic variables impacting student learning and success. The university has its own resources specifically for this population of freshmen students. The university is one of the largest in the region and the number of freshmen who enroll each year continues to break the previous year's enrollment record. The center and department created for this population of students is one of the nicest facilities on campus and has extensive resources for students.

The department's budget could be a potential barrier. Although the center is well funded and continuously growing to keep up with the growing number of freshmen enrolling each year, the instructor, counselor, and learning specialist to student ratio needs to be improved. The department's budget could be reassessed and changed if financial resources need to be moved



around to hire more instructors to lower the teacher-student ratio in order to provide students with a personal and intimate learning experience.

Another potential barrier to facilitating white paper recommendations could involve a required course or encouraging students to participate. Additionally, although the center is one of the best facilities on campus, this population of students is especially unlikely to go despite the resources, support, and specialists awaiting their arrival. One way to get students to the center is to make it a course requirement to attend so many times a week or semester by having them scan their ID. Additionally, scheduling a meeting with each specialist there could be made an assignment by having the students turn in what services they received such as findings from career assessment. Instructors could walk students to the center on the first day of class and have someone from the center conduct a resource tour. Instructors could build in time for center days in the syllabus and have occasional open classes, but remain present in the facility to be available to students if needed in order to give students another opportunity to experience the center. There has never been a set instructor training or meeting schedule, training time varies annually, and there is no set policy for new instructor training. Although asking for required weekly meetings or annual training would be inconvenient and unfavored by some, having a non-intrusive light training schedule set in stone is a start, and necessary to commit to following the policy change recommendations.

### **Proposal for Implementation and Timetable**

The department dean, director, assistant director, and senior director of the center for freshmen have asked me to give a presentation of the white paper of my findings from my research study along with any other relevant information. Participants are required to be updated

on the results of this study and requested to be alerted. The faculty members I have been working closely with through these processes of conducting this study are anticipating the results. After presenting the results to the gatekeeper, dean of the department, director, assistant dean, and senior director of the center for freshmen, I will meet privately with the gatekeeper and seek permission to present the results and other relevant information along with a white paper/position paper. After he reviews this information and permission is granted, I will email and present the position paper to the rest of the faculty and key university stakeholders.

Upon obtaining permission from the university gatekeeper, the position paper will be presented to university stakeholders and administrators after the spring semester ends. The timing of this presentation is intentionally scheduled for the end of the spring semester because faculty workload, business, projects, student volume, responsibilities, and other required tasks are likely to decrease during the summer. Presenting at an opportune time may influence how the position paper is received by administrators and impact their response or reaction, consideration of the policy recommendations, the action is taken, and motivation. Unintentional pressure on administrators resulting from the presentation may potentially be avoided by presenting at the beginning of summer because the summer can be used to implement recommendations, plan annual training, and determine the best day and time for weekly faculty support, training, and resource meetings for the fall. Because there will be weekly meetings, annual training could be simple such as scheduling one day in August prior to the first day of class to provide an overview of the topics, objectives, and goals of each weekly meeting. This time could also be used for instructors to sign up to present during one of the weekly meetings on a new practice or update in research or literature during the semester. Last, this day could be used to answer questions from

faculty and stakeholders as well as review the rationale for the changes and program enhancements.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

The goal of this white paper or position paper for this research project was to offer recommendations to the administration and faculty members of the first-year experience program on the problem that was focused on in this study. The purpose was to prompt members to act by revising, updating, and increasing instructor education and training on mental health education to better meet the needs of students.

My role as the researcher was to communicate the background of the problem, discuss the results, reflect the significance of the problem on a local and global scale, and provide a brief history surrounding this study. I discussed the significance of the problem and how it directly related to academic persistence and student wellbeing. I used the quintessential outline for a position paper published by the AIC Position Paper Guidelines (2015). I included the sections introduction, problem statement, background related to the issues at hand, solutions/recommendations, conclusion, and references in the outline (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The target audience for the position paper is the administration and faculty members of the first-year experience program. I will emphasize key findings and suggestions supported by the data and research in a presentation. The university gatekeeper will authorize the presentation and distribution of findings scheduling the meeting date.

### **Project Evaluation Plan**

In addressing the findings of this study, a position paper with detailed policy recommendations to the current training module that can prepare, support, educate, improve,

increase professional development, and improve teaching and learning was developed. The position paper shares the results of the study and provides administrators and stakeholders with step-by-step directions, activities, and resources to follow to implement changes into the current policy. The goal was to provide faculty, administrators, and key stakeholders with an easy to read, concise, and relevant policy change recommendation resource. The position paper will share the results of this study with faculty members and administrators of the university first-year experience department at center for education, teaching, and learning in a conference room after gaining permission from the university gatekeeper.

Shortly following the presentation of policy recommendations, faculty members will be given the opportunity to evaluate the position paper to determine if they believe it is relevant, attainable, valuable, useful, and effective (Bernhardt, 2015). A 5-point Likert scale will be used to evaluate the delivery of the presentation, proposed goals and recommendations, and the remaining content of the position paper. Six months following the implementation of the position paper another evaluation will be given to measure if the position paper effectively researched the determined goals. A goal-based evaluation will be used. Using an evaluation is justified to ensure that individuals achieve the institution's performance objectives (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Faculty should have the opportunity to evaluate professional development training or resources to determine that they are invested in the content and find it useful (Bernhardt, 2015). Evaluation is needed to measure if goals are met and if the enhancement suggestions are effective. Evaluation offers or denies justification for decision-making, actions, and conclusions. A goal-based evaluation was selected to measure if the goals in the position paper were met by the program and instructors. Because the purpose and focus of a position paper are on making

enhancements to a current policy, a goal-based evaluation was the best choice to measure if the suggestions made, effectively met the intended goals. The evaluation results will determine if the project met its intended goals.

The primary goal of this project study will include the following:

Goal 1: The faculty leadership team will implement the recommendations of the whitepaper to improve or enhance teaching and learning about mental health education in a classroom setting.

Goal 2: The instructors of the experience course will begin attending weekly meetings.

- a. Select an objective for each week outlined throughout the semester.
- b. Each meeting will include teaching a new tool or relevant classroom learning activity related to the objective.
- c. Instructors are to participate in meetings by taking turns practicing a new skill or classroom activity and then to apply it and demonstrate it to the group.
- d. Instructors will take turns over the course of the semester briefly presenting one relevant update in current literature and /or practice. Each instructor will only do this once because of the large rotation.
- e. Each person not demonstrating will offer the demonstrator feedback.

The goal is to have 16 weekly meetings with instructors throughout the semester and for each to learn one skill or tool a week, receive updated literature information and/or updated or new information regarding practice. The type of evaluation is goal-based. There are different levels of stakeholders involved at a university with various roles and positions. Key stakeholders are identified as individuals who personally invested, involved, and want a report on the findings of

the study. The key stakeholders at the local university include the director and assistant director of the first-year experiences program, the university gatekeeper, the participants in the study, and instructors of the course.

### **Project Implications**

When the local university's department of the first-year experience was confronted with the unexpected and unusual findings derived from the data analysis of the freshmen experience course evaluations, the director was unsure of where to begin. It was already determined from the course evaluation that student mental health education needs were not being met. To improve this, change must begin at the faculty and instructor level. The director of the first-year experience program and I have had an academic working relationship since the first contact was made regarding conducting this study and I believe there is a genuine interest in the findings considering the participants from this department. Updates, touching base, questions, and study progress are things discussed with the director through open communication.

Believing there to be significant gains and implications, the director asked me to share my findings with him and other university student personnel. I will meet with the director and other administrators to present my project deliverable, a position paper. The results of the position paper will be presented to key university stakeholders, university growth and development administrators, the administrators of first-year experiences, as well as the Chief of Administration and Student Affairs and the Chief of Admission and Enrollment Strategy. Every quarter of the academic year, meetings take place to discuss the university's growth, development, future, and direction. I am invited to attend and participate by presenting in one of these meetings. The goal of presenting a position paper is to encourage a conversation about how

administrators could better meet the needs of students by revising policies based on the results of this study, increase student learning experiences, better relationships between teachers and students, and aid students in persisting to graduation. The department of first-year experience programs at the local university is presently in the process of changing current strategies, developing new ones, and seeking other resources to promote active faculty development for both new and senior members.

The implications for social change associated with this position paper included an increase in student support from instructors becoming more involved and evaluating student progress and experience with intention, developing a supportive student-teacher relationship with open communication, improved teaching, and learning skills and tools, spending more class time on the most relevant issues, spending more time on class group discussions on the most relevant issues, spending more time on class activities to practice tools and skills, offering an optional follow-up course, discussing topics related to mental health as soon as the semester begins, and instructor sense of teaching confidence will be improved by practicing new teaching tools or activities during the annual summer training. Following the annual training seminar, students and instructors will have a more aligned relationship based on unconditional positive regard.

Student learning will increase after policy suggestions are implemented and they will be better equipped to manage mental health wellness and become more self-aware. Students will have attained crucial self-reflection awareness, skills, tools, and other supports equipping them with the ability to manage mental health or seek resources if needed. From implementing policy changes, student learning potential will increase, and students will be more likely to attain a degree, and students will perform better in classes. Students who are successful in this class are

also likely to be successful in degree attainment, more self-aware, and more aware of others.

This project could have long-lasting effects because students will learn more about themselves, attain a degree, be a successful professional, and be a more thoughtful, sensitive, and caring citizen. The improvements made to the course will provide students with the best learning experience possible and the skills, tools, and insights gained will provide participants with a strong foundation that will last well after college years are over.

This project focused on addressing themes and variables that impacted students' perceptions and preferences in teaching and learning about mental health in a classroom setting. The original problem regarded student reports of unmet mental health educational needs. I focused the research questions on student perception and learning preferences when teaching and learning about mental health education in a classroom setting. Through improved teaching and learning about mental health, student mental needs will be met and in turn support academic progress. Education can help fight the negative stigma attached to mental health and encourage a supportive community.

More in-depth learning activities can be developed to break down negative prejudices or labeling people, making assumptions, and the way people should treat one another. Increased self-awareness and awareness of others was a major benefit of the class as reported by students. Future activities could be focused on raising awareness and challenging assumptions, labels for people, and prejudices. Not only should cultural, ethnic, social, and religious assumptions or labels be challenged but also discriminating against others for their political views. A group of diverse fearful, nervous, anxious, and with pre-determined mindsets could turn into an inclusive, supportive, and kind community. The goal is to teach students their beliefs, assumptions, views,



and ways of treating people is not always correct and to recognize differences in style, religion, political beliefs, and other issues should be respected, even if they do not agree.

In addition, this project study also has implications for the community. The southern university is in one of the lowest ranking states for education. This state is also one of the poorest states in the country. This course is committed to providing students with a positive learning experience and student success and experience in this course often parallels or reflects their success and outcome regarding graduation. The university is in a community that does not have many resources and many students who attend this southern university are from the area or state. Local and state high school graduates are not educated or skilled enough to earn more than minimum wage. Improving teaching and learning about mental health by following the position paper will improve the students' learning experience and further support academic success. Implications include more detailed oriented preparations and training for instructors which will increase their thinking, perceptions, and knowledge when applying new skills, reflecting, or answering questions. Implications could lead to further development of evidence-based practices, which are more effective. Leading the development of more effective educational practices could strengthen the university's competitiveness against other schools resulting in college graduates receiving better job opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

This section of the paper included a second literature review over white papers and the emerging themes resulting from the thematic analysis of the data. An introduction to the project study and a concise summary was given about the project study and the rationale for selecting a white paper to share findings was stated. From the themes which emerged from the data, I made

policy recommendations. The purpose of the policy recommendations is to enhance teaching and learning about mental health education. Implementing the changes will further student learning and has social, community, academic benefits. At the request of the director of the first-year experience, a meeting was scheduled, and a white paper was presented containing the results of the study, relevant literature, and policy recommendations. A survey will be given to administrators following the presentation to evaluate the effectiveness of the white paper followed by a goal-based evaluation six months after position paper implication to determine if the program met its intended goals.

## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

The final section of this paper includes the strength and weaknesses of the project study, recommendations for alternative approaches, reflections, scholarship, project development, evaluation, and leadership, and positive social change. The paper will conclude with study implications, applications, and direction for future research. As the researcher of the project study I will discuss my learning experience, growth, and personal reflections.

### **Project Strengths and Limitations**

#### **Project Strengths**

There were different areas of strengths in this project and as with all research studies, potential areas to grow and improve on. The first strength of this project was the ability to directly target and address the problem identified in this study. The problem was first-year students enrolled in the University experience course reported strong personal and academic concerns regarding their mental health education and needs (Smith, 2013). The goal was to learn about student perceptions of mental health education in a classroom setting to better address the problem by improving teaching and learning about mental health. Mental health issues are becoming increasingly reported by freshmen students and have established a sense of urgency to better adapt teaching techniques to meet these needs by using the findings from this study to improve and change how learning about the subject of mental health is approached and taught. The first step to improve teaching and learning about mental health is to gain a better understanding of student affect and perceptions on the learning content to discover and develop instructional strategies (Lumpkin et al., 2015). The better students are understood, the more information available to change or develop teaching approaches and techniques to best fit

students and maximize learning (Beiter et al., 2015). The participants of this study came directly from the first-year students enrolled in the University experience course. The results of the study lead to the creation of the project deliverable, a position paper. The content of the position paper consists of recommendations to policy based on the findings. Using the same population of students as the population of students the problem derives from allowed specific suggestions to be made directed toward the instructors of the University Course and relevant administrators and stakeholders.

The second strength of the study was the opportunity to fill in research and literature gaps and contribute to the field. Few studies examine the mental health challenges associated with university life from a student's viewpoint, despite the value it would have in improving mental health education and student support (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013). Qualitative research studies on perspectives of teaching and learning about mental health education are scarce and the study increased current knowledge and understanding of this issue (Downs et al., 2014). There is a gap in practice regarding student perceptions and expectations on learning about mental health, and this study filled it by increasing current understanding and knowledge, making it possible for new teaching techniques and practices to be developed (Bruffaerts et al., 2018).

The third strength of the study is the potential of the results to be generalized not only with other universities but other classes as well, because the recommendations made may be applied to all university courses. It is important to teach college students about mental health education because they are in the process of becoming more responsible for their health and help-seeking behaviors.

The fourth strength of the study is that it facilitates professional development among university faculty and administrators. The ideal environment a university can provide a student is one that not only trains for professional life and advances individual development but one that also contributes to their psychosomatic, social, and mental wellbeing (Divaris et al., 2008). Raising faculty awareness on student dispositions, enhancing instructive activities to minimize the impact of negative variables on learning, supporting student affect, and promoting positive learning experiences can increase student performance while promoting the success of higher education (Eagan et al., 2016). Making adequate changes to support students' emotional wellbeing is necessary for the future success and prevalence of colleges (Beiter et al., 2015).

One recommendation of the position paper is to present new teaching tools, class discussion topics, research, and other items that can be applied to enhance teaching. The development of new skills or assessments, techniques, improved ways of designing or implementing curricula, newer or changing ways of viewing the student-teacher relationship, and increased commitment to education is needed (Kamel, 2016). Features of faculty development which make it effective are the role of experiential learning, applying a new idea or skill, practicing it, receiving genuine constructive feedback on the learning skills, the value of working with peers in a supportive environment, collegial support to promote change and maintain it, the "we are in this together" team approach, the exchange of information, ideas, and practices among peers, and peer role models. These items are outlined with directions in the position paper (Appendix A). High-quality professional training programs for faculty members have become essential to Higher Education Institutions to compete with the continuous revolving door of change. It is important for educators to understand students and actively revise teaching

techniques, evaluate the most relevant issues being focused on, continuously observe the learning and social environment, and to stay up to date on current research.

The last strength of the study is all the implications social, local, community, and academic. The implications for social change associated with this position paper included an increase in student support from instructors becoming more involved and evaluating student progress and experience with intention, developing a supportive student-teacher relationship with open communication, improved teaching and learning skills, tools, spending more class time on the most relevant issues, spending more time on class group discussions on the most relevant issues, spending more time on class activities to practice tools and skills, offering an optional follow-up course, discussing topics related to mental health as soon as the semester begins, and instructor sense of teaching confidence will be improved by practicing new teaching tools or activities during the annual summer training. Following the application of recommendations to the current policy, students and instructors will have a more aligned relationship based on unconditional positive regard. Once instructors and administrators reviewed the policy recommendations and step-by-step directions, they had a clearer understanding of what the themes or issues are or what changes needed to be made and were provided with research and literature support about these topics

Student learning will increase after policy suggestions are implemented and will be better equipped to manage mental health wellness and more self-aware. Students will have attained crucial self-reflection awareness, skills, tools, and other supports equipping them with the ability to manage mental health or seek resources if needed. From implementing policy changes, student learning potential will increase, and students will be more likely to attain a degree, and students

will perform better in classes. This project could have long-lasting effects because students will learn more about themselves, attain a degree, be a successful professional, and be a more thoughtful, sensitive, and caring citizen. The improvements made to the course will provide students with the best learning experience possible and the skills, tools, and insights gained will provide participants with a strong foundation that will last well after college years are over. Following this presentation, I contacted every single study participant to share the findings of this study because each participant requested to be contacted about the results of this study. Students were contacted about the study through the initial means of communication, student email addresses.

### **Project Limitations**

The number of suggestions to incorporate into the current policy may be too many to effectively accomplish. Technology is necessary to incorporate in teaching and training and the recommendations made to the current policy do not include any using technology in the classroom or during weekly meetings while training. Instructors may potentially have an issue with meeting weekly and this could create barriers. Due to the fact the project calls for unity among instructors and relevant faculty members, it may be challenging to synchronize everyone's schedule to determine a meeting time and goals. Also, instructors may learn at different paces, and having a different objective each meeting may be strenuous and gaps in instructor progress may surface. Because the number of participants was small, it is possible a future study with more participants would yield different results. The potential for the results of this study to be globalized and generalized throughout the USA and other countries may be limited due to regional demographics variations and the small sample size. Limited sample size

and regional demographic variations mean limited representation of all diverse student populations across the globe.

Studying a larger number of students could yield different results by providing a more accurate mean value or understanding of dominant themes from having more data and providing a smaller margin of error. Larger studies increase the diversity of the student population to be studied and allow outliers or more discrepant cases to be identified which may influence data. A larger study would prevent accidental extreme cases or bias individuals from significantly impacting the results. Another limitation is the length of the position paper. The position paper is eight pages and may overwhelm faculty and stakeholders. Reviewing the position paper requires attention and time to be valuable and there is no guarantee each person reviewing it will give it that. Last, student trends can change each semester, the topics and objectives ranked as most relevant and prioritized may not be accurate in the following semester.

### **Recommendations for Alternative Approaches**

The findings of the study supported a policy revision that included various options to address the research problem. The policy recommendations for instructors of the University experience course are weekly instructor meetings to learn and practice classroom activities, discussing the course topics with students and determining what the most to least relevant topics are and adjusting the time allotted for each topic accordingly, assigning each instructor to present one new tool, skill, or learning activity and update to literature relevant to the course topics, assigning reflection journal prompts about the course to students to gain feedback and make adjustments, and instructor evaluation the classroom learning environment and prompting a classroom to discuss about it to gain student feedback and make appropriate changes. These



solutions are effective because research has found the main contributors to student perception to be the learning environment and relevancy of course topics. The suggestions evaluate the learning environment, the relevancy of course topics, promote communication between the course instructor and student, and incorporate new literature and teaching tools while allowing instructors to practice the new information. Last, discussions about the course are encouraged during the meetings.

Due to the number of suggestions, a second alternative approach may be to create a faculty annual training seminar lasting a minimum of three days each summer. This would allow recommendations to be implicated in a shorter amount of time instead of spreading it out over the semester. Recommendations could be turned into training objectives. An annual training seminar would allow instructors to focus more thoroughly on each training objective and allow for more time to group discussion among instructors and to ask questions. Both approaches may improve teaching and learning about mental health education in a classroom setting while addressing first-year University Seminar student needs. The last alternative approach to address the problem would be to work with the local high schools to build mental health education into courses. The local university and high schools could join to create a summer course or program for mental health education that students could attend before beginning regular courses in the fall. This alternative would prepare and equip students mentally before their transition in the fall.

### **Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change**

#### **Scholarship**

High school was a challenging time for me academically and it took hours of energy and time daily to make average grades. During my senior year of high school, my expectations for

being admitted to college were low. I was only admitted after submitting an essay about why college was for me and how success was a possibility when my grades and test scores suggested the opposite. I have always been attracted to intellectual individuals and desired to have the same scholarship as others. An attraction was developed to others with high accomplishments. These were accomplishments I believed could never be attained due to personal self-doubt. Fortunately, college was much easier for me than high school unlike most of my peers. I have taken every educational opportunity presented to be because of being admitted to college. The pursuit of knowledge. The need for a challenge, continuously feeling a need to pursue knowledge, and educational opportunities I have been given has led me to where I am today. I would never have imagined picturing myself doing this scholarly work.

I wrongly assumed there would be nothing new to learn after finishing the last official class in the program and the project study began. I know now that learning never ends and to make significant contributions one must continuously pursue knowledge or efforts will be outdated, remedial, and ineffective. I never believed the caliber of scholarship needed to complete my degree on the project study started however, with the support of peers and faculty, I will soon have the highest accomplishment of my life.

### **Project Development**

I have learned that “project development” is just that, a development. I assumed developing a project would be like writing any paper and that it would be black and white, the direction would be clear, and that I would be finished within a year. I learned there is no clear direction, it is all a gray area, and that it was not a task but a journey. I did not begin progressing in my proposal until I embraced the journey and accepted I would need to sincerely understand

aspects of the problem and find meaningful literature. The problem I selected to target contained many more layers than I ever imagined. Working through each layer was part of the experience and at times I went through layers more quickly, but my personal and professional growth was continuous and throughout. I am looking forward to developing future projects because I have learned over the past few years will not change just because the problem I am investigating has changed. The learning within myself will stay the same across all my future endeavors.

### **Leadership and Change**

Unable to see the big picture, when I started this project study nothing made sense. I had no idea the self-growth I would endure through the process. I have learned that although life circumstances can impact progress, having determination and commitment to proceed and continue anyway will get you through the rough patches. This research study was a journey in which I needed and showed personal resiliency. At times, I doubted if continuing my education was the right decision, but the growth and sense of accomplishment have reassured me that this is where I am supposed to be. I have learned to work with others and appreciate everyone who offers their time and feedback in assisting me. A new appreciation for teachers, supporting faculty, and other doctoral students and professionals were gained from my realization of the work and commitment involved in this process from every person involved.

### **Reflections on Self as a Scholar**

Through the course of this study and development of the project deliverable, I have learned more about people and deepened my understanding of student perspectives. Learning from students expanded my mind in many ways and taught me how to deliberately think about things in different ways. Expanding my horizons has enabled me to grow as a person and

professional. I have grown not only in intellect but also with others and within myself. I apply information significantly different than before I started this program when I was applying it only on a surface level. I now consider many aspects and variables in a problem to gain a deep, full, and empathetic understanding. This new way of understanding is what motivates me to work and produce a positive change on some level to any problem. Last, my analytical, critical thinking, professional thought, and scholarly writing skills have improved drastically.

### **Reflections on Self as a Practitioner**

My confidence in making a difference and improving student experiences and commitment has significantly improved. I am capable of developing solutions to address problems. Having the experience of conducting the research study has improved my feelings about my professional competence from the contributions I have made. I am motivated to move onto the next problem and explore issues I can potentially make a small impact on.

### **Reflections on Self as a Project Developer**

When I first started, I was confused and anxious about how everything, from the literature to the results, would come together or align in any way. I doubted the process and thought I would have to force the overall proposal paper to flow. I witnessed by hand how often the literature and research studies aligned from analyzing the findings. My understanding of the whole picture of research has developed and allowed me to become aware of different things to consider and potential explanations. I am more motivated after my experience conducting the study to work with students and implement solutions from simple feedback and resolutions.

### **Reflection on the Importance of the Work**

As I reflect on the amount of energy, work, and time that has been invested throughout this experience, the first feeling that comes to mind is one of thankfulness. Although this is a small contribution, the energy and time were well spent because I got the opportunity to help others and make solid recommendations to improve their experience and wellbeing in college. College is a significant time for growing, learning, and becoming, I desire to support students during there once in a lifetime experience. The importance of my work is dependent on the changes and improvements it makes in the lives of others. To me, nothing is more important than helping others and trying to make the world a better and healthier place.

### **Promoting Positive Social Change**

This study and project have implications for positive social change including promoting community unity, addressing unhealthy behavior contributing to poor mental health, confronting stereotypes and assumptions to improve campus climate, using education to reduce stigmas attached to mental health, encouraging a positive and supportive mental health climate, teaching and promoting awareness of self and others, improving mental wellness, using peer learning and discussions to learn from others and grow, and improving academic achievement. There are several reasons why most students reported class group discussions as the most meaningful and relevant to students. Topics and classroom activities deemed as meaningful by students promote positive social change.

Students reported feeling a sense of unity and built friendships in the course from their increased awareness of self and others, gained from the course. Students discussed their transition from when they entered a classroom full of people who were different to the moment

after time, understanding, and connecting, that they realized they were more similar than different. Students realized everyone in the course was going through the same things and were bonded by that alone and could all grow together. Students gained a deeper understanding and more patience with others were through sharing personal experiences, thoughts, and ideas, and feelings allowed for rich, impactful, and meaningful group discussions about mental wellness. The course has a strong impact on positive social change by providing a supportive, sincere, and healthy learning environment. The impact on social change could be stronger after recommendations to the current policy are implemented. The environment allowed barriers and walls to come down by providing positive peer learning experience opportunities. These meaningful experiences challenged and broke down many assumptions students had about others.

The course promoted personal wellness by addressing student mental health needs and topics that significantly influence mental state. The healthier a student is in all realms, the stronger they are to support others. The course objectives and activities taught students the tools and skills to manage, cope, and target issues about their mental wellness. This information also allows students to help others and be a resource. The knowledge and experiences gained from the course enabled students to understand mental health as a part of life versus the negative stigma they previously attached to it. Gradually, the community is becoming more open, accepting, and supportive of mental health.

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

The project study has implications for faculty development to improve first-year student teaching and learning about mental health education in the university experience course.

Understanding student experiences and perceptions direct applications and future research. This study should be conducted at other universities to evaluate the consistency of the findings to the results of this research study. Future studies could be conducted on teaching and learning about mental health education from a teacher's perspective to allow any barriers, issues, or disconnections to surface. A study could be done to compare annual faculty training seminars to weekly supportive meetings to discover which method is the most effective. Finally, a study could be done with a larger population of students and involve technology.

### **Conclusion**

Often overlooked, mental health wellness is a critical component of academic achievement and degree attainment. First-year students enrolled in the experience course at a local university reported mental health to be a barrier in learning, and mental health education to be a significant area of need. College years are a critical time in student development and freshmen are even more susceptible to experiencing mental distress because they are adjusting to a new life. I wanted to learn about student perspectives on teaching and learning in a classroom setting to meet the mental health education needs of students who reported the problem. I used semistructured interviews to gain the understanding I am seeking and make solid policy recommendations to improve teaching and learning about mental health. Contributing to literature that was personal to students, because most literature does not focus on student perspectives on mental health education yet, was my goal. As a relatively new topic being focused on by higher education institutions, there is much more learning and studying to go on how and what to teach students about mental health; however, this experience, making a small contribution to literature, and the journey has been the most meaningful thing I have

accomplished in my life thus far. Similar studies should be conducted in other regions and countries. Future research should focus on specific aspects of student perceptions of learning about mental health in a classroom setting such as the perception of peer unity and learning through group discussions.



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**First-year Student Perceptions of Teaching and Learning about Mental Health Education  
in a Classroom Setting**

**Background Information**

The student evaluations within a freshmen University experience course at a southern university suggested mental health education to be both an academic and personal concern. Mental wellbeing is becoming a greater barrier to learning and academic success, as the number of students reporting mental health issues is increasing annually. A positive relationship has been established between emotional and mental wellbeing, academic performance outcomes, student attendance, and general adjustment to higher education (Ning, Wihite, Wyatt, Young, & Bloemaker, 2012).

There is a gap in practice regarding student perceptions and expectations on learning about mental health, and using this study, I filled the gap by increasing current understanding and knowledge, making it possible for new teaching techniques and practices to be developed (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). The first step to improve teaching and learning about mental health is to gain a better understanding of student perceptions to discover and develop instructional strategies (Lumpkin, Achen, and Dodd, 2015). For this reason, semistructured interviews were used to gain rich detailed information about student perspectives.

## **Relevant Literature**

### *Debellis' & Goldin's Approach*

The framework applied to this study on student perceptions of teaching and learning about mental health in a classroom setting stems from Debellis' and Goldin's (1997) approach to the process' underlying attitudes, thoughts, and feelings. Learning about student perspectives gives educators insight into their affect and gaining this information allows educators to gain a full understanding of each student as a unique individual (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). From here, these variables can be challenged and changed by providing students with adequate education, skills, learning experiences, emotional experiences, learning opportunities, and with reflections of their affect.

### *Mental Health in College Students*

As defined by George (2013) student mental health is a state of emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. Mental health effects how a person thinks, feels, and acts (George, 2013). The prevalence of mental health issues reported by students has steadily increased every year since 2006 along with diverse populations of students from the increase and expansion of diversity across students in various aspects. In fact, student diversity and college enrollment are growing so quickly, university counselors are struggling to keep up (McAllister, Wynaden, Happell, Flynn, Walters, Duggan, & Gaskin, 2014). Not only are students changing, more students are experiencing and reporting mental health concerns than ever before. In addition, the way students learn has changed to become strongly technology and social/peer oriented and student mental health needs being reported by college students enrolled at a local university are more

diverse presently than it has been at any other time in history. Being aware of emotions, self-assessing mental wellness, self-regulation, self-reflection, managing emotions, application of appropriate skills and/or tools to control mental wellness, addressing problems effectively, organization skills for detailed planning to make changes to a behavior or management plan using resources like SMART goals, and the ability to establish relationship boundaries and maintain positive relationships and competencies, are skills needed by college students to excel academically, socially, and professionally in life, during and after college (Bruffaerts et al., 2018).

### ***Mental Health Development of College-Age Students***

The ability to identify and manage emotion, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationship competencies are skills needed by college students to excel academically, socially, and professionally in life, during, and after college (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Mental health issues may develop at any time, however, ages 18-21 are when the surfacing of specific mental health issues is more likely to surface (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011). College years Students enrolled in college are at the prime age for the onset of mental illness (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). The developmentally sensitive time discussed establishes a sense of urgency to assist students because it is during the transition to post-secondary institutions, that attitudes are an influential factor in determining if the student is successful in college (Elffers & Oort, 2012). Poor mental health wellness in college may pose a future problem that undermines negative future functions especially at this sensitive developmental age span (Suldo, Gormley, Pupaul, & Butcher, 2014). College freshmen are the prime age for brain expansion, molding, development, and adaptation

(Turner & Thompson, 2014). Learning creates changes in brain structure. Change or activation in one area of the brain can lead to activation or change in another (Praditsang, 2015).

One pro of working for a university is having the opportunity to reach many students who are amid many important and life-impacting transitions. Mental health education is important to teach college students because they are becoming more responsible for their health, help-seeking behaviors may be poorly informed, and may lack mental health awareness (Lumpkin, Achen, & Dodd, 2015). Issues developed from mental health distress may be resolved or managed through education to minimize its effects. Mental health education is important to improve for the wellbeing of college students this is a critical developmental time and the consequences of unresolved issues can impact them for the rest of their life.

### ***Mental Health and Academic Performance***

Student mental and emotional health is found to influence student learning capacity and scholastic achievement (Vanderlind, 2017). Mental health and student perceptions of school, learning, and confidence are strongly correlated (Askill-Williams & Lawson, 2015). Mental health and human perception can strongly influence one another. Cognitive intelligence is not the sole predictor of student performance and other predictors include affective and cognitive functioning, and ability or emotional intelligence (Suldo et al, 2014). Students who are exposed to social and emotional learning during the first semester of college were found to have more control of their mental health and higher-grade point averages across multiple semesters

compared to students who were not, more research, especially qualitative is needed to raise awareness and make improvements (Sutton & Austin, 2013).

Students with little or no mental health education are poorly equipped to cope and in a review of the literature and unfortunately, these students may experience difficulties with concentration, motivation, decision-making, organization, stress management, and focusing resulting in students' affects lowering and negatively affected memory, attendance, attention, participation, and assessment (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013). These factors were found to lower student confidence and causing them to withdraw from the university experience by avoiding class and faculty interaction due to shame. Other ways these factors manifested as academic difficulties: class participation, group work engagement, assignment completion, exam preparation, focus during exams, and overall productivity (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013). Students with mental health issues are more likely to experience lower grades and have a higher rate of experiencing academic attrition (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013). Mental health issues strongly impact the odds of a student's success or failure in a university setting and the conditions resulting from mental health challenges compromise their ability to meet academic standards.

### ***Student Perceptions of Mental Health***

Beliefs, attitudes, and feelings derive from what a student perceives as logical connections between them and learning about mental health. For perceptions to change, the individual must challenge their beliefs. Although beliefs are cognitive, they impact emotions (Suldo et al., 2014).

There is little literary evidence on the biases and prejudices students enter the classroom with and the only way of challenging this is through giving students positive learning experiences using multiple modes to provide and support them with multiple outlets (Shapieo, 2019).

Students draw their conclusions from experiments, the results were life alternating allowing for a change in student beliefs and perceptions. A university's public stigma outweighs student's personal stigma therefore, public stigma influences student openness to learn about mental health education, utilization of mental health service, and likeliness to converse with any faculty member about concerns. Students perceive public mental health stigma higher than their view of mental health (Gaffney, 2016). The best way to change student stigma towards mental health education is the change teaching approaches and to offer students numerous diverse opportunities for learning so they can change how they feel about it on their terms.

### ***Structural Change in Universities Needed***

Structural change in integrating mental health education structural reorganization is needed in universities to facilitate unity, eliminate environmental barriers, change student perspectives on the mental health education, and to improve teaching and learning to increase student support and success. Training and educational workshops are needed to inform educators on the academic implications of mental health difficulties experienced by students because some faculty have been found to be unaware and therefore unwilling or unsure how to teach about mental health (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013).

Faculty development evolved or came into awareness from the accumulating evidence of the ineffectiveness of the traditional ways of teaching around thirty years ago (Kamel, 2016).

Faculty development emphasizes the development of faculty skills in teaching, assigning learning activities, administration, conducting research, use of technology, media courses, small group teaching, and curriculum design (Kamel, 2016). Faculty members are responsible for their professional development and continued education and training and are held accountable. Although faculty members are responsible for their continued education and practice, they should be previously trained.

Raising faculty awareness on student dispositions, enhancing instructive activities to minimize the impact of negative variables on learning, supporting student affect, and learning experiences can increase student performance while promoting the success of higher education. Faculty development activities have a positive effect on student academic achievement, specifically in higher education. Implementing changes is expected to increase teacher performance and improve student learning outcomes. The development of new skills or assessments, techniques, improved ways of designing or implementing curricula, newer or changing ways of viewing the student-teacher relationship, and increased commitment to education is needed (Kamel, 2016). Faculty or instructor competency can largely impact intentionality, which strongly influences meeting goals, depth, and the success of classroom activities such as group discussions (Le, Janssen, & Wubbels, 2018).



Faculty or instructor competency can largely impact intentionality which strongly influences meeting goals, depth, and the success of classroom activities such as group discussions (Le, Janssen, & Wubbels, 2018). For example, low attention to collaborative goals of collaborative or peer learning may cause teachers to ignore training students in collaborative skills resulting in teachers not wanting or being able to assess learning processes due to lack of training (Le, Janssen, & Wubbels, 2018). A lack of teacher competencies for implementing peer or collaborative learning exercises may have a serious negative impact on student learning groups because some students may aim only to master individual academic learning and neglect the importance of social interaction during collaboration (Le, Janssen, & Wubbels, 2018). High-quality professional training programs for faculty members have become essential to higher education institutions to compete with the continuous revolving door of change.

### ***Peer and Collaborative Learning***

Peer learning encourages meaningful learning and is effective and meaningful across all cultures of the globe. Compared to traditional learning environments, collaborative learning provides an interesting social connection between peers and instructors (Chen, 2018). Peer learning, such as in-class group discussions, should power to change the nature of learning to be pleasant, beneficial, and meaningful, as learners become more positive and deeply involved (Mustafa, 2017). Peer learning is the process in which learners acquire new skills and knowledge through active listening and supporting equal or matched students (Le, Janssen, & Wubbels, 2018). Peer learning strategies have been associated with the development of these general and transferable skills: critical thinking, intellectual thought, communication and information management skills,

intellectual rigor, creativity and imagination, ethical practice, integrity, and tolerance of diversity across all realms (Mustafa, 2017). Learning during class from partners or groups improves student performance and leads to high rates of attendance by encouraging students to develop their learning to support academic success and equips them for lifelong learning (Mustafa, 2017).

The academic culture or culture of learning universities is dependent on the strategies which get students involved in the learning-teaching process (Chen, 2018). Peer learning has been proven to be an effective strategy as it gives fresh life to the process of learning, encourages student activity and a positive attitude, and allows teachers to be facilitators rather than being the sole source of knowledge (Chen, 2018). Interactive learning is an efficient path for teachers to establish a curriculum, a positive class environment, and for developing academic progress (Chen, 2018).

There are academic and social benefits for collaborative learning. Academic benefits include the improvement of critical thinking skills, actively involving students in the learning process, course outcome improvements, and the reinforcement of the problem-solving technique (Mustafa, 2017). Socially, collaborative learning creates social supports for students, establishes a mutual understanding between teacher and students, and provides a positive environment for practice and cooperation (Mustafa, 2017). Collaborative learning is only successful when instructors are involved in the process, intentional with in-class activities, ask questions, respond to students, and correct current misunderstandings (Le, Janssen, & Wubbels, 2018).

Students who are involved in peer learning activities develop high levels of personal and professional skills, expand their subject learning, improve their grades, and their relationships and intercultural awareness is enhanced (Mustafa, 2017). Students who experience interactive or peer learning perform better, improve logical thinking abilities, and positive learning outcomes (Chen, 2018). Peer learning supports a sense of belonging among students and improves academic confidence. Friendship development is supported, greater confidence in social integration and more participation in the community are other benefits of peer learning (Mustafa, 2017).

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### ***Learning Environment***

Learning environment or physical, psychological, and instructional atmosphere is vital to student success, and affects students in many ways (Fraser, 2018). Although the responsibility and desire to learn are still in the students' control, learning environments optimize the conditions, contexts, and ability for students to learn. A negative learning environment is a setting that adversely affects students in many ways such as low achievement, student anxiety, depression, or poor behavior. A positive learning environment is one that allows students to feel comfortable and

confident as learners. The physical aspects of a classroom include items such as lighting, space, organization, cleanliness, furniture and desk layout, and anything else physical.

The psychological classroom is how students feel about their learning. It is important for expectations to be clear and for rules to be consistent. Instructors must be a role model and maintain control of the classroom through patience, kind words, and actions (Fraser, 2018). Positive instructors with calm demeanors who are focused on helping students learn intellectually and socially are best. The instructional environment is the setting for which all teaching takes place. It is the pace, tone, and variety of activities used while teaching content to students. The goal is to engage learners and make content more personal so learning is maximized and will have longer-term effects (Fraser, 2018).

### *Course Topics*

One of the resulting themes from the data analysis was that class time should be spent on relevant course topics and less time should be spent on less relevant topics. Students recommended that relevant topics be made a priority when decisions are made on how to distribute time across course topics. Students reported that the more relevant course material was to their personal life, the more meaningful the information became.

The more personal and meaningful information is to students, the more they will learn and retain. Student motivation is largely connected to their perception of their learning environment. The most important factors of a learning environment are the students' perception of the usefulness or

the relevance of course topics, students' sense of autonomy, enjoyment of course topics, and teacher support (Radovan & Makovec, 2015). Student perceptions of how relatable course objectives and topics are to them as individuals are the strongest predictor of their perception of course satisfaction (Radovan & Makovec, 2015).

Radovan and Makovec (2015) conducted a study to determine what factors influenced student perceptions of how related or relevant course content was to their real-life. The researchers found student levels of intrinsic motivation and intrinsic goal orientation influenced their perception of how relevant course content was to their life (Radovan & Makovec, 2015). Student motivation is largely connected to their perception of their learning environment.

### **Results of the Study**

Thematic analysis was used to analyze student data collected from eight semistructured interviews, a writing prompt, and an observational checklist. Each item across all the data streams was created to address the research questions about freshmen perspectives and preferences on teaching and learning about mental health education in a classroom setting.

From the thematic analysis of data, five dominate themes emerged:

- Impact and experience
- Topics, activities, and tools
- Recommendations, preferences, and feedback

- Teacher and learning environment
- Overall perceptions, first thoughts, emotions, attitude, and effectiveness

Significant and meaningful experiences students will take away with them is the first theme.

Next, is the most relevant course topics, activities, skills, and tools learned. The third theme is student feedback, recommendations, and learning preferences for future courses. The fourth theme is student perception of the classroom environment, teacher, and student-teacher relationship. Last, overall student perception, thoughts, initial attitude, emotions, and expectations of the course and/or of self upon entering the classroom the first day and realizing the course would be focused on teaching and learning about mental health education in a classroom setting throughout the end of the semester.

### **Recommendations**

The following policy recommendations are based on the results of the thematic analysis of qualitative data and literature research.

1. Add weekly meetings with the instructors of the experience course and outline an objective for each week throughout the semester. Next, ask each instructor to sign up for a meeting once throughout the semester to present a new teaching tool or a new relevant classroom learning activity related to the objective.
  - a) Ask all instructors to practice applying and demonstrating the new classroom activity or tool with a partner or in groups.
  - b) Following each demonstration take turns offering feedback.

- c) Ask one partner or member in the group to demonstrate the new tool or learning activity to everyone in the meeting.
  - d) Every instructor should participate and offer feedback after each person demonstrates the activity or tool for their group or partner.
2. Require each instructor to sign up to present one relevant update in current literature and practice each semester during the weekly meeting.
  3. During the first class, ask the instructors to review course content and rank the subjects from most relevant to least relevant. Adjust course schedule to include more class time to focus on discussions and activities on the most relevant subjects and decrease class time on less relevant subjects.
    - a) Ask each instructor to share what the top five relevant subjects were for each class.
    - b) Ask instructors to discuss what the top five most relevant subjects were overall, across all the classes. Make a point to discuss differences and similarities across classes and instructors.
    - c) After discussing the most relevant subjects selected by the students, ask instructors to adjust their course schedule accordingly. The course schedule should be adjusted by giving the most relevant subjects more classroom time and taking time from the least relevant subjects determined by students.
  4. Ask instructors to add a weekly student reflection journal to the course requirements as a means of communication between the instructor and student about the course content, learning experience, thoughts, feedback, and suggestions.

- a) Ask instructors to share any significant weekly journal reflections every meeting.
  - b) Ask the instructors to assign “Classroom Environment Evaluation” as the first subject for the students to journal about. Ask students to evaluate all aspects of the classroom environment including the instructor and peers. Discuss all aspects and components which should be considered when evaluating a classroom environment. Explain what a classroom environment means and discuss how it applies to students and learning.
  - c) After collecting the student journal responses have a classroom discussion over different opinions about the classroom environments and discuss ways to make enhancements.
  - d) Ask instructors to share what their students’ reflections on the classroom environment was and what suggestions were made to make improvements.
  - e) Ask instructors to make the recommendations to the classroom suggested by students or made by a peer in the meetings. They will share personal responses to the changes in the following meetings as well as the reactions from students upon making changes.
5. At the end of the semester, give instructors student feedback or a summary of student evaluations and ask them to write a response plan to address or improve student concerns.
- a) Discuss evaluations during the class instructor meetings. Identify the common themes across each class and instructor.
  - b) Share response plans with peers during the last meetings.



- c) While listening, each instructor is the give feedback to their peers on the response plan.

### Implementation Plan

The timing of the presentation and the project enhancements implementation date should be made carefully. The policy recommendations for this program will be implemented within a week after the Spring semester ends. The Rationale for this is to ask faculty for cooperation, time, and energy after the busyness and excitement of the spring eases. Business, tasks, and other projects tend to be lighter during the summer. Additionally, faculty members will have all summer to plan and schedule meetings and/or annual training. I will emphasize this point to ease any pressure faculty members might be feeling.

### Conclusion

A position of this white paper was created based on the review of the literature to make policy recommendations. The results addressed the research questions and information gained. Recommendations to improve teaching and learning about mental health, increase available resources, and to enhance educator training. The position or white paper could be presented at a scheduled meeting with administrators and stakeholders and facilitated conversation about the problem and the results of the study can be shared.

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## Project Evaluation

A survey was created to evaluate administrator's perception of the effectiveness of the white paper. There are two parts to the survey. The survey evaluation part A can be completed immediately following the presentation. The goal-based evaluation part B is to be completed six months after the policy recommendations are implemented. For part A, a Likert scale was used to indicate responses:

1 –Strongly Agree; 2 –Somewhat Agree; 3 –Neither Agree/Disagree; 4 –Somewhat Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree

### Part A: Given directly after Reading

1. The white paper was directed towards the appropriate audience and captured my attention.

1 –Strongly Agree; 2 –Somewhat Agree; 3 –Neither Agree/Disagree; 4 –Somewhat Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree

2. The white paper was well organized

1 –Strongly Agree; 2 –Somewhat Agree; 3 –Neither Agree/Disagree; 4 –Somewhat Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree

3. The white paper was easy to understand.

1 –Strongly Agree; 2 –Somewhat Agree; 3 –Neither Agree/Disagree; 4 –Somewhat Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree

4. The white paper was concise.

1 –Strongly Agree; 2 –Somewhat Agree; 3 –Neither Agree/Disagree; 4 –Somewhat Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree

5. The recommendations made to the current policy were aligned with the study result and themes.

1 –Strongly Agree; 2 –Somewhat Agree; 3 –Neither Agree/Disagree; 4 –Somewhat Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree

6. The suggestions and objects listed on the white paper are attainable.

1 –Strongly Agree; 2 –Somewhat Agree; 3 –Neither Agree/Disagree; 4 –Somewhat Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree

#### **Part B: Given six months after the initial reading**

1. Which recommendations were implemented?
2. Please describe what was accomplished, how it was facilitated, or why it was not implemented.
3. What were other strategies implemented, which helped you improve your faculty development?
4. Was an annual training program developed instead of implementing recommendations into the current policy? If so, what recommendations were implemented, what was accomplished, and what other things were implemented?
5. Moving forward, what do you hope to implement in the future?