

Executive Committee of the Student Body: Mental Health Taskforce

Report and Recommendations: March 2011

William Larson '08, '11L, EC Vice President, Chair

John Grigsby '12, Peer Counselors Steering Committee

Laura Steitz '12, Peer Counselors Steering Committee

Lauren Ashley Tipton '12, President of Active Minds

Introduction

During the fall semester Active Minds and the Peer Counselors Steering Committee sought and received recognition as student organizations by the Executive Committee of the Student Body ("EC"). In January 2011, the EC reflected on its accomplishments this term and other issues that might warrant attention. The EC recognized that student organizations had taken the lead in the fall addressing mental health issues and that further examination of this subject by the EC would benefit the Student Body. Recognizing mental health as both a serious and under discussed issue on campus, the EC formed a joint taskforce involving the student organizations most involved in mental health. The taskforce was charged with examining the current status of mental health at W&L and coming up with recommendations for improvement.

The EC formed the taskforce in mid-January. The taskforce met with various stakeholder groups on campus to learn more about the current mental health status at W&L and to come up with recommendations to improve it. The taskforce met with students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Taskforce members informally met with numerous students and formally met with Active Minds, Peer Counselor Steering Committee, Interfraternity Council, and Panhellenic Council. The taskforce also held an open meeting for members of the W&L community to come and voice their opinions. In addition to faculty members, the taskforce met with members of Student Health and Counseling, the Student Affairs Office, the Academic Administration, and members of the law school community.

Findings

Mental health is the most prominent issue on our campus that is currently not receiving adequate attention. One in four students visited the counseling center during the last academic year. This statistic provides evidence that the counseling center is commonly used by W&L students. This likely comes as a surprise to most students because visits to the counseling center are generally not widely discussed among students. While keeping individual students' visits confidential is of the utmost importance, it is vital that the Student Body understands the counseling center is widely used by our peers. Many students may not view mental health as a

serious issue simply because the pervasiveness of the issue at W&L is not immediately apparent or discussed among the Student Body.

Alcohol abuse is also a real issue on our campus, but the extent of the problem can be difficult to gauge because the definition of binge drinking used by many of the surveys to which W&L participates is debated in academia.¹ Many students consider W&L's definition of binge drinking to be unrealistic. The taskforce does not want to enter into this debate, but rather seeks to express our findings that mental illness and alcohol abuse are frequently tied together and sometimes students use alcohol to self-medicate. It is important to focus on this issue and those students, who present "variables that predict future problem drinking."²

Washington and Lee students deal with mental health issues at a higher rate than students at other colleges according to W&L health surveys. Our students are disproportionately high achieving perfectionists. While perfectionism is often positive and leads to success, it also can have negative effects including a disposition to depression and other mental disorders.³ According to the counseling center, the most prevalent issues on campus are depression, anxiety, and eating disorders, but other prominent issues students struggle with include, but are not limited to, homesickness, alcoholism, suicidal thoughts and loneliness. Sexual assault continues to exist on our campus at numbers higher than the national average and sexual assault survivors also use the counseling center to help with their recovery.

W&L expends significant resources towards mental health and the taskforce appreciates the administration's dedication to the issue. W&L employs many of the best practices for university counseling centers. Nonetheless, there is significant room for necessary improvement. This is not an issue with which the University should feel content because we have better resources than our peers. We should strive for excellence in mental health treatment and education as we strive for excellence in all other pursuits.

Having four full time counselors, places the counseling center at the top of its class among other institutions of higher learning, but that is not enough to both meet the demand on our campus and increase the counseling center's outreach efforts. Some institutions take a limited view of counseling, for example they limit the number of visits a student can have with university staff before being referred to an outside counselor. We commend the University and the counseling center for taking a different approach, namely, seeking to provide students with all treatment necessary during a student's four years at W&L. The Lexington community's resources for people needing mental health support are limited and do not make referrals as practical as they are in more urban areas. W&L strives to give students the support required for success and should continue to offer the treatment they need for their entire time here.

¹ See <http://www.alcoholfacts.org/Wechsler.html>

² Ham, Lindsay S. and Debra A. Hope. "College Students and problematic drinking: A review of the literature." 23 *Clinical Psychology Review* 719, 748 (2003).

³ See eg. Bergman, Anthony J., Jennifer E. Nyland, and Lawrence R. Burns. "Correlates with perfectionism and the utility of a dual process model." 43 *Personality and Individual Differences* 389 (2007).

W&L's mission statement states, "Graduates will be prepared for life-long learning, personal achievement, responsible leadership, service to others, and engaged citizenship in a global and diverse society." In order for W&L to fulfill its mission, it must do a better job of recognizing students who need help and getting them high quality assistance. A multipronged attack is best for addressing this issue. Students, faculty, the counseling center, and administration can all take action to improve mental health and mental health treatment at W&L. We make the following recommendations and encourage all members of the W&L community to do what they can to improve mental health at W&L.

Recommendations

Students:

At W&L, we pride ourselves on student leadership in all facets of campus life, and mental health should be no different. Indeed, between the new formation of Active Minds and the continued expansion and increased presence of the Peer Counselor program, we are starting to see meaningful student leadership concerning mental health. These organizations require diverse membership that is representative of the Student Body at-large. However, Active Minds would particularly benefit from more male members as they expand their organization. Below, we offer suggestions to help both these organizations and the Student Body as a whole to more adequately address the mental health issues that W&L students face.

Active Minds:

- Publicize information about mental health illnesses including signs and symptoms using the popular Stall Street Journal model in addition to other promotion materials. Broaden the reach of Stall Street Journals to Greek houses.
- Promote the self-assessments available on the counseling center's website.
- Publicize statistics about mental health on our campus, including the fact that one in four of our students went to the counseling center last academic year.
- Work with Greek organizations to promote educational programs such as Reflections, an eating disorder training supported by Delta Delta Delta Sorority.

Peer Counselors:

- Expand the first year hall program to include Peer Counselors for upperclassmen halls and Greek houses. Continue to use the opposite sex model.
- Consider whether a name other than Peer Counselors would better convey the organization's mission and capabilities (eg. Peer Support or Peer Resources).
- Cultivate and improve relationships between RAs and Peer Counselors and include Peer Counselors in more hall programming.
- Update the first year orientation video on mental health.

Student Body:

- Actively work to learn more about mental health illness.
- Look out for friends and encourage them to get help when you are concerned.

Faculty:

Faculty serve an important role recognizing students at risk and helping those students find campus resources. Faculty members frequently interact with students through class, office hours, and advising, and thus are in a position to recognize changes in mental health. Because severe deterioration of academic performance is often a sign of underlying mental health issues, faculty members are in a good position to recognize possible mental health issues in students. Additionally, it is important for faculty members to take note of students who are constantly overwhelmed and obsessive over their academic work to a concerning level as these may also be symptoms of a serious underlying problem. In addition to helping individual students, the faculty should look for opportunities to offer education on mental health in the curriculum.

- Create and offer a 2-credit PE on Nutrition and Health.
- Train coaches on the mental health resources available on our campus (the Athletic Department is already working to complete this action item).
- Provide programming for the faculty on mental health issues and on campus resources. Senior faculty members expressed an interest in the programming generally offered to new faculty on the topic because it can be difficult to keep up with resources as they change and expand. This programming could be added to the Faculty Academy.
- Expand the focus of the faculty beyond freshman. Faculty training on mental health should not focus only on first-year advisors and the struggles facing first-year students. All classes of students have mental health issues and faculty should be aware of changes that may raise mental health concerns in students from all classes.
- Take an active interest in advisees and provide advisees with mental health resources when helpful—all faculty members should recognize that academic advising is not limited to class work, but includes helping students through their W&L experience.
- Institute a one credit graduation requirement that mandates attendance of lectures/programs based on relevant wellness topics over students' 4 years at W&L. Currently, the majority of wellness programming is aimed at first year students who are already bombarded with information and often do not yet have an understanding of the realistic nature of the problems that the programming aims to address. As one advances in their college experience, they will face a multitude of new issues. Therefore, we believe that continued wellness programming over four years would allow students to put programming into context with one's own life experience. This will make the lessons and information resonate much better with the students and realistic questions can be addressed. We propose that several mental-health lectures and interactive programs/panels be hosted each year on a variety of relevant wellness topics, and that students must attend two events of their choosing during the year. Most of these events could come from existing programming that would be approved by the administrator of the program.

Topics could include depression, eating disorders, anxiety, personality disorders, sexual assault, time management, stress management, general relations, or other pertinent issues. Students should be required to attend sessions in four to six specific topic areas and then permitted to repeat topic areas or select from other approved programs for the remaining required sessions. The administration of such a requirement could be handled by the faculty or the student affairs office.

Health Services:

W&L has extensive health services for a campus its size including a 24-hour health center and four full-time counselors. We offer the following recommendations based on interviews with members of the health services staff as well as consumers of those services. We hope these suggestions can be implemented to improve the utilization and effectiveness of health services.

- Develop a method for patient feedback. While this would only be one data point, it is important to formalize the evaluation process and not only rely on anecdotal evidence to assess the quality of care.
- Develop a relationship with another counseling facility to help with more serious cases and to provide outpatient care for students who need more help than W&L can provide, but do not need to receive inpatient care. These relationships would also be helpful for students, who want to receive counseling services off campus.
- Develop a one-page document available in hard copy and on the counseling center homepage including what a student can expect from counseling that dispels some common myths and explains confidentiality policies.
- Strive to provide excellent quality care with therapists who are well respected in their field, which will give students a heightened sense of trust and competence regarding the Counseling Center. The qualifications and expertise of the counselors should be publicized so students are aware of the knowledgeable and esteemed resources that the University has made available. The pursuit and execution of excellent skilled care should be both a major criterion for both the hiring process and continued employment.

Administration:

The University administration and Student Affairs Office have dedicated significant resources to mental health; yet, for the well-being of the student body, the University should dedicate more resources towards this issue. We recognize that several of our recommendations are expensive and the University is not in a hiring phase, but we believe this is an important, time-sensitive issue. The administration should seriously consider making these investments in the well-being of our students.

- Add a banner on the wlu.edu homepage and law school homepage for campus resources. This banner would direct people to a webpage with phone numbers and a list of resources available for students who need help with a variety of issues, including, but not limited to,

- mental health. The banner could replace the e2campus link because it attempts a similar goal, but nearly 100% of students sign up for e2campus during matriculation.
- Hire one additional counselor, ideally one with a specific specialty and experience that is relevant to our student body. This new position should serve three primary purposes:
 - First, one counselor should have a larger physical presence at the law school, to increase law students' familiarity and comfort with the counseling center. This person could hold office hours at the law school and would be present for orientation and events including discussions on substance abuse and character and fitness.
 - Second, an additional counselor would lighten the work load of all counselors, allotting more time for consideration of individual cases, creation of individualized treatment plans for students who use the Counseling Center on a regular basis (with a large amount of input from the student himself), and easier scheduling of appointments. Our counselors already carry high patient loads and during certain times of the year, new patients have to wait long periods to see a counselor. Students who need help should not have to wait.
 - Third, the lighter counseling load should free counselor time for additional mental health programming and conferences to be held on campus.
 - Look for more specialization in counselors. In hiring a new counselor and through attrition over time, the counseling center should look to find counselors with specializations in issues that are particularly prevalent on our campus. This should include a counselor with training or experience working with older, graduate level students at the law school and/or counselors with a background in helping students deal with some of the most prevalent mental health issues on campus, such as eating disorders and depression. Successful treatment of these illnesses necessitates therapists who are very well trained regarding these specific issues.
 - Evaluate the administration of required session with a staff member after a substance abuse strike. Currently, some students are sent to the Director of Health Promotion and others to the Counseling Center without a reason for one versus the other. The administration should determine if this is meant to be punishment or assistance and eliminate the dichotomy between a student affairs staff member and a counselor conducting the session.
 - Make recordings of mental health speakers available digitally on the W&L website, when those speakers allow their presentations to be recorded. Allowing students to view presentations from their computers at home would allow students who missed the presentation, either due to other commitments or feelings of discomfort, to view it.