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Subject: Mental Health Issues at Iowa State

1. Purpose

The purpose of this proposal is to help students and faculty feel more comfortable addressing mental health challenges throughout the semester. We intend to do this through the implementation of 'Mental Health Days' or days off that allow the student and faculty to take a break from stressors in their lives to focus on their own issues. This will help create a positive learning environment on campus, which all can benefit from.

2. Summary

Mental health issues affect every student and faculty member to some degree, especially with the many stressors of college and careers. These issues are prevalent here at Iowa State. Research shows that addressing these mental health issues improves academic success for students and faculty. This proposal will cover the problems caused by stress that students and faculty face. The creation of 'mental health days' and how implementing these days will benefit students and faculty. This proposal will also cover its funding, other potential issues, research related to this problem, evidence of this problem, and examples of similar solutions used at other institutions.

3. Introduction

Throughout the semester, students have a variety of responsibilities, transitioning from their teenage years to adulthood, in addition to the stress of college. Especially with midterms, students increasingly struggle to work through this stress in healthy ways. Many students resort to drugs to deal with stress, as well as using social media to cope. Many of these coping methods are ineffective and only aggravate the issues of this stress.

Excessive stressors can cause a variety of mental health issues for students and faculty. The fast changes from a teenager to an adult for many students, the constant workload and pressure often impacts students negatively (Iowa State Daily, 2023a, 2023b; American Psychological Association [APA], n.d., 2022). To help students and faculty with this fatigue this proposal analyzes adding 'mental health days' to the Iowa State Schedule, which will



Figure 1: Illustration demonstrating mental health issues. (Figure 1) (Neuro Wellness Spa, n.d.)

enable students and faculty to manage their mental health more effectively through college and reduce dropout and turnover rates.

3.1. Problem

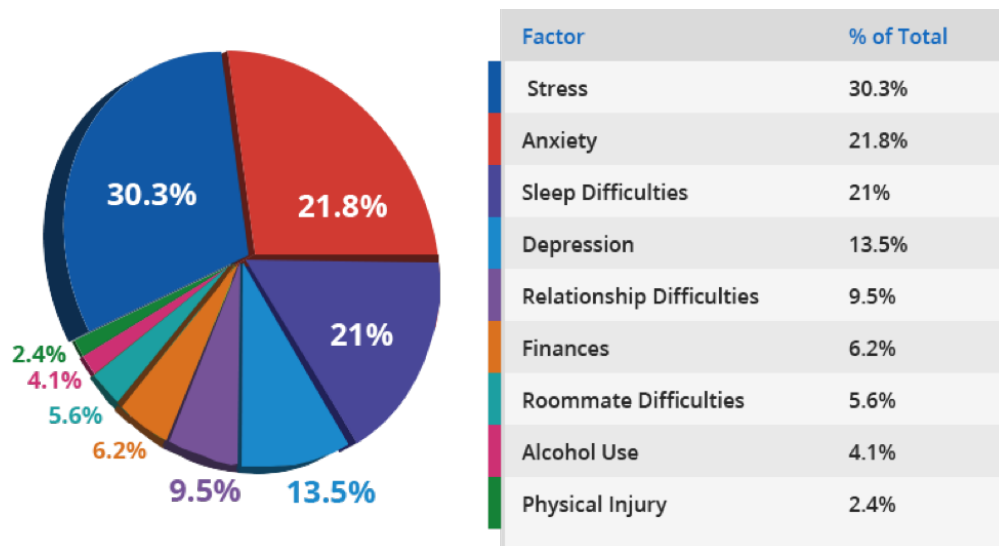


Figure 2: Graph illustrating common mental health issues in college. (Figure 2) (Addiction Education Society, n.d.)

College is a stressful time and a transition from high school. Articles in Iowa State Daily highlight this. These articles cover interviews of real students struggling with midterms and more. This stress is a significant factor in every student’s mental health, which is integral to maintaining effective learning habits. These learning habits broadly define each student’s success in college, and because of this, students’ mental health must be aided by a variety of sources. It is a responsibility of the college to assist in this help, and this can and has been done in a variety of ways. However, mental health issues are rampant among college students, especially during midterms and finals (Iowa State Daily, 2023a; American Psychological Association [APA], n.d.). The National Education Association reports that more than 60 percent of students struggle with at least one major mental health issue (Flannery, 2023). Much of this stress comes from the diminishing focus throughout each semester and a struggle to feel prepared for midterms and finals. It also inevitably negatively impacts students sleep hurting their focus. It is important to mitigate this stress to increase each students ability to succeed in college.

3.2. Current Solutions

Comparing College Students: 2008 to 2017

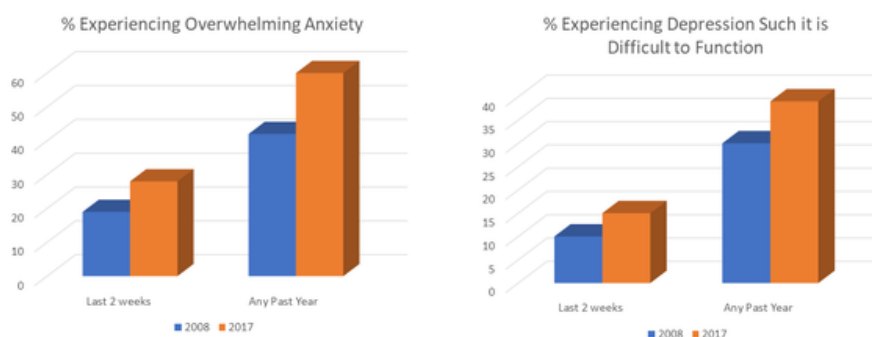


Figure 3: Increasing mental health issue trends (Figure 3) (Henriques, 2018).

Currently, many practical solutions are in place (APA, 2022; Iowa State Daily, 2023b). However, many of these solutions rely on students reaching out of their own volition or require additional funding to be more effective (Inside Higher Ed, 2025; WPTV, n.d.). Solutions like this primarily include counseling services and on-campus therapists (APA, 2022; Talkspace, n.d.). These solutions need to target mental health issues proactively (Talkspace, n.d.; APA, 2022). Because people have to consult a counseling service on their own, many students who do not realize they are struggling with mental health issues, and students who are afraid to reach out, do not get the help they need (Flannery, 2023; APA, n.d.). If more education was provided about mental health to students, more would be able to identify and better cope with issues (APA, 2022; Talkspace, n.d.). It would also help each student build personal

connections and actively watch for warning signs to support one another (NEA, 2023; APA, 2022).

3.3. Proposed Solutions

There are two major facets of this solution, the mental health days and the increase in outreach and mental health services. These solutions will be effective by reaching out to struggling students and preventing fatigue among those scared to reach out. If one is more effective than the other this proposal can be adapted to reflect that.

Mental Health Days Mental health days can be implemented in a variety of forms. Many schools allow students to take a day off without penalty. However, this is not necessary in college as most classes have a version of this built in. For college mental health days they will be extra days off throughout the semester, which have been proven to improve learning (CT Mirror, 2023; Talkspace, n.d.; American Psychological Association [APA], 2022).

- Identify Periods of exhaustion and burnout
- Add more days off in the semester to mitigate stress and burnout
- More days off in the semester will increase students academic performance leading to lower dropout rates and more effective learning.

Professor-Level Accommodations Another way mental health issues could be handled is by the professor rather than the college. Professors allow extensions and are compassionate for many students issues.

- It is reported in the National Education Association that many students do email professors about their personal struggles with mental health affecting academic performance.
- A way to address burnout would be to take lecture days off for students who are struggling, reducing workload and increasing available time for homework
- This would also allow mental health to be better addressed for each major

Outreach and Support Services Outreach in mental health here at Iowa State is currently good. However, good is not always sufficient to address general stress or more complex issues. How will Iowa State reach out to students with mental health issues?

- Train faculty to recognize warning signs in students and to handle more complex issues.
- Expand student health and wellness by adding more counselors on campus and more office space.
- Train students to deal with mental health issues

3.4. Solution Wrap-Up

Each of these solution sections will need to be further analyzed for cost analysis. For instance Mental Health Days do not need a substantial budget while professor and student training will be more money. Finally, the expansion of Student Health and Wellness services will be the most costly. Each of these solutions will be effective for different reasons and are intended to highlight specific areas of the issue.

4. Proposed Tasks

The tasks necessary to implement these solutions are outlined in the following section.

4.1. Research

Research is necessary to determine the best implementation of each solution and to determine the severity of mental health issues here at Iowa State. The easiest way to do this is through anonymous surveys. We can use these surveys to gauge the prevalence and timing of issues like burnout, depression, anxiety, and more. Once we better understand these issues, we can choose which day or days would be most effective to improve students' mental health. We can also conduct active research with a continuing study throughout the semester to gauge the issues and actively adapt Iowa State's solution. This type of research does require funding specifically for the analysis of the data. This is because a variety of faculty will need to analyze the class schedules, specific responses, and the efficacy of the solutions currently and potentially implemented.

A significant issue with this approach is the lack of interaction in student surveys. There are multiple ways to attempt to address these issues with surveys. For instance, we suggest that each college ask the professors to add the study to their course and indicate the use of extra credit. If this is not effective, we can incentivize the students through gift cards and more. Much of this has already been implemented by many researchers. Another, more straightforward way would be to make this survey required through Canvas or other software.

The more data Iowa State can acquire, the more accurate our assessment of the issue can be. With this assessment, we can determine the most effective solution, whether it is adding more days off or being more proactive with the mental health services on campus. This research will continue as mental health is a persistent issue that evolves and will need further exploration in the future.

4.1.1 Proposed Survey Questions

Demographic Information

- What is your major?
- What is your gender?
- What is your age?
- How would you describe your financial situation?

- Are you employed?

Mental Health Experiences

- Selection of mental health issues they are known to struggle with.
- Selection of mental health issues their friends struggle with.
- Have you considered suicide during your time at Iowa State?
- Do you feel comfortable reaching out to faculty when you are struggling with stress?
- Have you ever used the counseling services at Iowa State?
- Do you think there is enough mental health resources on campus?

Academic Stress and Burnout

- When do you feel the most mentally drained during the Fall and Spring semesters?
- If Iowa State were to implement more days off to improve academic performance, what would be your suggested number of necessary days within reason?
- How often does your course load feel overwhelming?
- On a scale from 1-10 how much has stress affected your sleep?
- Rate how stressed you are on a scale of 1-10.
- What is your biggest source of stress currently?

Lifestyle and Balance

- How much sleep on average do you get per night?
- Do you participate in extracurriculars?
- How would you rate your work, school, life balance?

Faculty and Campus Support

- Do you feel that you are cared for by the faculty at Iowa State?
- What could faculty do to improve outreach to students?
- What is the dialogue around mental health around you?
- Would you participate in peer led mental health programs and outreach?

4.2. Analyzing Data

Accurate and practical analysis of these issues is necessary for effectiveness of the solution. The first step is to determine the scope and severity of the problems. We can determine this through the number of responses relative to how many people have experienced serious effects and how many people have a self-assessed or diagnosed mental health struggle. Once we have determined how widespread each issue is, we can apply this to our solution later. For instance, if burnout is far more prevalent than depression, we can focus on solving burnout.

The next step would be to determine the most stressful periods of time for each student. While it is assumed that midterms and finals is the most stressful time, more data will allow a better understanding of these issues. By identifying when students are struggling most with burnout, we can implement a day off to help them catch up and relax. This also addresses struggles like loneliness, as we can implement more parent weekends during times when students may feel more isolated, especially in the winter.

We can also choose to analyze changes in data over periods of time to determine external factors (known as longitudinal analysis). Factors such as world events and periods of political and economic struggles are essential. A recent example of this is how the COVID pandemic drastically changed how students fundamentally think. The National Education Association has described it as stress-induced aging (Flannery, 2023).

4.3. Choosing the Days

To choose which days to turn into mental health days after data analysis, we can look at the majority of the time selected in the fall and spring semesters, when burnout is felt the most. We can also factor in the extent of the burnout to either add more than one day or days at different periods, to extend student longevity. For instance, if most students begin to experience burnout after the first midterms, we can implement a day off soon after the standard midterm date. If more days are needed, we can implement them at separate points as well. More days off have been proven to extend retention and student longevity (American Psychological Association [APA], 2022). It also gives the faculty time to regroup in their own life. The cost of this solution is relatively low compared to expanding counseling, as the primary expenses are research, communication, and schedule restructuring. The simplicity of this solution and the proven results it has achieved in other schools make it the primary choice, as it will yield benefits for students and retention for the college.

4.4. Choosing Training

Creating effective training for the faculty will require analysis of the data. However, based on the format of the questions we can break down training into generalized ideas and steps before people are hired to create effective training courses. The following is the anticipated areas that will be covered for faculty which will be an expansion from the current training.

4.5. Outreach Programs

Student-led outreach programs can also be implemented through clubs and extracurricular activities. Mental health groups can raise funds and awareness through lunches and also

Training Focus	Description
Warning Signs	Faculty will be trained to recognize warning signs in students and take preventative steps to help students with workload and get them in contact with support.
Handling Complex Issues	Faculty will be trained to handle more complex issues that students may share. It will focus of communication, confidentiality, and more. Refer to Student Health and Wellness if necessary.
Promoting a Supportive Environment	Training will cover creating a classroom atmosphere where people feel accepted and are comfortable talking about mental health. Can include check-ins and flexible deadlines.
Utilizing Campus Resources	Faculty will be informed on all campus support resources and connected them with students. They will also inform students on resources on campus which can be used with their issues.
Faculty Care	Burnout and mental health issues are also very real among faculty, and it is essential that faculty's health is also prioritized. This section will cover ways faculty can address their own struggles, as well as resources available on campus.

Table 1: Outline of proposed faculty training.

speaking events throughout the school year. This will promote awareness among students and open conversations in closed circles. The data from the survey can lead the speakers to focus on specific areas of coping and more.

4.6. Expanding Counseling

To expand counseling, Student Health and Wellness will need to hire more counselors and possibly expand office space. Once the research data has assessed the need for counselors, we can set up a more specific process. Iowa State can use existing spaces to expand counseling services before creating new spaces. This extra staff will allow more students to get the help they need and reduce the time required to get it.

4.7. Communication

Effective communication will be necessary between faculty and students. But especially with the changing schedule, it is integral for Student health and wellness to communicate with the

registrar when mental health days need to be prioritized. Then, with these communications established, they can come to a resolution. Once a resolution has been reached it is necessary to communicate to the students and faculty quickly and effectively.

4.8. Further Analysis and Evaluation

Mental health will be a challenge for everyone. It is essential to continue research on the effectiveness of this solution and better implementations. We can continue researching and studying student and faculty mental health to accommodate all individuals better and continue adding to each solution in the future.

4.9. Why this solution?

This solution will likely be popular and effective among students for several reasons.

- It allows more social time and recharge time.
- As a student myself, I experience this burnout.
- The inclusion of other options allows for greater adaptability in implementation, leading to a more relaxed, smoother process.
- It allows for the expansion and contraction of certain aspects based on needs.
- There are also a few other solutions that can address this problem at low cost and with a high level of simplicity.

5. Schedule

This is the currently planned schedule if implemented within the month.

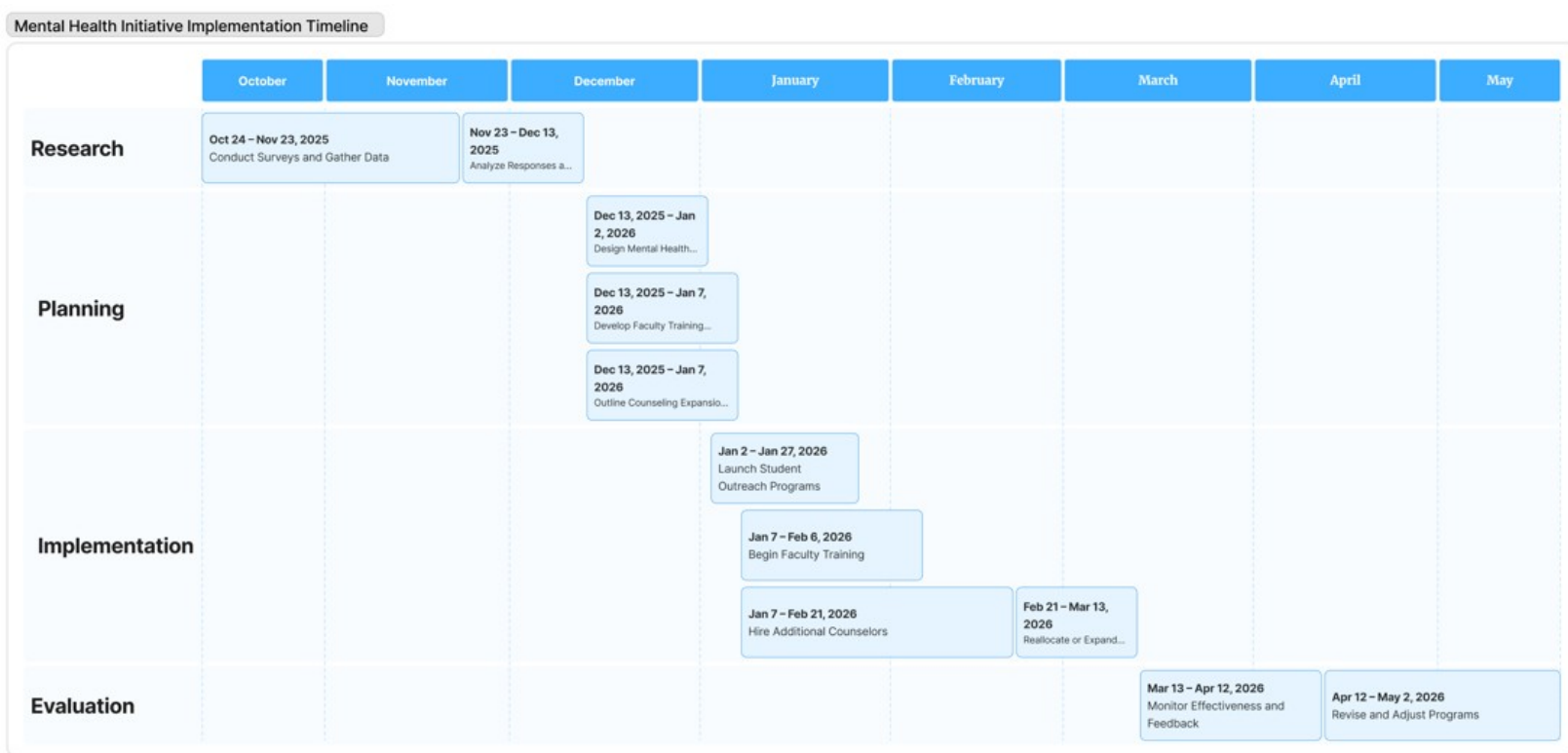


Figure 4: Schedule of Proposed Tasks

6. Budget

The figures below are provided by **Inside Higher Ed** and are intended to be an estimate of cost.

1. Research Costs

Research will primarily include development and implementation of surveys and the faculty costs of analysis.

- Survey development and distribution: \$4,000
- Research Faculty compensation: \$16,000
- Total estimated cost: \$20,000

2. Mental Health Days for Students

Adding more days off in the in the semester will require changes to current schedules and faculty workload. The costs outline communication from administrators and faculty workload changes

- Administrative support and scheduling adjustments: \$5,000 per semester
- Faculty workload compensation: \$10,000 per semester
- Total estimated cost per academic year: \$30,000

3. Professor and Student Training

Training faculty and students will require workshops, outside sources and also pay for more faculty work hours. It will also require costs for the development of the training.

- Workshop development and materials: \$8,000
- External mental health consultants: \$12,000
- Faculty compensation for training hours: \$15,000
- Total estimated cost: \$35,000

4. Expansion of Counseling Services

Additional counselors will be the most expensive portion of the changes outlined below. Inside Higher Ed provides financial estimates. The number of counselor postions may vary based of need.

- Hiring additional counselors (3 full-time positions): \$180,000/year
- Office space renovation and equipment: \$50,000
- Administrative support: \$20,000/year
- Total estimated cost: \$250,000/year

Total Estimated Budget

The combined cost for implementing all solutions, including research, student mental health days, faculty training, and counseling expansion, is approximately:

\$335,000 per academic year

7. Experience

Tropical Smoothie Cafe
Assistant Manager

Papillion, NE
2021 – 2024

- Trained and led a six-person team to maintain efficient operations and quality control.
- Coordinated inventory and delivery systems to reduce waste and improve workflow.

8. Conclusion

Overall, this proposal has identified an issue at Iowa State University. The issue of burnout and mental health issues is not exclusive to our university and is prevalent everywhere. By continuing to spread awareness of these issues Iowa State can set the example of universities tackling relevant issues that students face and applying creative effective solutions. The research into Iowa States mental health will benefit other colleges and higher education institutions as well serving to be a stepping stone to a enhanced college experience as students and faculty navigate the changing world.

Sincerely,
James Morton, BS Aerospace Engineering

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