The Influence of UCLA Environment on Graduate Students' Health & Wellness

Executive Summary

PURPOSE

In order to better understand how the UCLA campus environment influences graduate and professional students' ability to set, obtain and maintain personal health wellness goals, this study analyzed responses to an open-ended item on the 2014 Student Affairs Graduate and Professional Student Survey: *Is there anything you would like to tell us about the influence the UCLA environment has had on your ability to act in ways that are consistent with your health and wellness goals?* This report highlights five key themes identified in the data.

FINDINGS

1) *Lack of Healthy and/or Affordable Food on Campus:*
    Although students acknowledge the increasing presence of healthy food options on campus, they nevertheless report significant difficulty locating food options that are not only healthy, but are also affordable and relatively easy to access from any location on campus.

2) *Structural Barriers to Health & Wellness Resources:*
    Structural barriers, such as limited parking near recreational facilities and a lack of designated lactation spaces, played a significant role in students' inability to maintain healthy lifestyles.

3) *Limited Availability of Mental Health Services:*
    Although respondents had overwhelmingly positive views of CAPs, they simultaneously critiqued the scarcity of these resources stating that appointment ceilings, excessive wait time for appointments and lack of race-based services are significant barriers.

4) *Intersections of Race, Campus Climate and Mental Health for Minoritized Students:*
    Students reported incidents of racism and discrimination on campus, which acted as an additional challenge for their mental health and wellness.

5) *Limited Knowledge of Health & Wellness Resources:*
    A noteworthy number of students critiqued UCLA for not having resources that are actually available, including a graduate student gym or free recreation classes. Such responses indicate a substantial gap between the resources offered by the University and the resources students are aware of.

IMPLICATIONS

In order to address the concerns identified by students, UCLA can partake in several institutional change efforts: *1) Increasing Access to Healthy, Affordable Food for Students via Community Partnerships;* 2) *Addressing Structural Barriers to Health & Wellness Resources with Innovation & Resource Redistribution;* 3) *Increasing Capacity of Mental Health Services*; 4) *Providing Identity-Based Mental Health Services; and 5) Increased Outreach for Health & Wellness Resources.* Importantly, the suggestions offered are intersectional in that they attempt to address students' overarching concerns about campus climate, affordability, diversity, resource allocation and equity in each categorical solution offered. Thus, each change effort is comprehensive and holistic rather than singular in its focus and draw on the direct suggestions of the students' themselves.

Introduction

The 2014 Student Affairs Graduate and Professional Student Survey was administered online in Spring Quarter 2014 to all graduate and professional students at UCLA. The survey was designed with a Student Affairs focus and included items related to: perceptions of progress, mental health/wellness, use of time, financial concerns/resources, interactions with others, campus climate, self-ratings of skills, ethics in academia, international student issues, post-graduation plans, sense of community, and improvement of graduate/professional experience. In addition to a number of close ended wellness questions, the survey included an open-ended question that asked, "*Is there anything you would like to tell us about the influence the UCLA environment has had on your ability to act in ways that are consistent with your health and wellness goals?*" Written responses to this open-ended wellness item are the focus of this analysis. A total of 669 of the overall survey-takers provided a response to this item. The demographics of this sub-group of respondents did not differ in any substantive way from those of the overall sample.

Findings

Overall, five major themes emerged from the open ended responses regarding how UCLA's campus environment influences students' ability to obtain their health and wellness goals: 1) Lack of Healthy and/or Affordable Food on Campus; 2) Structural Barriers to Health & Wellness Resources; 3) Limited Availability of Mental Health Services; 4) Intersections of Race, Campus Climate and Mental Health for Minoritized Students; and 5) Limited Knowledge of Health & Wellness Resources

Lack of Healthy and/or Affordable Food on Campus

Although participants applauded the University's attempts to increase access to healthy food options, such as salad bars and fruit stands, graduate and professional students overwhelmingly experienced dissatisfaction with the availability of healthy food options throughout campus. As one graduate student mentioned, "food at UCLA is abominable. It interferes with [my] healthy diet." For the student pool, "healthy food" meant a variety of different things, including being fresh, vegetarian, vegan, and/or low-carb. In addition to emphasizing the need for healthier options, participants also noted that diversity in food choices was an important factor in their ability to maintain healthy dietary choices. As one student noted, "Better food on campus (fresh, healthy) and more variety would make a big difference."

Graduate and professional students simultaneously acknowledged that the University's nutritious options were often inaccessible due to a variety of institutional barriers, such as operating hours and location. As explicated by participants, some areas of campus are virtual healthy food deserts while others have some limited access to soup, salad and sandwich stands. Likewise, the designated areas that did offer fruit stands and salad bars had rigid hours of operation, making it impossible for students to get access to nutritious food throughout their busy day.

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>
> -PhD Student in Sociology

Graduate and professional students were not only concerned with having access to healthy food, but they were simultaneously concerned with finding nutritious options that were affordable within their limited student budgets. One student stated, "Healthy food options on campus are often very expensive." Likewise, another student stated, "Healthy and inexpensive food options on campus would be very helpful for me. Currently the only food I feel comfortable buying on campus is pizza due to my budget, so I will often eat pizza or nothing for lunch on very busy weeks."

Structural Barriers to Health & Wellness

In addition to encountering barriers to nutritious food options, graduate and professional students simultaneously expressed concerns regarding the availability and accessibility of fitness spaces, courses and workshops throughout and beyond the academic year. Many students identified the gyms' limited hours of operation as one significant barrier to reaching their health and wellness goals. For instance, one student

mentioned, "Make SAC pool hours more accommodating rather than just 3 hours a day," while another noted that "UCLA NEEDS to get a new or larger gym. The amount of people at UCLA is not supported by the Wooden Center alone." Some students also expressed concern regarding the availability of fitness programs that fit their hectic work and school schedules.

Additionally, lack of sufficient parking spaces near recreation centers, inordinate prices for daily parking and limited availability of parking spaces in campus garages were primary concerns reported by a number of respondents. Students also expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of clean, safe and comfortable resting spaces on campus. Given the frequency at which respondents mentioned busy academic and work schedules, it makes sense that a large number of students would seek out designated spaces for napping, resting and relaxing while they were on campus. One graduate student admitted that, "It would be great to have dedicated places for short naps on campus," while another student noted, "It would be nice if there was a nap room or meditation space."

Parenting students also emphasized the lack of clean and accessible lactation areas on campus. One student admitted, "I have written to the Dean of the public health school about this issue, and would like to see UCLA step up to support working/learning moms. I believe in the importance of nursing and want to continue to do it, but the inadequacy of the spaces makes it stressful and unpleasant." Another parenting student added, "Finding convenient places to pump, store breast milk, and wash pump parts has been difficult between my places of work and study." As collectively expressed by survey respondents, structural changes that accommodate students' physical needs, from nursing to napping, must be thoughtfully incorporated into the campus environment.

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Limited Availability of Mental Health Services

As explicated by student respondents, graduate and professional school breeds high stress as a result of the rigorous course work, financial burdens, competitive environment, and the pressure of the job market. As a result, maintaining a healthy mental state was identified as a crucial part of respondents' health and wellness goals. On the whole, graduate and professional students reported overwhelmingly positive experiences with CAPS counseling and therapy. For instance, one student stated, "CAPS and Behavioral Health Services are good resources in helping me to de-stress and exercise emotion regulation," while another noted, "CAPS is a great resource for students who are emotionally unstable or feeling helpless."

While students found immense value in CAPS services, they simultaneously expressed dissatisfaction with the overall accessibility and availability of this critical mental health resource. For instance, one student said, "I think that CAPS is an incredible facility, but it seems as if they are trying to accommodate too many students. I feel like the staff genuinely listen to me and I have received so much amazing help, but they all seem overworked and their appointments are always booked. I know of several students who have been quite distressed about this lack of availability." Additionally, one student explained, "CAPS groups are a great resource; this is from someone who has a history of depression & anxiety. However, CAPS is terrible for ongoing individual therapy, and the BHS referral process is needlessly complicated." Similar comments suggested that the limited number of visits, excessive wait time for a counselor appointments and the multilayered process for initiating CAPs services were major hindrances to maintaining a mental health and wellness goals for a large portion of students.

Although UCLA insurance covers a portion of counseling services outside of CAPs, graduate students felt that significant budget and time constraints limited their ability to seek off-campus mental health resources to augment CAPs. One student said, "CAPS has been helpful, but the limit on number of appointments is worrisome as I cannot afford counseling elsewhere." Another student echoed these sentiments by noting, "CAPS services are so limited that it's hard to get much help from them - they just refer you elsewhere and that can often be prohibitively expensive even with UCSHIP insurance."

Intersections of Race, Campus Climate and Mental Health for Minoritized Populations

Regardless of race, responses overwhelmingly suggest that campus racial climate has a major impact on students' mental and emotional health. One student said, "Very rude and racist campus interactions take a toll on wellness." Another student provided more detail on this topic by noting, "Incidences of hostile racial campus climate at various locations (Asian American Studies Center, Law School, Education School) have negatively affected how comfortable I feel in my own skin on this campus." Likewise, another graduate student said, "Campus climate and environment is generally unwelcoming of people who identify the way I do (race, gender, sexuality, ability, etc.) and I have had unsafe encounters on campus, which make it difficult for me to pursue health."

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>
> - Master's Student in Education

Students suggested several steps the University could take to address some of these racialized health concerns. For instance, after noting that some faculty have detrimental or inaccurate perspectives about minoritized students, one student suggested that faculty "should also be required to undergo [ongoing] diversity training" while another said the University should "Take a stronger interest in campus climate…and introduce more intensive training for faculty and staff."

Another potential solution would be to generate more race-specific mental health services for students struggling to cope with experiential encounters with discrimination. For instance, a Hispanic student completing a Master's in Education noted, "As a result of the lack of diversity (culturally, race, gender, and socio-economically) at UCLA my experience has been negative. I feel anxious all the time and have sought out help at CAPS but the counselors did not understand my perspective on why I am anxious at UCLA." Though this student did not explicitly suggest race-conscious mental health services as a solution, such a resource could be beneficial for students that feel their struggles with racial battle fatigue cannot be addressed by the counseling department as it currently stands.

Limited Knowledge of Health & Wellness Resources

Many respondents noted that they were unaware of the various health and wellness resources available to graduate students at UCLA. As a result, many respondents suggested increased advertisement and publicity of these services as a way to increase awareness and utilization of these critical resources. For instance, one respondent said, "I wish there would be more outreach to graduate departments for positive mental and social well being." Another student added, "More information could be routinely provided about two things: 1) classes at KREC and 2) mental health services available to grad students."

Importantly, students identified faculty as playing a dominant role in their mental health. "PI's have major influence on the stress level and mental health of their graduate students but I highly doubt that many of them factor this into decisions that they make," noted one student. Another respondent discussed her inability to obtain support for her mental health from her faculty advisor. She noted, "We had a professor say explicitly in class the following exact words 'your emotional wellbeing is none of my concern'. That sums up the…faculty's attitude towards graduate student welfare in my experience." In recognizing the significant influence that professors have on graduate students' mental health, many of the respondents suggested that faculty become more meaningfully involved in the mental health culture here on campus.

Participants suggested that faculty be made aware of the types mental, emotional and physical health resources on campus because they usually have the highest level of interaction with graduate students. "Encourage professors to acknowledge or advertise psych services and related accommodations that are available for those grad students struggling with previously diagnosed and/or undiagnosed mental health conditions," suggested one student. Likewise, another student stated, "UCLA should institute required mental health trainings for faculty, and require them to be more sensitive to the pressures they are creating and passing on." Overall,

graduate and professional students overwhelmingly agreed that professors should not only be aware of the mental health resources available on campus, but they should also receive basic training on how to interact with students who suffer from mental or emotional health issues.

Conclusion & Implications

Interesting themes emerged from the 2014 Student Affairs Graduate and Professional Survey. Though the campus has made substantial advances in both the type and quality of wellness resources being offered, it can draw from graduate student voices centered in this report in order to continue developing, expanding, and refining student health resources and services. Overall, respondents expressed mounting concern over three broad areas of health and wellness services - the availability, the efficiency, and the accessibility of resources. In order to address the concerns reported by students, UCLA should consider several institutional changes.

Increasing Access to Healthy, Affordable Food for Students

There are a variety of ways to address the lack of healthy, affordable food on campus. For one, UCLA could consider building additional restaurants on campus that offer low-price, nutritional options. If conventional dining is too pricey, alternative options such as having food trucks and fruit stands on campus could be pursued. In this latter option, UCLA could improve its health and wellness resources while simultaneously make meaningful, mutually beneficial partnership with local businesses, family-owned restaurants and individual community members that are struggling to stay financially relevant in the midst of a franchise-oriented food economy. In addition to providing the campus community with more affordable, nutritious and potentially culturally relevant food options, the University's liaisons with family-owned restaurants, food trucks and fruit stands could indeed bolster its commitments to diversity and community building in the eyes of students, administrators and other stakeholders.

Addressing Structural Barriers to Health & Wellness Resources

Though seemingly rigid and inflexible, structural barriers to health and wellness resources can be resolved in a number of creative and innovative ways. For instance, addressing students' concerns around the inability to find substantial parking near the gym and the lack of availability for courses that meet students' late night schedules could involve reducing the price of campus parking after regular hours or designating a certain amount of parking spaces for gym-goers. Moreover, if the campus shuttle had extended evening hours, students might be less reluctant to park in lots that are farther away from the gyms.

In order to address students' concerns regarding the availability of lounge and lactation spaces, UCLA could first consider reallocating existing rooms on campus. By engaging in this preliminary step, the institution can provide students with clean and comfortable rest spaces in an expedient manner. Secondarily, administrators and stakeholders could consider constructing new, additional spaces on campus whose primary purposes would be lactation, meditation, and relaxation.

Increase Capacity of Mental Health Services

Given that students had overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the quality of mental health services offered by CAPS, it would be beneficial for UCLA to focus any improvement efforts on simply increasing the capacity of CAPS services. Perhaps allocating additional funding to hiring more mental health staff, offering more therapy sessions led by graduate psychology candidates, or establishing additional partnerships with private practices in the surrounding area. Providing financial relief to students willing to pursue mental health services off campus could be a thoughtful consideration as well, particularly because student responses indicated that monetary constraints were a prevalent obstacle to maintaining health and wellness goals while in school. In addition, attending to the capacity of institutional staff and faculty to provide support to students who may be feeling challenged, but not in need of a clinical level of intervention is an important leverage point. Given the role that faculty in particular play in graduate students' lives, providing them with training on how to listen, provide support, and direct students to relevant resources could make a real difference.

Providing Identity-Based Mental Health Services

The emotional and psychological impacts of hostile campus racial climate should not be understated. In addition to addressing these climate issues on an institutional level, UCLA should simultaneously devote comprehensive resources for racially- and culturally relevant mental health services to minoritized student populations. For ideas on how to construct such services, the University can examine look to specialized wellness resource that are already in existence on campus, such as Yoga for Survivors. For support or insight into creating such programs, the University could consider partnering with student affinity groups or ethnic studies departments. Additionally, fellowships and postdoctoral funding could be offered for students interested in developing these types of diversity-oriented resources.

Increased Outreach for Health & Wellness Resources

Since a significant number of respondents were unaware of various health services available on campus, it follows that UCLA could increase its outreach efforts to make students more aware of the wealth of resources available here at UCLA. In addition to increasing outreach, campus administration could also work with student organizations to find innovative and attention-grabbing ways to inform students about resources, including social media pushes, Bruin Walk fliers, announcements on UCLA radio and podcast channels, and placing informative posters around campus. Faculty will also be important partners in this effort, as students mentioned the strong role they play in being able to provide support (or not) to students in helping to manage their challenges.

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