

The Student Voice

Subject: Mental Health

Listening Session: 11/17/2020

Prompt 1: *What are the biggest mental health issues facing students in your organization today?*

The most common answers to this question revolved around the COVID-19 pandemic and the stress it has caused. Depression, anxiety, and isolation were common threads. Directly related to school, the schedule during a pandemic, transitioning to remote school, and less engagement with instructors led to heightened anxiety about failing.

Overlapping stressors also appeared in a variety of forms. A general state of national turmoil was another theme that came through with mentions of political issues, LGBT rights, and the pandemic. One group acknowledged that its membership is statistically more likely to face mental health issues in the first place. Others mentioned the layers of cultural stigma around mental health. Another group spoke about the difficulties of balancing school with military duties and family commitments.

Prompt 2: *What programs or services do you feel are missing, inadequate or difficult to access on the NDSU campus?*

Most organizations recognized the Counseling Center as the primary point of service for mental health on campus, and were aware of the wide variety of services offered. There was some sense that services could be hard to access, and a sentiment was expressed that Zoom counseling sessions are “weird and uncomfortable.” They generally agreed that they wished there was more campus support for these programs to expand and provide both broader and more targeted support options.

Specific areas of targeted support included veterans, having a counselor trained specifically for LGBT or gender issues, and support groups specifically for LGBT students and students of color. One group also discussed the process for approval of ESA’s (emotional support animals), citing it as “very hostile” and stress inducing.

Prompt 3: *How do your academic responsibilities, classes, and interactions with instructors impact your mental health?*

Stress levels were the common theme in this question. In general students find instructors to be understanding and willing to work with them (especially this semester), particularly when there is good communication. One group felt it was easier to approach instructors virtually. Some instances of instructors who were less sensitive or just “didn’t care about mental health” did come through.

Several identity-specific stressors were brought forward. One group talked about stress surrounding the correct use of their pronouns in classes. Another group discussed that coming from African households, there is pressure to succeed and not a balance between mental health and school work. They also said it can be difficult to approach professors because of race differences. Many of the guard members that are active felt that they had to prove their military obligations as professors didn’t really believe that they were missing classes for a legitimate reason.

Prompt 4: *What stigmas do students in your organization experience around accessing mental health care?*

Many stigmas revolved around personal or cultural feelings of weakness. Some cultures still see mental health as something that either isn’t real or isn’t curable. One group talked about being told to “pray the issue away”, or being told that if you need mental health help you are crazy, not intelligent, or weak.

Other stigmas were more about feelings of safety and acceptance. One group noted that some, but not all counselors stated they were LGBT friendly in their bio’s, making them worried about meeting with someone who wouldn’t understand or them. One group talked about Black women being labeled as angry, hostile, or blunt when expressing feelings, and how young black men aren’t allowed to show weakness and are taught to bottle up their feelings. They worry that if they seek help, we will be judged or meet a counselor who is insensitive to these problems.

Prompt 5: *How do you think the University can best help improve mental health on campus?*

Listen to students’ experience, advocate for students, share experiences, ask questions and find new ways to get resources to students. Conversations like these are a huge step in the right direction to make sure student voices are heard. Groups would like to have more counselors trained specifically to serve their populations. They believe NDSU could promote resources and give more time and money to existing resources to help them handle the larger need.

Another common answer centered on space. One group reported that mental health improves when they are able to interact with other veterans. Other groups believe spaces for women and/or people of color are also necessary.