

Student Experiences Navigating Mental Health and Counseling Needs in a Rural Community

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ABSTRACT

This study applied a qualitative exploration of the experiences of university students navigating mental health and counseling needs within a rural county, Washington State community. The study uses data on mental health and counseling needs gathered from the local Community Health Assessment supplemental student focus groups (2023) and a survey of students living off campus (2021). The focus group (n=13) and survey data (n=372) provide insight into what barriers may constrain or facilitate students' ability to meet their mental health and counseling needs. This study will utilize a specified research design, framework, and methodology to better understand the gaps, limitations, and effects of mental health counseling needs among college students in rural areas.

KEYWORDS: Mental health, rural health, college students, counseling, community health assessment

Mental health characteristics and experiences of students attending a predominately rural undergraduate university is a phenomenon that has had limited attention in research and intervention. Research on rurality has mainly focused on the rural community members who are not connected to an institute or organization but rather the broader population of a rural setting. Due to this broad evaluation, the context on university's based in a rural setting are often overlooked and not included in the rural population.

Individuals in rural settings are at higher risk of adverse health outcomes due to compounding factors and influences such as geographic isolation, decreased availability of trained providers, and lower socioeconomic status that may present barriers to receiving mental health services (Morales et al., 2020). Recent studies have determined that mental health issues among college students have doubled over the past 5-10 years (Eisenberg, 2019), and there is a higher incidence of mental health concerns among undergraduate students than among the general public (Limone & Toto, 2022). As more light has been shed on the prevalence of mental health disorders among college students, terms such as "crisis" or "epidemic" have been utilized to describe the severity of mental health challenges among this particular population (Limone & Toto, 2022). With 18.5% of college students meeting the diagnostic criteria for major depressive disorder and 16.7%

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of students meeting the diagnostic criteria for generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), it is critical to further study the connection of mental health among college students, specifically in rural settings that have low capacity to provide vital support services to them (Duffy et al., 2019).

This study provided additional context on the barriers and facilitators of mental health service utilization among college students residing in rural areas and lent the student voice to current research. Specifically, this study sought to explore and present responses the following questions:

RQ1. How do students at CWU characterize their experience navigating mental health and counseling needs within the broader rural community?

RQ2. What barriers constrain or facilitate the ability to have their mental health needs met?

Literature Review

Mental health is the state of well-being in which an individual can healthily engage with life and community through coping with life stressors and upholding daily activities such as work (World Health Organization, n.d.). Mental illness is defined as emotional discomfort in reaction to life's difficulties and stressors (Huang et al., 2018). Common mental health problems have adverse impacts on all realms of a person's life, and social determinants of health can largely impact one's mental health risk (Huang et al., 2018). Common mental health disorders include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Huang et al., 2018). The prevalence of depression and suicide among U.S. college undergraduates is 21%, and 11.9% of students suffer from anxiety disorders (Sheldon et al., 2021; Pedrelli et al., 2014). Understanding the prevalence of mental health concerns and disorders among U.S. college students is essential to better-aligning services and supports that meet the needs of this population.

Furthermore, students who live in rural areas are less likely to have access to mental health and counseling services as rural areas traditionally have lower capacity and fewer providers per population compared to urban and metropolitan locations. The current study takes place in Kittitas County, Washington State, which has a 17 on the HRSA health provider shortage area (HPSA) provider priority measurement. The measurement assesses the priority of assignment providers, with 0 being no priority and 26 being high priority. Thus, understanding the experiences of students located in rural areas who have disproportionately higher risks of mental illness but fewer points of access to mental health services is a critical step in addressing gaps for the target population.

The prevalence of mental health concerns among the college student population indicates a growing public health concern (Liu et al., 2018). Research has shown that mental health issues and risks among college students have doubled over the past 5-10 years (Eisenberg, 2019). Terms such as “crisis” or “epidemic” have been used to define the prevalence of mental health challenges among the college student population (Limone & Toto, 2022). A study on the factors of mental health concerns among undergraduate students notes a higher incidence of mental health disorders and concerns among undergraduate students than in the overall population (Limone & Toto, 2022). The magnitude of college undergraduate students who experience mental health challenges is staggering; statistically, over half of the students attending American public universities are impaired by anxiety and depression (Limone & Toto, 2022). Research shows that suicide, anxiety, and depression rates are on the rise among the U.S. college student population (Liu et al., 2018). A study done on the prevalence of mental health found that one in four students reported having a diagnosis or treatment for a mental health disorder in the previous year (Liu et al., 2018). The 2015 American Health Association-Nation Health Assessment found that of the undergraduate survey participants, there was a rate of 24% suicidal ideation and about 9% rate of suicide attempts reported (Liu et al., 2018). A multinational study reported that 18.5% of college students who were

surveyed met the diagnostic criteria for major depressive disorder, and 16.7% of students met the diagnostic criteria for generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) (Duffy et al., 2019). In 2018, about 20% of university students in the U.S. reported being suicidal (Limone & Toto, 2022).

Research has found that 75% of people who suffer from a mental health disorder have had the first “onset” of symptoms by the age of twenty-five years old, often during a period of continuing education or career building (Huang et al., 2018). As reported by self-reported mental health data, symptom severity scales, and counseling centers, many studies have hypothesized the widespread occurrence of psychological issues among college students (Eleftheriades et al., 2020).

Due to college students being in the age range when mental health disorders commonly first present themselves, along with other factors such as experiencing life transitions and stressors, it is imperative that mental health research and intervention have an emphasis on the college student population (Huang et al., 2018). The change in living situations, relationships, and novel experiences increases the likelihood of mental health issues (Liu et al., 2018). These factors, along with late adolescence and early adulthood being the time when psychiatric conditions most commonly occur, the college years emulate an interval of increased vulnerability to mental health concerns (Liu et al., 2018). Mental health disorders among adolescents and young adults are linked to several adverse outcomes, including future mental health challenges, unemployment, decreased academic achievement, substance use, and increased risk of suicidal ideation (Duffy et al., 2019). The college period is the formative years in a young person's life when many life transitions and changes occur. Students face new challenges and often experience stress for the first time. These stress factors include finances, romantic and peer relationships, and health (Karyotaki et al., 2020). Academic variables, including studying and poor grade outcomes, stress of job opportunities, and studying and coursework in isolation, can produce stress and depression (Limone & Toto, 2022). The changes in environment and lifestyle when students first enter college expose students to increased susceptibility to risk-taking behaviors such as alcohol, drugs, and other substances that can increase the risk of or exacerbate mental health disorders (Limone & Toto, 2022). Along with the consideration of the environmental factors of college life, it must be noted that many students may enter college with preexisting mental health conditions; the compilation of these multiple factors can contribute to the high prevalence rate of mental health issues among the college student population (Cohen et al., 2020). Some researchers believe that the reasons for rising mental health disparities among this population can be attributed to the growth in digital media use, which can cause other mental health factors, such as impacting sleep (Eisenberg, 2019). As the college's student population continues to be acknowledged as a vulnerable population to mental health issues, mental health services and resources must be provided (Cohen et al., 2020). Barriers to college students seeking mental health care can span many areas of a student's life, including personal, sociocultural, and institutional levels (Dunley & Papadopoulos, 2019). Due to the diverse age group of college students, the rise in mental health disparities could be argued that the population is engaging in help-seeking behaviors that may not have been practiced in the past (Eisenberg, 2019). There is some evidence that college students are more likely to seek out help due to the escalation in mental health promotion and education. Still, although there may be a rise in mental health awareness, the research shows that the continuation of mental health concerns reported among the college student population is increasing (Eisenberg, 2019). While there is a rising rate and awareness of the prevalence of mental health challenges among the college student population, research that focuses on university mental health services is limited (Liu et al., 2018). University counseling services have reported a rise in caseloads, finding that more students are seeking help for mental health challenges (Duffy et al., 2019). The number of students utilizing university counseling services has continued to grow; the Healthy Minds Study found that in 2017, 11.8% of students engaged in college counseling services (Cohen et al., 2020). In recent years,

university counseling centers have not been able to meet the growing need for services (Cohen et al., 2020). Students have reported concern about the gaps in counseling services, which include a lack of providers and lengthy waitlists (Cohen et al., 2020). The gap in meeting the rising demand for services is leaving students without support, increasing the risk of more severe adverse mental health outcomes. The positives and difficulties of mental health at the population level are that numerous adaptations and variations can be implemented effectively (Eisenberg, 2019). Mental health is in an extensive range, meaning there are optimal chances to bolster access to care and take preventable measures (Eisenberg, 2019). Due to the vast spectrum of mental health, college campuses must initiate a comprehensive approach to student mental health services and resources (Eisenberg, 2019). Studies have noted that mental health interventions must be specifically geared toward college students, as some of the mental health treatments may not align with all factors of the college student lifestyle (Barnett et al., 2021). The increased proportion of numerous stress factors in the student population and the impacts of these factors have brought to light the cruciality of further research and intervention on mental health support among the college student population to better shield students against susceptible mental health challenges (Liu et al., 2018).

A mixed methods study focusing on U.S. college student counseling needs, conducting co-design workshops, and interviews found that students' main concerns regarding mental health needs were barriers to accessing services (Cohen et al., 2020). In one question asking about the location of campus counseling services, students stated that the location of the counseling services was a large barrier; it was found that location was a barrier regardless of whether the university was in an urban or rural setting, but obstacles due to the location were especially voiced among students attending rural colleges (Cohen et al., 2020). In the study interviews, students also stated that many of their peers were unaware of the location of the campus counseling services (Cohen et al., 2020). It is difficult to find a single effective intervention due to costs, time, and low levels of self-efficacy regarding mental health (Limone & Toto, 2022). Mental health stigma accounts for a major barrier to help-seeking among university students. In studies, student participants have stated fears of embarrassment linked to help-seeking due to being perceived as incapable of contending with social and academic stressors on their own (Eleftheriades et al., 2020). Researchers have indicated that university students residing in rural or smaller town locations perhaps perceive a higher social risk of help-seeking, attributed to the decreased anonymity of rural populations (Eleftheriades et al., 2020). In an investigation conducted by Eisenberg, Golberstein, and Gollust, 20% of students reported fears of how their peers would perceive them as a reason not to pursue help, 10% of students worried that treatment would be visible on their academic records, and 9% of students fear gaps in privacy leading to family becoming aware of treatment (Eleftheriades et al., 2020). The study also found that 32% of students believed that their mental health issues or concerns would go away with time without intervention, 51% of students were aware of their mental health issues but did not seek help due to an ideology of stress being an ordinary part of college life, both of these statements may demonstrate the need to bolster mental health awareness and education among the college student population (Eleftheriades et al., 2020). The study noted a crucial aspect of mental health stigma among college students; it was discovered that most of the mental health stigma was self-perspective rather than peer perception of help-seeking; this phenomenon could be linked to underreported mental health rates (Eleftheriades et al., 2020). Understanding self-stigma could further strengthen college mental health service outreach and education efforts. Such mental health interventions, including education and mindfulness training, such as mindfulness-based therapy, yoga, and peer-based groups, have indicated lower rates of anxiety, depression, and mental health stigma among college students (Cohen et al., 2020). Due to the increased prevalence of mental health disorders and concerns among the college student population, many universities have expanded their health services to include mental health materials focusing on recognizing

symptoms and awareness, as well as bolstering referral and screening resources (Kang et al., 2021). Approaches such as campus counseling services, preventative programs, and educational courses may prove to be successful as these strategies continue (Eisenberg, 2019). It is also essential to consider the relationships of college students, as this relationship may be an avenue for bolstering caring connections and positive peer influence (Eisenberg, 2019).

The majority of mental health services have a history of being face-to-face; the emergence of digital mental health services and supplemental interventions have shown to be successful in mitigating mental health needs among college students (Cohen et al., 2020). Digital mental health counseling, or telemental health (TMH), continues to rise in popularity as it has been shown to decrease waitlists and location barriers for college students (Hadler et al., 2021). Although there are some perceived advantages to TMH, some students prefer face-to-face services due to feelings of awkwardness from the lack of personability and privacy concerns (Hadler et al., 2021). An online survey of 662 college students in Indiana reported that 68% of participants preferred face-to-face mental health care, with only 17% indicating favor of online chat, an even smaller number of students preferring video or phone calls (Hadler et al., 2021). In an additional survey of 500 students, 93% expressed favor for face-to-face mental health counseling (Hadler et al., 2021). Also, it must be noted that the utilization of TMH does not negate the factor of mental health stigma, which is a barrier to seeking care, including TMH services and care (Hadler et al., 2021). The mental health resources and services provided through university frameworks may not serve students who need further counseling services and resources or have the capacity to fill gaps in diverse interventions.

Significance of the Study

As previous research has shown, rural communities experience a low capacity and worsening gaps in care overall. It is also essential to consider the mental health outcomes compared to outcomes in urban settings. Mental health prevalence in rural settings is often far worse, with suicide rates of 50% compared to rates of 31% in urban populations (RHI, 2022). Many factors contribute to these rates, including the access to mental health services and the prevalence of mental health stigma in rural communities. Another critical component of the mental health disparities among college students residing in rural settings is the COVID-19 pandemic. It is crucial to consider the pandemic's impacts on the rural college student population. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students were in social and academic isolation for an extended period; studies have indicated a possible correlation between the pandemic period and the exacerbation of the prevalence of depression and other mental health concerns (Limone & Toto, 2022). It is important to note that although longer-term nuance in mental health concerns among college students has existed, the increased prevalence of help-seeking and reported mental health disorders among the college student population has grown (Duffy et al., 2019). Evaluation of trends and the contributing factors of mental health concerns among rural college students is significant to the overall student population's health and the allocation of further mental health resources to rural communities. The study focused on understanding factors related to college students accessing mental health counseling services in the rural community.

Methodology

This study involved the analysis of two sets of qualitative data to provide a deeper understanding of the student experience navigating mental health needs in a rural-based university setting. Using traditional qualitative case study methods, the study treated the student population

at the target university as a single, bounded case (Creswell, 1998). The study utilized the bounded system drawing on the multiple data sources and relied on two separate studies, one being a set of survey data and the other a focus group.

Triangulation of qualitative data from an online survey of on-campus residential students and focus groups of students who live off campus was conducted to combine multiple data sources for a rich contextualization of these experiences in mental health service utilization. The study's foundation in case study methodology provided a pivotal understanding of the focus group and survey data by utilizing the case themes that occur (Creswell, 1998). The case study methodology was the best fit for the aim of this study as it supports an analysis of multiple data sources that will allow the investigator to explore a deeper understanding of the target population's collective experiences. The integration of both the survey and focus groups provided a more diverse range to draw meaning and conclusions from the emergence of key themes that yielded targeted recommendations for intervention and population health improvement action.

Participants and Sampling: Survey

This study utilized the results of a 2021 survey of students residing on campus at a rural based, primarily undergraduate institution in Washington State. The survey aimed to understand the impact of COVID-19 on mental health experiences, including barriers to access and coping strategies of students living in residence halls and other on-campus living arrangements (Writer et al., 2022). Although the survey focused on the specific timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic and the particular impacts on mental health from the pandemic, these targeted questions still provided value to the study due to the overall increase of mental health concerns among college students in recent years (Duffy et al., 2019). Participants were eligible for the study if they resided in residence halls or on-campus apartments, and students had to be enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate program (Writer et al., 2022). It should also be noted that the former survey effort only focused on students living on campus, meaning either residing in residence halls or on-campus housing. In contrast, this study focused on all students on and off-campus living. A population of 1,525 respondents was accounted for, and approximately 372 respondents met the inclusion criteria and had sufficient qualitative responses for analysis; this represents the final sample for this data set (n=372) (Writer et al., 2022). From January to March 2021, participants were recruited for the study via emails sent out by the university's Housing and Residence life administrators, which introduced them to the details of the study. The survey was administered through the online application Qualtrics, containing 37 questions that ranged across four disciplines (Writer et al., 2022). These four themes included coping strategies, participants' demographics, self-reported mental health status, and supports and barriers to managing mental health status (Writer et al., 2022). Participants' responses were measured utilizing a Likert scale; the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) was employed for measuring the student's self-reported emotional and mental status on a 3-point Likert Scale consisting of "Not at all" to "Nearly every day," as well as the open text survey questions (Writer et al., 2022). The design of the survey questions prompts participants to be explicit about their perceptions and experiences with mental health concerns. The survey's four domains align the 'students' experiences navigating mental health and counseling needs within a rural-based community' study through the thematic examination of the characteristics of the population at risk.

Participants and Sampling: Focus Groups

In addition, this study used qualitative data from a 2023 effort to gather focus group data on student experiences from those who reside off-campus in community settings. Three focus groups were conducted in English by a team of two researchers over three days. The focus group data was audio recorded, de-identified, and transcribed for analysis, which was conducted by a team of faculty and student researchers. Focus group participants were eligible if they were students enrolled at the institution for at least one full academic year if they were able to participate in English, and if they were currently living off campus. At the end of the focus group, each participant was awarded a \$50 gift card for contributing and participating in the focus group. The focus groups were audio recorded and de-identified; the focus groups were also transcribed for coding purposes. The final sample for this data set was (n=13).

Instrumentation: Survey

The 2021 survey's purpose was to collect information regarding the mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students living on campus. The survey provided insight into the mental experiences of university students, which may not solely be correlated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Four open-text questions were included in the survey instrument. Respondents were asked to report their free responses to the following items:

- In your own words, how would you say you've been managing your mental health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Is there anything that has made managing your mental health particularly hard at this rural based, primarily undergraduate university?
- Is there anything that has been particularly helpful at this rural based, primarily undergraduate university with managing your mental health?
- What coping strategies or supports do you wish you had?

Instrumentation: Focus Group

The three 2023 focus groups intended to provide supplemental information to a county health assessment effort by including specific data on the university student population. The three 2023 focus groups provided essential backing and insight into the experiences of students' access to mental health counseling in the local rural community. The themes that arose in the focus group dialogue align with the study's methodology by supporting themes in inquiring about students' experiences in the utilization of on-campus and community mental health services. For this study, only focus group questions referencing mental health will be analyzed.

Data Analysis Method

The study uses the triangulation of multiple qualitative data sources across different groups of participants within the same target population to enhance the validity and deepen the rigor of its qualitative approach (Creswell & Miller, 2000). For the purposes of the analysis, both survey data (open-text responses) and focus group data (transcriptions) were placed into the same data set and analyzed using both inductive and deductive coding techniques to identify key themes. First, open coding was used to describe how university students characterize their own experiences navigating mental health in the context of a rural environment. Simultaneously, a deductive strategy was used to identify barriers and facilitators of mental health service utilization across the major domains of the Social Ecological Model, such as individual, interpersonal, organizational, policy, and societal

factors that might inhibit or support a student to get their mental health needs met (Devooght, 2023). A primary coder (SC) conducted the analysis, and then a secondary coder (LS) provided additional interpretations of the data and introduced new interpretations to the analysis. The secondary coder serves as a key to preventing incorrect contextualization of the data that can occur through the biases of the first coder.

Secondary interpretation of the contributing factors bolstered the study's relevance and meaning. The study provided an analysis of data sets that support a deeper understanding of the barriers and facilitators that college students face when exploring mental health counseling needs in their rural communities.

Research Ethics and Bias Control

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Results

Facilitators and barriers based on individual and societal factors were identified from the data. However, many of the themes highlighted in the study established that most findings swayed in the way of being barriers to students' mental health seeking in the rural community. The analysis found that students' experiences interacting with and perceptions of the rural community on all levels were a large barrier to their interest, trust, and engagement in seeking out mental health counseling services within the rural community.

The 2023 focus group responses provided evidence of a larger need for focus on student mental health and counseling services. The student participants voiced their experiences, highlighting information regarding rural university college students' mental health, such as perception, capacity, limitations, and needs. The analysis provided a further understanding of the gaps, characteristics, and factors at play that may impede or bolster rural-based university students' counseling seeking and receivability.

The 2021 survey questions corresponded with the variables in the social-ecological model framework by providing context to themes that may be useful for future implications (Bronfenbrenner 1970). The survey examines the characteristics of the population at risk through the design of the questions that the student answered based on their perceptions and experiences with mental health concerns. Questions regarding students' coping strategies allowed this study to gain insight into students' mental health experiences and perceptions as well as implications for future intervention. The prompts sought to understand the students' self-efficacy and experiences of managing hardships in life.

Covid -19 Pandemic Factors

One large aspect of the 2021 survey is the reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, in which students addressed their mental health experiences and coping strategies within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we cannot ignore the presence of a global pandemic and the

impacts that it has had on college student's mental health, as we can see in their responses, COVID-19 brought to light the lack of accessible mental health services. It exacerbated the need for mental health counseling for the college student population. Students' clear indication of mental health decline during the pandemic, "*COVID-19 has had a tremendous impact on my mental health. Although I was in therapy and on medication before the pandemic, the pandemic has caused many issues to progress negatively where I had previously made progress*".

Also, COVID-19 might have been an instance where mental health among the college student population was more widely considered and considered by health professionals than it had been in the past, prior to the pandemic. Students' clear indication of mental health decline during the pandemic can have lasting effects. The COVID-related policies at university, state, and federal levels are noted as having residual effects on students' mental health as their responses indicate that the pandemic has impacted their perception of mental health services in terms of support, costs, and helpfulness. The pause in mental health services or changes in service structure has remained altered, leaving students confused about how university and community mental health services operate, which is a deterrent to accessing mental health counseling.

Academic Factors

The study's findings pinpointed the impacts of academics on students' mental health. Student responses in both the 2021 survey and the 2023 focus group indicated that academics, including classes, coursework, and faculty, impacted their mental health. In some cases, this was seen as a supportive resource for student mental health, such as coping through routine and coursework. Still, for others, the academic stressors of grades, faculty interactions, and course load had negative impacts on students' mental health status as well as their experiences. This factor of academic stress in a student's life was present in student responses regarding questions asking about coping, such as:

"I have not really. School takes up almost all my time, but I have also been really struggling with focusing on school at the same time. Online exams and quizzes have been giving me severe anxiety that I do not know how to cope with"

-Survey participant

Rural Community Factors

The analysis found that students had strong perceptions of the rural community, impacting their interaction and immersion into the community. Many of the themes and factors discussed in the analysis highlighted students' experiences and beliefs about the rural population and setting, as well as those of community members. Student state

"... I feel safer on campus than off campus...I'm transgender, so I feel safer on campus because I feel that there are more resources for me, but off campus, I feel all the stares I'm getting from people, and I just don't feel comfortable wearing certain things around town. I'm from a more diverse area, and it's just easier to be there than here". -Focus group participant

The evaluation provided a deeper comprehension of the students' perceptions of mental health and mental health access in rural society, finding that students experience a lack of trust in the rural community and its systems related to mental health.

Community Healthcare and Resource

The findings indicated that students' beliefs around any healthcare accessibility in the community heavily impact the facilitators or barriers in students seeking out mental health counseling in the community. Although the 2021 survey was mainly centered on mental health regarding COVID-19, due to the question's open-text nature, the analysis found that although it provided the opportunity to address community resources, there was a significant lack of acknowledgment of community services among participants:

“I think that mental health in a community like this, while it is accessible to get online therapy and things like that, I think it’s great, but I have yet to hear of a therapist in town that is not through the school that is not online. So, like an actual therapist. There probably are, and I just don’t know of them, but with the demographics of this town, there are a lot of people who might not be able to afford therapy because it’s a small town with a low minimum wage. On campus, that’s great, and there’s tons of options but off campus, there’s room for improvement with increasing accessibility for people who can’t use university resources.”-Focus group participant

Mental Health Services

The study’s themes often provide insight into the comparison between community mental health services and university services; this comparison was critical to analyze as a part of the study. The data clearly provided insights into students' experiences and perceptions of the facilitators and barriers to seeking mental health counseling in the rural community. Students' perceptions of the local community healthcare found that the student's needs may not be met in the community:

“When you go into town for healthcare needs, you might be treated differently. I think the needs of the younger population are harder to address in town, whereas on campus you can get what you need... Trying to stay up to date on HPV trio shots, that’s not really offered in Ellensburg, you have to get it at the campus clinic because the population that needs it is here. There are different needs in the student population from what’s in town”- Focus group participant

The study found that although students had sufficient mental health recognition, their coping strategies and awareness of community mental health services were lacking. The themes that emerged in the study indicate that there are numerous factors that are barriers or facilitators to students seeking mental health counseling services in the community. These factors are mainly based on students' experiences with university resources and their perceptions of the rural community.

Results Summary

The study’s framework, methods, analysis, and findings provide valuable examination and understanding that align with answering the research questions. The study met its aim by exploring the experiences and perceptions of college students navigating their mental health counseling needs in the broader rural community and understanding how students navigate getting their mental health needs met. The study's findings and concepts indicate the need for program implementation

and further research that bolsters mental health well-being among the rural college student population. This study is a fruitful contribution to research and knowledge of mental health among rural based college students.

Discussion of Findings

Themes were used to guide the study direction as they were categorized under a social-ecological model (SEM) level. In the study, multiple themes were assigned to several levels of the SEM, as many of the themes crossed over in context. The themes addressed multifaceted factors that were critical to examine among various SEM levels. The research felt it was important to address all aspects of each theme by considering and applying the theme to all relevant and appropriate SEM levels.

The study found that many themes were facilitators and barriers based on individual and societal factors. However, many of the themes highlighted in the study established that most findings swayed in the way of being barriers to students' mental health seeking in the rural community. The analysis found that students' experiences interacting with, and perceptions of the rural community on all levels were a large barrier to their interest, trust, and engagement in seeking out mental health counseling services within the rural community.

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One large aspect of the 2021 survey is the reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, in which students addressed their mental health experiences and coping strategies within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we cannot ignore the presence of a global pandemic and the impacts that it has had on college student's mental health, as we can see in their responses, COVID-19 brought to light the lack of accessible mental health services. It exacerbated the need for mental health counseling for the college student population. Also, COVID-19 might have been an instance where mental health among the college student population was more widely taken into account and considered by health professionals than it had been in the past, prior to the pandemic. Students' clear indication of mental health decline during the pandemic can have lasting effects. The COVID-related policies at university, state, and federal levels are noted as having residual effects on students' mental health as their responses indicate that the pandemic has impacted their perception of mental health services in terms of support, costs, and helpfulness. The pause in mental health services or changes in service structure has remained altered, leaving students confused about how university and community mental health services operate, which is a deterrent to accessing mental health counseling.

The study's findings pinpointed the impacts of academics on students' mental health. Student responses in both the 2021 survey and the 2023 focus group indicated that academics, including classes, coursework, and faculty, impacted their mental health. In some cases, this was seen as a supportive resource for student mental health, such as coping through routine and coursework. Still, for others, the academic stressors of grades, faculty interactions, and course load had negative impacts on students' mental health status as well as their experiences.

The analysis found that students had strong perceptions of the rural community, impacting their interaction and immersion into the community. Many of the themes and factors discussed in the analysis highlighted students' experiences and beliefs about the rural population and setting, as well as those of community members. The evaluation provided a deeper comprehension of the students' perceptions of mental health and mental health access in rural society, finding that students experience a lack of trust in the rural community and its systems related to mental health.

The findings indicated that students' beliefs around any healthcare accessibility in the community heavily impact the facilitators or barriers in students seeking out mental health counseling in the community. Although the 2021 survey was mainly centered on mental health regarding COVID-19, due to the question's open-text nature, the analysis found that although it provided the opportunity to address community resources, there was a significant lack of acknowledgment of community services among participants.

The study's themes often provide insight into the comparison between community mental health services and university services; this comparison was critical to analyze as a part of the study. The data clearly provided insights into students' experiences and perceptions of the facilitators and barriers to seeking mental health counseling in the rural community.

The study found that although students had sufficient mental health recognition, their coping strategies and awareness of community mental health services were lacking. The themes that emerged in the study indicate that there are numerous factors that are barriers or facilitators to students seeking mental health counseling services in the community. These factors are mainly based on students' experiences with university resources and their perceptions of the rural community.

Limitations of Study

As the first research was conducting the initial coding phase, bracketing was performed to take accountability for limitations, biases, and contextual misinterpretations. The bracketing process provided the first researchers with insight into their own personal biases, limitations of the study, and concepts that arose during the coding process. The limitations of the study include the possible biases that emerged as both the first and second researchers are not immune to personal biases or interpretations of data. Biases of personal interpretations of the measurement of 'good' or 'bad' mental health statutes and where the responses fell based on the first researcher's interpretation of the participant's wording. To mitigate as much personal bias as possible, the second coder was utilized to analyze themes and social-ecological level categorization and point out possible biases in the coding process.

The themes have limitations due to the nature of the study. The coding process found large, broad themes from the participant responses, which were then assigned to an SEM level. Due to the categorizing of themes, some smaller themes may have been missed, and some responses may not have been accounted for in the themes.

The study acknowledges that due to the survey's specified targeted questions, the context of mental health help-seeking in the community did not have the opportunity to be highlighted among participant responses. Although the survey was highly specific, the student participant

responses still provided constructive and useful descriptions of students' mental health experiences within a rural university setting. The specificity of the questions in the survey may have led to missing context among student responses regarding mental health resources other than on campus due to the focus of the survey. Although the limitations of the survey questions may have caused participant responses to be more campus-oriented in framing, the open-text questions provided students the ability to account for various coping strategies, experiences, and perceptions regarding their mental health.

Implications for Practice

The study findings provide insightful context that can contribute to future implications in practice. The findings indicate the need for bolstering mental health systems on university, community, and societal levels. The findings imply that university systems may lack supportive resources as well as a lack of connection between the university and the rural community. The university systems contribute largely to students' experience and perceptions of seeking out mental health counseling services in the community due the university system not providing a link to outside campus services in the community. The university's supportive systems for students can be improved by providing a streamlined referral process to community mental health services. The university would create a system that provides direct information or referrals to community mental health counseling services; this would bolster students' options in care as well as access to additional care services if university waitlists are long or the care does not fit the student's needs.

It is crucial that rural universities bridge the gap between the community and campus through partnering, promoting, and supporting community services. This critical connection between the university and the community will foster students seeking mental health counseling services in the community. Bridging the gap between campus and community can be implemented in a variety of ways, specifically for mental health; creating partnerships with community mental health providers is key. These partnerships can support students' experiences and beliefs that the community and university are aligned on age-appropriate, inclusive, and accessible care options. University partnerships and the promotion of community services can also influence students' perceptions of the rural community and make them feel safer when navigating the community. The relationship between the university and the rural community, over time, can alter students' perceptions and even experiences in the rural community; as this connection strengthens, students may experience a less stark divide between the community and more support in the community.

Along with the increase in university-community connections, community services may need to take action to adapt to the student population. This adaption includes mental health providers that represent diversity and inclusivity, as well as a variety of mental health counseling types and care that are suited for a student's life. Community mental health services and mental health providers can undergo training in nuanced counseling methods as well as age-appropriate care to ensure that the student population is receiving quality care. It is also important that community mental health services advocate for themselves at university events and fundraisers to widen the opportunities to educate students on the available services in the community. The study findings provided an understanding of the direction of possible effective implementations that will facilitate students seeking out mental healthcare in the rural community.

Future Research

The study's findings provide strong implications for important future research that can bolster further understanding regarding aspects of rural college student experiences pertaining to

their mental health status and perceptions. Future research on the experiences of rural college students is key as this age group is not widely considered as a part of the rural population. Additional research on students' mental health experiences and perceptions in a rural setting is crucial, as there is currently limited data, this focus should be more widely explored as it is key to bolstering the health and well-being of the target population.

Another aspect that should be explored is evaluating the impact of student age on access to, and quality of mental health counseling services in a rural community. Future research can also investigate how college students' age impacts their care in a rural community, including students' experiences in the community and their perceptions of the community. Further investigation can address whether student age impacts the quality of care and mental health status of students attending a rural-based university. This study highlighted that students identify strongly with their age and see it as an outlier in receiving mental health care in the community. College students' average age range is an important aspect to consider in mental health research, as this is a specified population that may experience life and mental health differently than those not in a college setting, especially in a rural college setting.

An additional avenue for future research is the impact of university academics on students' mental health status. The study findings highlighted the impacts of academic stressors on students' overall mental health experiences. Further investigation addressing university academic systems' role in student mental health status and experiences is crucial. Academics are a major aspect of a college student's life; further mental health research evaluating academic factors will shed light on the university's education system's impacts on student mental health. Further research in many areas related to this study is critical in providing further nuance and knowledge into the mental health of college students in rural settings.

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