Creating a Caring Community: The SJSU Mental Health Ambassadors Program

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The Background
1. SJSU Students

• Highly diverse:
  – e.g.: > 100 languages used everyday at campus.

• Most = Commuters.

• Average age = 26.

• 1st Generation.

• Most need to work → volunteering = luxury.

• Therapy = ?!*@#$^@$&*??
2. SJSU CS’s Challenge

• Providing ethical and socially and culturally responsive services while resources are limited:
  – Social Justice.
  – Non-traditional services.
The Mental Health Ambassador (MHA) Program
MHA Program

- Created in Fall 2006.
- Goals:
  - Improve the psychological wellbeing of the SJSU students and the university community.
  - A Win-Win-Win solution for students, the university, and the Counseling Services.
MHA Program: The Ambassadors

• All students are welcomed – complete the application form and go through an interview.

• Main goal = Spreading the words, bridging, “Ambassading.” MHAs are different from “peer counselors” or “peer educators.”

• Requirements for MHAs:
  – Complete training:
    – One-day Ambassador training + Weekly group meeting + monthly individual meeting.
    – Individual Educational Counseling.
  – Complete semi-structured responsibilities:
    – 4 Activities + 1 Final project.
    – Positive Impact Log.
MHA Program: Rationales

- Empirically supported ingredients for retention and academic success:
  - Sense of community and involvement.
  - Strong social support.
  - Mentors and/or role models.
  - Good academic skills and knowledge. (Lotkowski et al., 2004; “What Works in Student Retention” by ACT, 2004)
  - Cognitive map for success. (Torres, 2006)
  - Psychological and educational counseling. (Sharkin, 2004)
  - High academic self-efficacy. (Robbins et al., 2004; Close et al., 2008)
  - Informal support network. (Chiang et al., 2004)
MHA Program: The Handbook

• A 76-page training manual & a reference for the Ambassadors.

• A collection of analogies, accurate mental health knowledge, and tools:
  – For general public.
  – Many pages are designed to stand-alone handouts.
Table 2. Differences between various mental health professionals in California.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Psychiatrist</th>
<th>Clinical Psychologist</th>
<th>MFT</th>
<th>LCSW</th>
<th>“psychotherapist”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regulated by California government?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Need to pass licensing exams?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minimal degree required?</td>
<td>M.D.</td>
<td>Ph. D. or Psy.D.</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide psychotherapy?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prescribe medications?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Order medical Tests</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethics Standards to follow?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Outcomes
Outcome: Ambassadors Activities

- Presentations (class, conference, faculty meetings).
- Interactions w/ students, professors, department heads.
- “Chalking.” Tabling.
- Small research projects.
- Flyers, bookmarks, gifts, etc.
- Multi-language and culturally responsive services.
- Relayed students’ and faculty’s needs and voices; being counseling Services’ “ears, eyes, and mouths.”
- Significant increase in students “taking” students to CS.
Outcome: Ambassadors’ Growth

- Based on anonymous summative evaluations, the program reportedly increased Ambassadors’:
  - Confident.
  - Communication skills
  - Sense of belonging/connection to the university.
  - Career clarity.
  - Skills in stress, time, and emotion management.
  - Academic and interpersonal success skills.
Outcome: Campus Reactions

• “I am convinced that the type of program...is the only way change can happen in our culture to improve mental health awareness and care.”

• Psychology department printed and distributed the Handbook to all faculty members.

• Other agencies/departments started “attaching” themselves to the MHA program or starting their own Ambassadors.