

PSYDEKICK: REDUCING THE STIGMA OF MENTAL HEALTH ON ECU'S CAMPUS  
THROUGH THE CREATION OF A PEER EDUCATION PROGRAM

by

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## Table of Contents

|                                  |    |
|----------------------------------|----|
| Abstract.....                    | 3  |
| Introduction.....                | 4  |
| Honors 2000 and Honors 3000..... | 5  |
| Honors 4500 and Honors 4550..... | 9  |
| Methods.....                     | 12 |
| Executive Board Meetings.....    | 12 |
| Campus-Wide Tabling Events.....  | 12 |
| Organization Meetings.....       | 13 |
| Results.....                     | 14 |
| Individual Involvement.....      | 15 |
| Conclusion.....                  | 17 |
| References.....                  | 18 |

## **Abstract**

Mental health issues have become a growing concern among all colleges and universities within the nation. There is a lack of education and resources on these topics, which fuels the growing issue of mental health illnesses among college students. According to a survey administered by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 75% of their students were unaware of the university's counseling services and 92% claimed to be uneducated on mental health prevention (Catanzarite & Robinson, 2013). Psydekick was created on ECU's campus to provide students with valuable information on ways to cope with the six mental illnesses seen primarily among ECU students: anxiety, depression, stress management, suicide prevention, eating disorders, and substance abuse. As an acting partner with the Counseling Center, the focus of this organization was on the advocacy and peer education of mental health on campus. Through extensive research on the topic of peer education, it was found that the "social learning theory" supported that peers learn best from one another within a specific social context and results in more behavior change (Catanzarite & Robinson, 2013). Psydekick would function as a source of outreach to educate students on different ways to cope with these prevalent mental health issues while attending ECU. When individuals are given accurate information, they can successfully empower and encourage positive behavior change among their peers (Catanzarite & Robinson, 2013). Members in the organization planned to complete national peer education training through a program called BACCHUS to become certified as peer educators, as well as complete training provided by the Counseling Center on the six special topics of mental health. Throughout this process, Psydekick was successful in providing information and research on the importance peer education holds in the area of mental health, which has further led to a professionalized peer education program being formed in direct connection to the Counseling Center.

## **Introduction**

The focus of our project was to reduce the stigma of mental health across ECU's campus by providing students with the correct coping mechanisms, information, and resources needed. This would be done through the potential formation of a peer education program linked directly to the Counseling Center, which would be known as "Psydekick". As research has shown, peer education has produced a major impact on other students across campuses. A study conducted by Patalay et al. (2017) found that the formation of a peer education group focusing on mental health, entitled "OpenMinds," had significant positive effects on mental health literacy among college students. The impact that a peer education program for mental health has on university students includes "improvements in disorder identification, confidence in identification, and helping other's attitudes towards mental health illnesses" (Patalay et al., 2017). Psydekick acted as an organization that was formed to provide valuable information on mental health illnesses that would effectively benefit in all of these areas. The mission of other successful peer education programs at other universities have established the main goals to be (1) raise awareness of mental disorders; (2) reduce the stigma of mental health disorders through the use of counseling services; (3) promoting strategies to coping with mental health disorders; and (4) connecting students to resources and counseling services (Catanzarite & Robinson, 2013). With all of these goals in mind, Psydekick strived to emphasize that a program of this impact was necessary at ECU and would benefit the vast majority of the student population. Regular meetings with the Counseling Center were held to plan for future interactions with both them and on campus, and numerous of tabling events were completed to recruit members to educate on the stigma of mental health. All of the efforts among the team members resulted in the realization within the Counseling Center that a program of this caliber was necessary for the benefit of ECU's students.

## **Honors 2000 and Honors 3000**

This project was started in the Fall of 2018 in the HNRS 2000 instructional class. We were tasked with creating a wicked problem using human-centered design. A wicked problem is one that is nearly impossible to solve due to the fluidity of the subject. Problems and issues constantly arise that require changes in the path taken towards a solution. The wicked problem we chose to tackle was mental health on college campuses, specifically ECU's campus. Throughout the Fall 2018 semester, several interviews were conducted, and research was compiled to solve this wicked problem. At the conclusion of the semester, we were able to present possible solutions to the increasing issue of mental health on ECU's campus.

Over the course of HNRS 2000, nearly 30 interviews were completed. The interviews consisted of student opinion and current knowledge on the Counseling Center. Through the interviews, we learned that many students did not know where the Counseling Center was on campus, or what they offered. Most students knew that a Counseling Center existed but didn't know how to go about making an appointment. Through our interviews we also learned from students that had been to the Counseling Center, that appointments available were scarce, and were extremely backed up. Aside from this issue, students also expressed fear of the social stigma surrounding mental health.

Initially we had many solutions to the wicked problem. We talked about running a phone line where students could call in and receive help, and in-person anonymous talk sessions. The main points we knew had to be addressed was the anonymity of the communication as well as the legality of the solutions.

As we entered HNRS 3000, we had the possible solutions identified and began investigating which would be the best route to take. Many of the initial interviews we conducted were from other schools that had implemented similar organizations on their campus. One key interview that was conducted was with Suzanne Hunt, the head of Wake Forest University's P.E.E.R.S program at the time. She was able to give a vast amount of information regarding how their program was set up and what they specifically did to benefit their university. One of the key points she brought up was how essential it was to contact the Counseling Center and form a partnership to best benefit their needs. Also, she mentioned how essential it was to identify key problems that were prevalent on our campus that needed to be addressed. She was unsure about our implementation of a peer mental health hotline as it gave rise to several legal issues and proceeded to suggest in-person counseling rather than on the phone.

As we began to investigate our solutions further, we consulted the honors 4500 group from the year before us to get answers on what they had already investigated. The initial project had been "sponsored" therefore, we were tasked with taking what the previous group had researched and added on to it to make a more sustainable, effective solution to our common wicked problem. Two members of our HNRS 2000 group met with Danielle St. Onge, one of the current founders of the organization "Psydekick" on ECU's campus, to see the progress they had made and what was needed to better the current solution that they had created.

At this interview, we discussed the legality of peer counseling and were again redirected towards peer education rather than peer counseling. The previous group informed us that the route of peer counseling had led them down too many roads of legal issues that could not be passed through given our credentials as college students. Therefore, we shifted gears and began researching peer education and how this could be implemented into creating more stability for

the Counseling Center as well as the mental health crisis that is currently overtaking ECU's campus. This interview led to the connection with a counselor at the Counseling Center, Maya Pittman, who was taking the lead on the project's implementation.

Maya Pittman was able to help throughout the semester, and in future semesters, with planning and supplies. We were able to participate in several events that we would not have been able to participate in if we had not made this connection. We were given several hand-outs to give to students to raise awareness of the Counseling Center as well as inform them about strategies to tackle mental health.

The HNRS 4500 group also directed our attention towards the need for marketing of mental health and the Counseling Center. This led us to several interviews with marketing Professors at ECU including Dr. William Rowe and Dr. Christine Kowalczyk. They informed us of different strategies to catch the attention of students on campus. This included the use of durable fliers with color and simple designs to get across information. They also suggested the creation of a university-approved logo to represent the organization. We incorporated this knowledge of marketing techniques as we began to run tabling events to advertise for Psydekick.

Another key interview that was conducted in HNRS 3000 was with a graphic design professor, Dr. Craig Malmrose. This interview allowed us to get connected with the graphic design school at ECU and become more educated on what a good logo consisted of. He pointed us towards the university guidelines for the logo and provided direction for how to submit the logo for approval.

Throughout the semester our focus became creating a face for Psydekick. We began operating tabling events to recruit new members. For our minimum viable product, we held an

informational recruitment table in front of the old dowdy store to survey the interest of students at ECU. We were able to give out more than 50 fliers at our first tabling event and collected several emails of interested individuals. This gave us a strong start to move forward as an organization in the coming semester.

In total we conducted 115 interviews during the HNRS 3000 semester. We became a more recognized organization on campus and were invited to attend several events in the upcoming semesters.

## **Honors 4500 and Honors 4550**

After completing work with the HNRS 2000 and HNRS 3000 courses, three of our twelve members decided to continue with the project into the Honors Signature Project courses, or HNRS 4500 and HNRS 4550. The goal of this portion of the project was to further our research and apply our prospective prototype or put it into action.

After the conclusions made in HNRS 3000, Psydekick had decided that the best route for furthering our project was to present our findings on peer education programs to the Counseling Center from ECU. In November of 2019, Psydekick presented our thoughts on implementing a peer educator program for mental health awareness at ECU.

We started by defining how the program would look. The proposed program would allow the Counseling Center to facilitate the program in its entirety.

This program would have an application process where prospective members would fill out interest and academic-based questions with requirements defined by the Counseling Center. The applications would then be processed by a member of the Counseling Center and applicants would be contacted to set up an interview. The applicants would then be interviewed, and final choices will be made by the Counseling Center.

These selected members would then go through two proposed cycles of training. BACCHUS Training is a National Peer Educator Training Program where members will learn how to effectively portray selected ideas their peers in a professional manner. The second training would be Counseling Center Training. The Counseling Center would create seminars based on the six identified aspects of mental health most prevalent to ECU. These seminars would inform

students of these aspects of mental health including, how to identify sufferers, how to interact with students, and how to recommend coping strategies or steps to reach the Counseling Center.

The above program proposal was made to the Counseling Center in HNRS 4500 in the form of a created PowerPoint. This closed out the work for HNRS 4500.

HNRS 4550 was focused on Psydekick receiving feedback from the Counseling Center based on the presentation from November. In early February of 2020, our main contact from the Counseling Center, Maya Pittman, arranged a meeting with us. At this meeting, Maya Pittman informed us that the Counseling Center was ready to take on our proposed program. This was our largest success. Our prototype, process, and methods had worked. We had proposed a program to a prominent branch of ECU and they took it on.

Referring to the conducted research and interviews, Psydekick decided that the student organization would function as an organization that informs campus of facts and coping mechanisms proven to aid in coping with the six aspects of identified mental health. This organization would hold tabling events across campus where they inform ECU students about these mental health issues and coping mechanisms related to these.

This new perspective on the student organization will be pushed forth by the original members of Psydekick, who will be taking back the program after our completion of research and progress. This is where Psydekick is now.

Psydekick's role as a student organization will progress further in the Fall of 2020 when ECU students return to campus following the global health crisis and pandemic. This development has directly impacted Psydekick's plans in the implementation of its new function, but the research

and progress made will be carried on in the semesters to come by the founding members and current members of Psydekick.

## **Methods**

This project was completed using a prototyping method, in which we formed ideas of action based on interviews and tested those ideas to see their effectiveness. Several methods are being used to spread information on Psydekick and mental health, as well as gain knowledge on how to further progress the organization.

### *Executive Board Meetings*

Throughout the completion of HNRS 4500 and HNRS 4550, there have been a total of three executive board members who have worked to further progress Psydekick. Meetings are held among these three members weekly to establish the state of the organization and steps needed to be taken in the future. The meetings are centered around reflection on prior events or meetings, updates on member status, and steps moving forward in the next week. The executive board also met regularly with their honors advisor, Tim Christensen, to discuss the progress being made within the project and the organization. These meetings also helped the team in tackling conflict if it ever arose. The Counseling Center advisor for Psydekick, Maya Pittman, was also in attendance during some of these meetings to review the progress of the Counseling Center's role in Psydekick and the further establishment of a more liable and permanent peer education program. The executive board also held and participated in many presentation events, such as to the Counseling Center staff, to highlight the purpose of Psydekick and the necessity that it is on ECU's campus.

### *Campus-Wide Tabling Events*

From HNRS 3000 to HNRS 4550, tabling events were used as resources to gauge student interaction with the establishment of a peer education program for mental health. These tabling

events served recruitment events to collect information from engaged students interested in joining the organization. All of these students were sent weekly emails with information educating them on mental health topics, as well as important dates for organization meetings and events. Through these tabling events, applications from nine students outside of the honors community were received through Engage. These members also assisted in participating in tabling events, in which flyers for the organization were handed out and information to the Counseling Center was provided.

### *Organization Meetings*

Psydekick received nine new members interested in participating in reducing the stigma of mental health and undergoing the official peer educator training provided by the Counseling Center. One official meeting was held in the Fall of 2019 to welcome the new members and provide insight into the organization. This was done to establish their role as a part of Psydekick and to encourage them to participate in the scheduled events. Maya Pittman also spoke at this meeting to further explain the role that Psydekick has on campus. Of the nine official members, four were able to maintain their hours throughout the semester and participate in events created by the executive board. Meetings and events were planned to happen once a month and a tentative schedule was created. Due to the rising liability issues, the meeting plans were put on hold for the Counseling Center to create a peer education program that was directly linked to them, rather than a student organization.

## Results

Coming into this project, we did not have much knowledge of what it took to implement an organization of this level of importance to our campus. There were several pivots along the way that completely changed our course of action; however, through this, we were able to initiate change on ECU's campus regarding mental health education. Through our discussions with the Counseling Center and key partner, Maya Pittman, we were able to influence the creation of a student-led branch of the Counseling Center. Although this means we had to hand off our solution to the wicked problem, our organization still exists an avenue for students to become educated on mental health issues. We will continue being a support system by finding ways for students to get connected with an on-campus resource that will provide the help they need. The influence we had on ECU's Counseling Center to put our solution into action at a bigger scale is a major success in solving our wicked problem. We were able to influence people of higher levels to use their status and resources to further initiate the goal we had in reducing mental health issues at ECU. By handing over the foundation of what Psydekick is to the Counseling Center, our solution is sustainable and will be active for many years to come at East Carolina University.

## **Individual Involvement**

The main role I oversaw in this project was the communication liaison. This entitled me to keep up with the different key partners of our organization. Communication in this area was majorly focused on communication with Tim Christensen (mentor), Maya Pittman (advisor), Bree Tucker, and Amy Clopper (team members), the older Psydekick members, and finally the new Psydekick members. I sent out weekly updates to the Psydekick team addressing the progression we made week to week throughout the project. I also sent out emails, typically twice a month, to new members to keep them informed of events and meetings they were required to attend. Moreover, I was in charge of reserving space for the meetings and tabling events. This entitled me to communicate with the student affairs office to document our usage of the on-campus spaces we needed to hold planned events. At recruitment events and during the application process, I recorded the student emails in a database and entered in new information as more and more members joined. I was also primarily involved with creating the events on Engage, our organization platform, for members to RSVP for events. It was imperative for my role to record data on the interviews and events we held to measure the success of our organization. I ensured our meetings followed an organized, structured agenda that I put together before the meeting to cover all topics that needed to be addressed. My main priority was keeping members up to date on the changes we made throughout the semester. I was able to create a “GroupMe” to communicate more efficiently with the new members. This group chat also allowed for members to interact with the organization officers with questions and comments they had more easily.

Overall, this project was a major learning opportunity for my future endeavors in life. It supplied me with tools that will be extremely useful when I enter the workforce. For example, throughout this experience I learned how to communicate findings to a large group through public

presentation. Being an individual that is more introverted, this is was an extremely hard, yet beneficial task to endure week to week. I learned how to communicate and interview professionals to research a wicked problem. Throughout this process, my overall communication skills have increased astronomically which has been key to many of my successes not only in relation to this project, but in my life as a whole. Another tool this project supplied me with is learning to work in a group setting. Throughout the semester there were several issues that arose from the clashing of multiple different personalities. Through research, I was able to understand and educate myself on how to best interact with different kinds of people to achieve a common goal. These are just two of the many tools that I now have under my belt when tackling future “wicked problems”. The satisfaction of achieving the successes we made throughout this project put into perspective the importance of enduring difficult situations in order to learn, and eventually achieve the end goal.

## **Conclusion**

Through the prototyping process followed throughout the colloquium and research courses of the Honors College Signature Project, Psydekick completed the goal of tackling a wicked problem at ECU. Psydekick did this by first forming a student organization on campus and using this status to present our extensive research and findings to the Counseling Center and its faculty. The Counseling Center took on our proposed program and Psydekick reevaluated its role. Psydekick is now a student organization ready to function on ECU's campus in the Fall of 2020 as a supporting branch of the Peer Educator program taken on by the Counseling Center. This process was supported entirely by the Honors College at East Carolina University, including its faculty, resources, and students, truly making it an Honors College Signature Project.

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