

SOLVING A WICKED PROBLEM: PREVENTING STUDENT ISOLATION

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## Abstract

Mental health difficulties are becoming increasingly associated with college students, and ECU has proven to be no exception in recent years. From a review of the relevant literature on the topic, it became clear that student isolation is a major factor regarding student health, most notably so in rates of student depression. To further explore this idea, there was extensive interviewing and surveying of ECU students, which led to the conclusion of the need for a student-centered solution. This manifested in the creation of multiple ideas as facilitated by the Honors College Program; an app dedicated to the counseling center services, a non-crisis student support hotline known as Phone a Friend, a student-led organization dedicated to the promotion of healthy student social interaction and human contact in a safe and supportive environment known as the Hug Force, and a questionnaire designed to connect students to applicable clubs and organizations at ECU reflective of individual interests.

After further investigation into these solutions, it became clear over time that, due to liability concerns and student feedback, the most viable proposed method for combating student isolation would be the questionnaire. Initially termed the Quiz of Student Interest, but later changed to Questionnaire of Student Interest (QSI) due to implications regarding test anxiety, the concept hinges around the goal of increasing student involvement. The current QSI has undergone various large-scale edits, the most notable being a functional paper prototype in which data from Residential Assistants on campus has been taken, as well as a Qualtrics version that has recently been submitted to ECU's Office of Institutional Planning, Assessment, and Research (IPAR) for Survey Review and Oversight Committee (SROC) approval. With said approval, further data can be taken utilizing the QSI in order to provide further evidence for the use of such a method in order to decrease levels of student isolation on ECU's campus.

### Solving a Wicked Problem: Preventing Student Isolation

Over the course of two years, our group has become aware of a wicked problem within our community and a systematic method to solving it. Beginning of freshman year, with the support and guidelines from *Designing Your Life*, we knew we needed to decide on a topic we were passionate about and begin ideation in order to organize our ideas. When deciding on our wicked problem, we asked ourselves what affected us the most in our current state in life. At this time, not only were we struggling to find our own places in a college of close to 30,000 students, but it became apparent that our peers were struggling as well. During our freshmen year here at ECU, we lost multiple students to suicide within the dorms. After taking a moment of silence in class and talking about the resources provided to us on campus, these tragic events opened our eyes to the significant problem mental health has on college campuses.

Attacking the mental health crisis on college campuses, and specifically here at ECU, became our top priority. Originally, we aimed to discover ways to cope with and combat depression and anxiety on campus. In researching the levels at which these conditions existed, we discovered the extent of the problem across all college campuses. From a 2018 survey done via the American College Health Association, 63.4% of students reported having felt overwhelming anxiety and 41.9% of students reported having felt so depressed that it was difficult to function anytime within the past twelve months (American College Health Association, 2018). Following this research, we began our own investigation on depression and anxiety affecting students here at ECU. Following our anonymous online interview of 50 students at our university, we found that 74% of students reported experiencing symptoms of depression while 88% of students experienced symptoms of anxiety. Understanding that our peers were struggling with these issues was the first step, the next was finding the root cause behind these emotions. From further research, we discovered that poor mental health on college campuses tended to be the result of isolation. According to the American College Health Association in a survey of over 26,000 students, a whopping total of 64.4% reported feeling “very lonely” in the past 12 months (ACHA, 2018). In

discovering this, we now had a target we could aim for where we were able to tailor our ideas to create a way to prevent isolation on college campuses. Once we had our wicked problem and the cause behind it narrowed down, we were able to accurately begin ideation. Ideation launched us into creating several brainstorming maps with the central goal of preventing isolation. From these maps we were able to synthesize four main ideas: Hug Force, Phone a Friend, the Counseling Center App, and the Quiz of Student Interest.

The Hug Force ideation stemmed from the original thought that human contact could foster positive social interaction as well as improve social well-being overall. In a review of the available research, we found that our initial findings were correct. While reviewing literature regarding human touch, we were made acutely aware of the need for touch in regard to its positive impact on one's mental well-being (Field, 2010). Additionally, it has been established that hugs in particular are linked to higher oxytocin levels, which are associated with lower anxiety and stress. In a 2005 study of 59 women, it was found that frequent hugs were associated with higher oxytocin activity and lower blood pressure overall (Light, Grewen, and Amico 2005).

From here, we began to draw further upon our initial idea. The Hug Force was meant to be a means for students to connect with their peers in a safe and positive manner. We originally ideated the Hug Force as a club where members would wear a uniform in their free time on campus and provide safe and comforting human contact to interested bystanders.

Phone a Friend was an idea that was developed in an attempt to allow students to have a "hotline" to a student counselor. A direct link would be found on the Counseling Center App, discussed further in the following paragraph. After meeting with a counselor on campus, we were informed that the counseling center often stays overbooked and could not always meet the needs of the large influx of students. So we began working with the counseling center to try and address this issue and the problem that some students may not want to present their struggles to a licensed therapist due to the stigma that culturally comes along with the issue of combating mental health related illnesses. We also wanted Phone a Friend to be

there for students on the days where they were not dealing with a mental health crisis but may just need someone on the other line to discuss everyday life with. This idea would require us to train student volunteers in certain counseling techniques in order to address the wide array of mental health issues or conversations that could potentially await them on the other line.

The Counseling Center App was meant to streamline the process of interacting with the available mental health services on campus. Using the app, students would be able to schedule appointments with counselors, utilize the Phone a Friend hotline, and access any additional information regarding student mental health resources from one easy location. In creating the Counseling Center App, we would increase awareness and accessibility for students on campus who are looking for support regarding their mental health.

Our final ideation from our brainstorming maps was the Quiz of Student Interest (QSI). With the goal of preventing isolation at its source, the QSI was an idea that would utilize strategically written questions to effectively connect college students with organizations and events on campus that align with their specific interests. We began this idea by organizing a list of active clubs and organizations at ECU through the OrgSync portal. We found that there were a lot of “dead” or inactive organizations listed in OrgSync, as well as clubs that incoming freshmen and transfer students could not join right away. However, as a group we had not yet developed our idea enough to see that OrgSync would soon become an extremely vital part of our group’s plan to solve our wicked problem.

We began our second semester as a group with the intention of implementing all of our different ideas, under the premise of facilitating a more positive atmosphere on campus regarding mental health as a whole. However, we quickly began to run into logistical issues in several aspects of our different ideas. The Hug Force was the first idea to be abandoned. After looking into the possible legal ramifications as well as the substantial number of liability issues, we realized the idea was not properly thought out. In order to support our assumptions, we conducted a number of student interviews about the general opinion

of such a program. It became clear that the Hug Force was not popular among the student body and therefore would not be in our best interest to pursue as a group.

Removing the Hug Force from our overarching list of objectives caused us to take a more extensive look at the remaining ideas that we had created. After further reviewing said list, we realized that a number of our other ideas were not necessarily feasible. This was especially so in regard to the Phone a Friend hotline. Just as the Hug Force, the hotline had a number of liability issues. Although we had specified in our initial ideation that it was purely a non-crisis hotline, there was no way to guarantee that the students using the resource would not stray from what the unlicensed student counselors would be able to assist with. We then realized that there were additional concerns regarding the training and upkeep of using said student volunteers. Overall, we found that the Phone a Friend hotline was not a realistic idea.

After coming to the conclusion that both Phone a Friend and Hug Force were no longer a viable option for our group to work towards in implementation, we were left with two remaining ideas; the Quiz of Student Interest, and the Counseling Center App. At this point, we looked to faculty advisors for guidance. In meeting with Gerald Weckesser, we discussed the changes that we had made, and if implementation was a realistic goal within our means as a student group. We then were given relentlessly direct feedback about our ambitions, especially in regard to the Counseling Center App.

After receiving feedback from Professor Weckesser, we realized that we needed to focus our resources on our single most functional idea. The Counseling Center App, while a well-intentioned idea, was not within our realm of abilities and overall would not be the most beneficial to achieving our goal of bettering the mental health of students on campus. The App was supposed to be a means for students to make counseling appointments, but it ultimately could not solve the issue of overbooking, and the complaints that we were working to address and resolve would only be highlighted through such technology. Simply put, creating an app for the counseling center on campus would not only pose

financial and technical issues, but the idea would work against itself. This left us with only one idea remaining: the QSI.

Once we realized that we were only doing the QSI, we had to seriously think about how to circumvent the logistical problem of implementation. After sorting through all of the “dead” or inactive organizations on OrgSync, we essentially created a list of all of the available organizations for an incoming student at ECU. From that list, we reviewed the previously existing categories on OrgSync itself, and quickly came to the conclusion that we needed to re-categorize these organizations in a means that we would be able to align our potential questions with. After editing and compiling a list of comprehensive categories, and the organizations that they fit into, we had a basis on which we were able to build our initial prototype for the QSI.

From our initial ideation, we knew as a group that our expectation was to have the QSI available online, where we looked to Qualtrics as our means of creation. However, we began our discussion of prototypes with a very limited understanding of the technology behind Qualtrics. At the time, we had preemptively divided our group into a number of task forces, one of which was related to technology and the more technical aspects of implementation. While the technology task force spent time discussing the best technologies available, the other task forces took time workshopping the questions themselves to be used in the prototype. Due to the differing levels of progress within the group, we decided to begin with the creation of a paper prototype that would allow us to test the QSI and get feedback in person.

At the end of Fall 2018, our group was to undergo significant change. Three members of our group, who comprised the technology task force, were going to spend the following semester abroad, and therefore would not be active members of the group for the remainder of the school year. This had a variety of implications for our group as a whole, but most notably, caused a shift in group communication.

With a group of just over half its original size, the roles and responsibilities of each individual member increased, and the implications of this required us to spend time thinking critically about what

that meant for the QSI. After adapting to these changes, our group quickly began to work towards some of the most significant progress that has been made toward implementation in all of the two years of the group's existence.

We began the Spring 2019 semester by creating a functional paper copy, and distributing it to a number of freshmen in the Honors College, allowing for feedback as they completed the questions. From there we catalogued these results, and made revisions as needed. While this data was certainly helpful, it quickly became clear that there was a need for more representative data, and we needed to distribute it further.

The need to distribute further opened up a discussion of the ramifications of such a wide scale usage of a student-created survey, which led us to a key interview with Linda Campion, who currently works in Student Affairs Assessment, Retention, and Research at ECU. We learned here that we would need to submit a request for approval from the Survey Review and Oversight Committee (SROC), via the ECU Office of Institutional Planning, Assessment, and Research (IPAR). Once obtaining said SROC approval, we would be able to distribute the QSI to an unlimited number of individuals in order to collect more comprehensive data regarding its effectiveness.

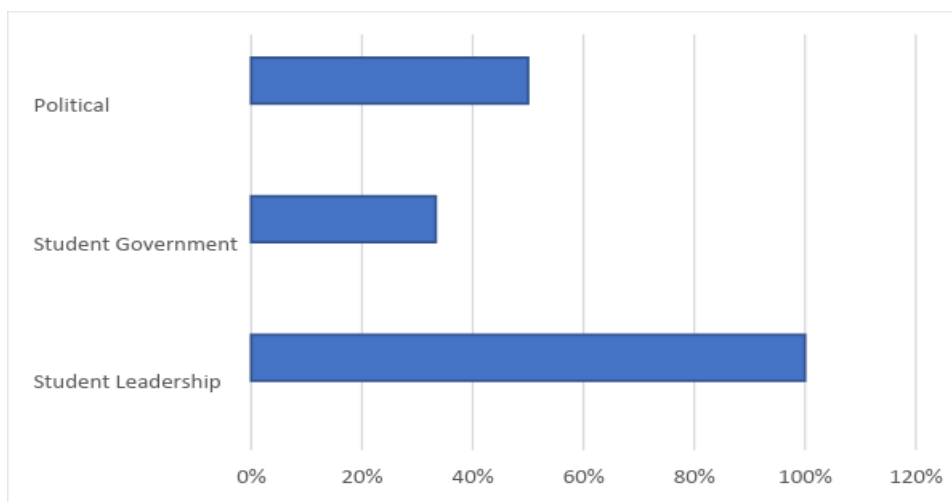
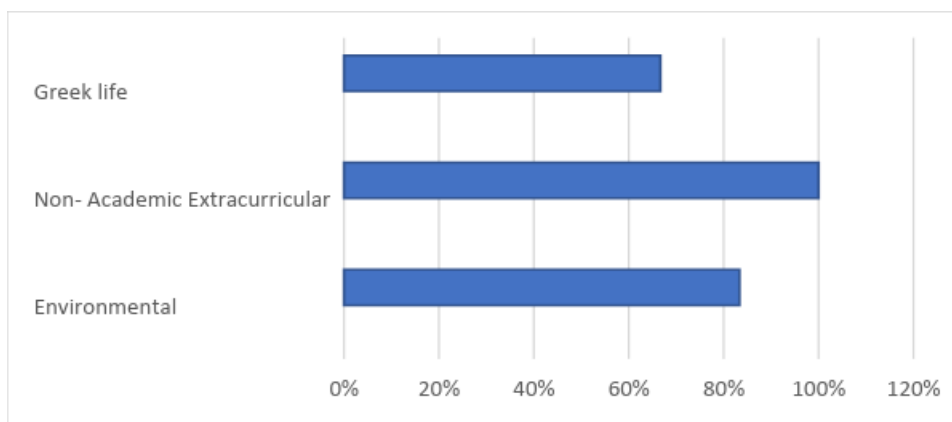
In addition to learning about SROC approval, we also brought our paper copy of the QSI to our meeting with Linda Campion, who had key comments and recommendations for revision. The most notable change we made after our meeting was the changing of the QSI title from Quiz of Student Interest to Questionnaire of Student Interest. This allowed us to avoid the negative perceptions associated with testing, while simultaneously allowing us to keep the same acronym that we had grown accustomed to throughout our years of working on this project. We were given additional advice on each individual question, which we used in order to revise our prototype.

After our meeting with Linda Campion, we began to explore the technology behind Qualtrics, and discovered that it was far more accessible than we initially thought. From there, we took our revised paper prototype and made it available on Qualtrics, then submitted it to receive IPAR approval. From there, our



focus turned to two upcoming presentations, at Research and Creative Achievement Week at ECU and for the staff of College Hill Suites, in order to gain additional data.

Both of these presentations were successful overall. The presentation at College Hill Suites was especially helpful in that it gave us the opportunity to give our revised prototype to a group of Resident Advisors, a group that we selected in particular due to their training and their repeated interactions with freshman students, our target group for the QSI. The data that we collected in this meeting is available below.



From the data presented above, there are multiple conclusions that can be made. It is rather unsurprising that student leadership and government are two of the most represented response areas. However, conclusions about the particular responses received as representative of all students would be inappropriate, because of the very particular sample size presented. What we can infer from this data, and

this experience as a whole, is the feasibility of using the questionnaire in practice, as well as a need for further data collection.

In the past two years, but most notably the past semester, our group has created the Questionnaire of Student Interest, and has made significant steps to making this goal a reality. There have been significant obstacles throughout the development of the QSI, which facilitated an ongoing discussion about leadership and intergroup dynamics. Due to the fact that every group member had leadership experience, which can largely be attributed to each student's Honors College involvement, there were moments that called for a form of more dynamic, collaborative leadership. In contrast, there were times in which the group was largely under the guide of a single student. This led to polarization and friction within the group and was not functional as a whole.

After looking back on our group accomplishments, we now will focus on the contributions that I, Elizabeth Majette, have made on this project. Initially, I was not part of the original team that began this project. After the first semester of Honors College, the professors picked the top projects that would move forward. Honor students were required to choose from this group the project they would like to join based on short presentations of each project's mission and goals. I decided to join the Mental Health group because I believe student isolation is a serious issue on college campuses. In my opinion, the addition of new project members brought fresh perspectives and unique ideas to the project.

In the beginning stages of the project, I was a member of the distribution team. This team was responsible for circulating and collecting the different surveys. The surveys consisted of questions asking students what would be beneficial in helping their mental health. The distribution team then analyzed the data and relayed the information to the rest of the team. From the information gathered; the team was able to make informed decisions on what the next course of action would be to accomplish our goals. This included the elimination of some aspects of our initial goals, such as hug force and phone a friend.

After much consideration and deliberation of our data collected, the team focused solely on the questionnaire. We began to focus on the type and how many questions to include. I volunteered to be on

the team responsible for identifying the many different clubs and organizations available to students on campus. The team and I validated all of the organizations to ensure they were indeed active and organized them into different categories. Based on these categories, our entire team began to put together questions that would match interests with clubs and organizations.

After several of our teammates left to study abroad, our plans pivoted. Stephanie and I went to visit Linda Campion, she was instrumental in this pivot. Due to this meeting we began to create new questions that would be able to pass an SROC inspection. I then volunteered to create a Qualtrics version of the new and improved questionnaire. This version enabled us to survey students and learn the effectiveness of the different questions we created. Through this experience, I learned different interview techniques, ideation, and experienced the impact of a major change to plans that were thought to be concrete.

As of Fall 2020, ECU has transitioned to Engage as a means of categorizing and providing further information regarding clubs and organizations. This has opened up a number of questions regarding implementation, as our original prototype utilized OrgSync extensively. This question will be left to remaining group members who wish to continue on as this particular group moves on to different individualized goals. The QSI project not only functioned as a means for students to solve a wicked problem, but also as a means for a rather uncommon group of students to both identify and challenge individual differences in order to promote a cohesive group structure.

References

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