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The Role of the Writing Center in Campus Mental Health

Mental Health and Mental Illness

Mental health is one of the most important aspects of our lives as it affects how we function in the world on an individual and societal level. Simply put, mental health is “a person’s condition with regard to their physiological and emotional well-being” (Merriam-Webster). Although a rather general definition, mental health is something that is always present within our lives similar to our physical health. Although the two are not interchangeable, mental illnesses are often a sign of poor mental health with prolonged symptoms that can create stress. Mental illness are “disorders that affect your mood, thinking and behavior” (MayoClinic). Mental health - as important as it is - remains one of the most fragile elements of our lives as it can change without warning. This is especially true in college aged students who typically are not in tune with their emotions.

In the past decade, college campuses have seen an increase in the amount of students struggling with their mental health. Within this category, there are three types of students that are usually found. The first being students who are experiencing mental health issues due to the rapid increase in the stress levels they experience during college. For these students, motivation for academic work generally decreases as they become overwhelmed with assignments and the belief that they do not have enough time to complete all of their assignments. For these students,

the role of the writing center in their mental health is clear since it functions as a collaborative space for learning and progress. Students already have the idea that a writing center is where you should go when you are struggling with your academic writing and planning. Yet, the writing center also has the ability to be regarded as a space where one can go to write in comfort and hopefully feel the motivation to work.

There is another group of students who are regarded as high functioning even though they are struggling with their mental health. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness or NAMI, high functioning individuals are those who are suffering from a mental illness yet retain their autonomy, occupational functioning, cognitive functioning, and interpersonal relationships. These individuals are often hard to tell apart from those who are not mentally ill, yet they require similar aid and guidance to those who are non functioning. The writing center is helpful to these students as the one-on-one meetings and focus on the writer rather than the writing will allow for them to develop a better understanding of their voice both in an academically and personally. These students would benefit from writing therapy sessions as it will combine both the academic and the emotional. Writing therapy according to the Positive Psychology Program is any writing that aids in one's expression of feelings and trauma in order to ease their emotions.

The final group of students are those who are non-functional. These students struggle not only with academic motivation but social and personal motivation as well. Although this group will be the hardest to reach as they require help from mental health professionals more than writing tutors and staff. That being said, these students may find writing as therapy helpful as writing centers would hold these events in tandem with their school's counseling center and other mental health resources. By having mental health professionals present, these students

along with their high functioning counterparts will hopefully be more successful in their mental health journey.

As student tutors, we are supposed to focus on the writer and their growth. This is usually meant in an academic way, but I do not believe that we should stop there. At Trinity College, the writing center holds events in tandem with the Office of Accommodations and Bantams in Balance - two groups that focus on students' emotional and personal status. One event that is held before finals is a Write-In where students can come to the writing center and work on their assignments either alone or with the aid of writing associates. Events such as this Write-In are essentially laying the groundwork for the writing center to be seen as an academic and personal space for students regardless of their mental health status. Hosting therapeutic writing sessions at the writing center is not a far-fetched idea or out of writing centers jurisdiction as there is discourse stating that in order to be successful, writing centers must be aware of the emotional and personal context of each writer. Mental health is a clear and ever present element of a writers as it affects every element of a person's being.

In this paper, I will argue that writing centers have the ability to aid students who are struggling with their mental health through collaborative projects and events with their campus counseling center. These sessions would focus on writing as a form of therapy rather than solely on academic writing. Therapeutic writing allows for the writer to express themselves and develop a better understanding of their internal world. By promoting the use of writing as a form of therapy, writing centers will be able to help students with their mental health as well as their academic standing.

Mental Health at Colleges and Universities

Mental health needs at colleges and universities across the continental United States are growing due to mental illnesses that stem from stress, genetics, sexual assault, and self-injury. College aged students are the most at risk for developing a mental illness according to NAMI as “more than 75 percent of all mental health conditions begin before the age of 24.” Since the majority of students on campuses fall into the age range of 24 and younger, it is imperative that their mental health be taken seriously by the institutions they attend. As the stressors of life increase for this age group, there is also an increase in “threat-to-self characteristics including serious suicidal thoughts and self-injurious behaviors” (James). Although these behaviors are seen in both teenagers and adults, colleges aged individuals are more likely to have these behaviors develop into a disorder primarily due to an influx of stress or a traumatic experience.

In 2016, Penn State’s Center for Collegiate Mental Health collected information from 139 institutions and found that 26% of students who sought help from campus facilities intentionally hurt themselves. Additionally, about 33.2% found themselves actively considering suicide - an increase from the previous report. In the report it was also revealed that the rise in the mental issues for college students stems from the increase in stress, financial burden, and the mentality that is you aren’t overworking yourself you cannot succeed. What is staggering about these statistics is that they are collected only from students who are actively seeing help. Although one in four students have a diagnosable illness, 40% do not seek the help they need while 50% have felt so anxious that they began to struggle in school (Best Colleges).

Currently, mental health remains one of the main reasons as to why students struggle in and drop out of school. Mainly because mental illness is a factor of one's life that affects every other aspect. The Suicide Prevention Resource Center explains how

Mental health problems can affect a student's energy level, concentration, dependability, mental ability, and optimism, hindering performance. Research suggests that depression is associated with lower grade point averages, and that co-occurring depression and anxiety can increase this association. Depression has also been linked to dropping out of school.

Stress is the leading cause of most mental illnesses and about 30% of students find that their stress is unmanageable (Suicide Prevention Resource Center). This leads to many other mental illnesses including the the most common ones which are anxiety (21.9%) and depression (30%).

Individuals who are struggling with their mental health usually find it difficult to maintain relationships with their family and friends as well as function in their job or school work. Usually this is because the person s begins to pull away from those who are close to them as they believe that their problems would be regarded as a burden. This correlates to how students with mental illnesses function on a college campus as they pull away from people they are close to and lose motivation to continue on with school life. While the counseling center is the most obvious place for students to go when they need help regarding mental health, writing centers can take an active and important role regarding helping students with their mental health in the form of writing as therapy.

Although writing centers cannot help with psychotherapy or provide medication for mental disorders, they can provide students with a comfortable space to engage in an academic

and personal way. Writing has often been used as a regarded of therapy as it can help you become more in touch with your feelings and thought processes. By hosting events in tandem with counseling centers and groups that focus on mental health, writing centers will be fulfilling their duty of focusing on the student and what they need in order to succeed.

Current Accommodations in Writing Centers

The main way that colleges and universities are working to combat the waning mental health of their students is by focusing on accomodation techniques. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) presents students with guidelines on how to manage their mental health in college. NAMI targets students who are aware of their mental health struggles before entering colleges but does not fully acknowledge students who have a developed mental illness or may simply be unaware that they have a problem. This exemplifies one of the issues facing accommodations on college campuses. There are numerous students who are struggling with their mental health who may not have a diagnosable illness or have not sought help in order to receive these accommodations. If there were more events and spaces on campus that focused on mental health, students would feel more comfortable about seeking help. Trinity College has many resources including its Bantams in Balance program which specializes in mindfulness and maintaining health during stressful times. In tandem with Bantams in Balance, the Trinity College Writing Center is hosting a “write-in” to help students who are stressed about papers can come together and write in a safe space. This is not too far from what writing therapy would look like. The main difference is that students would be writing about personal experience and emotions with a mental health professional present.

Although targeted at students with pre-existing conditions, NAMI's guidelines are helpful to all students. Before enrolling students should ensure that their school has services that are protected under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) according to NAMI. It is important for students to know "about [their] college's academic requirements and the services that might support [their] health and academic growth". Generally, these services are provided by each school's equivalency of a health center and counseling center but they should not be the only spaces where students can go to work on their mental health. The writing center would be a good place to combine academics and personal growth as they are designed to be collaborative spaces where students gather to better themselves. Hosting events that focus on writing therapy would present students with another safe space to engage with their thoughts.

Another recommendation from NAMI is for students to find ways to develop their "ability to describe [their] illness and its impact on [their] learning." One of the best ways to develop one's ability to describe something is to do it through writing. Currently, the majority of writing centers focus on academic work and rarely receive anyone who wants to work on something personal. Additionally, few writing centers have events where they bring students together to work on personal writing that will help them in a therapeutic sense and to grow personally. So far, Trinity College's Writing Center has made progress in bridging the gap between academic work and mental health.

For the most part, academic stress is unavoidable at most institutions of higher education. Yet, NAMI states that "using academic supports such as study groups, tutors and the campus writing center can make class work easier and give you encouragement from others." This is almost exactly what the writing center at Trinity College is doing when they host events such as

their “write-in”. Even if every writing center cannot hold events that aid students with practicing mindfulness, they can still present themselves as a safe space where everyone is welcome. Unfortunately, there is very little scholarship given regarding how writing centers can help students on an emotional level as well as an academic one. The lessons given to student tutors about mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and writing for personal growth should be extended to those who visit the writing center as well.

While accommodations are important, there must be numerous ways for students to find help. By using writing as therapy and a way of practicing mindfulness, student writers will be able to take the skills they use for writing recreationally and use them when writing academically. Although it is evident that writing centers are not spaces for group talk therapy, writing therapy would not be far fetched in these spaces. With the aid of a mental health professional, students who come to writing therapy sessions would benefit both emotionally and academically. These supplementary aids to mindfulness and therapy can help students to grow on a personal level and therefore develop further potential academically.

According to the Positive Psychology Program, “writing therapy can help the user to propel their personal growth, practice creative expression, and feel a sense of empowerment and control over the user’s life.” For students who have been struggling with their motivation, writing therapy can serve as a break from the stress of academic which is one of the leading causes of mental illness on college campuses. This form of stress relief - especially since it would be placed in an academic setting - could potentially aid students in finding their motivation. Additionally, “writing in a diary or journal is usually free form, in which the writer jots down whatever pops into his or her head, while therapeutic writing is more directed, and

often based on prompts or exercises” (Positive Psychology Program). This would help students as it mirrors the style of work seen in academic settings, yet succeeds in de-stressing students allowing them to function better academically and socially.

Students who engage in writing therapy will not only improve in their understanding of their emotions, but they will also be improving their writing skills. Where “writing in a diary or journal is generally focused on recording events as they occurred...writing therapy is focused on thinking about, interacting with, and analyzing the events, thoughts and feelings that the writer writes down” (Positive Psychology Program). Since writing centers are focused on students writers and their writing, the improvement of their skills through writing therapy will fit into the mission statement of writing centers - especially Trinity College’s Writing Center.

Besides the academic benefits of writing therapy, the most obvious and important element is that it aids students who have experienced events that they found traumatic or stressful. While mental health issues caused by academic stress are incredibly important, many have experienced traumatic experiences throughout their lives causing them to develop a mental disorder. Fortunately, with the aid of psychotherapy, “expressive writing can have a significant healing effect. In fact, participants in a student who wrote about their most traumatic experiences for 15 minutes, four days in a row, experienced better health outcomes up to four months later” (Baikie & Wilhelm). This responsibility falls on the writing center since it is a space that focuses on the context of the student and not the context of the writing. It should not (and does not) matter if the student is writing about how their day went or if they are writing an academic paper. Regardless of topic, writing centers are meant to provide guidance and support to writers.

The current set-up of writing centers - one-on-one appointments - already presents itself as a resource to students who need any sort of mental health accommodation. According to Lori Clapis, Trinity College's head of accommodations, there are currently no ADA accommodations that would directly transfer to a writing center. Yet, there are slight adjustments that could be made to its current form that would allow for students with mental health issues to feel more comfortable. The first is one that the Trinity College Writing Center already practices which is to have an alternative space for student who may struggle if placed in a large noisy room. Right next to the official writing center is a room where tutors and their students can go for a quieter, more accommodating space.

Lori Clapis then states that "many students share with me that they feel overwhelmed about starting a paper and some students who struggle with OCD have difficulty finalizing their writing assignments. I'm sure this is not shocking to you to hear. As a writing associate, I would guess it's a common theme." This statement is true for students with OCD as well as others who experience anxiety surrounding their academic work. The majority of my sessions involve students who are uncertain about whether their paper is finished and properly answered the prompt. Even if their paper appears perfect, these students will continue to point out flaws and question their own judgement and intelligence. The writing center already exists as a space where students struggle with managing their emotions in regards to their academic work. Since emotional check-ins are already part of most tutoring sessions, the writing center could potentially make the final step and host events that focus on improving the mental health of students. Lori Clapis and others who work with accommodations agree that writing centers could

be a space for emotional growth as well as academic since it already served that purpose for several groups of students,

Mental Health, Student Comfort, and the Writing Center

Although many will argue that writing centers would be the perfect space for writing therapy, there are those who believe that academic spaces have no room for emotions. In her Psychology Today article “How Making Colleges ‘Safe Spaces’ Makes Us All Less Safe”, Pamela B. Paresky Ph.D. believes that the push to create safe spaces actually hurts institutions of higher education and their students. She writes that “the apparent goal is for college campuses to be ‘safe spaces’ in which literature, ideas and words...that make some students uncomfortable are simply not allowed to exist.” However, I find myself intensely disagreeing with this point. Colleges are seen as safe spaces because many other aspects of life are not. Students do not expect to be catered to in college, instead they expect to not be in situations that are purposefully emotionally devastating. Paresky’s claim is an extreme one that does not allow for any sort of emotional wellbeing to occur on campuses. Instead of claiming that a safe space is detrimental, Paresky should say that it is the emotional coddling of students that is detrimental.

Paresky also claims that “the promise of a liberal arts education is to provide challenging, unpredictable, and even uncomfortable intellectual and interpersonal encounters in order to produce the capacity for critical thinking, open-mindedness, and critical self-examination in graduates who are less dogmatic and prejudiced than when they arrived.” This claim, although used as evidence for Paresky, actually helps to debunk this belief. If students are meant graduate with less prejudicial thoughts and as well-rounded individuals, then every aspect of their college

life should be regarded in this light. I agree that no one can grow unless they are given the chance to interact with ideas different than their own, but this does not mean that colleges should not create spaces in which students feel comfortable enough to express their true emotions.

Although an academic space, the writing center is already considered a safe space to the tutors who work there as well as some students. In “Writing Centers as Homeplace (A Site for Radical Resistance)” by Kaidan McNamee & Michelle Miley, they argue that the writing center can successfully be a safe space and a space that challenges ideas. At their writing center at Montana State University, both McNamee, a student tutor, and Miley, the writing center director; “recognize the potential of the writing center to be a transformative space for tutors - a space where they feel safe enough to ‘[engage] other ways of thinking and acting,’ a space where they learn to pay attention ‘to the systemic and institutional context from which conflict emerges’”. Without this safe space, McNamee and Miley argues that student tutors would not be able to truly engage with all ideas even if they are not ones that they agree with. Having a safe space does not take away the potential for important conversations and growth but instead they allow for students to feel safe and comfortable while engaging with these topics.

The idea of a safe space is often correlated to feelings that remind one of home and comfort. While home is a safe space for many people, it also means that one is comfortable enough with others within the home to speak openly about whatever they desire. While at home, you expect to be able to able to express your emotions, beliefs, and desires without feeling inadequate. As seen in both the Trinity College Writing Center and the Montana State College Writing Center, it has been proven that it is possible to be both an academic space and a safe space. While describing Michelle Miley’s goals for the Montana State Writing Center, they

writes “I want tutors to feel valued...I want them to be empowered to assert their own beliefs and values; I also want them to listen and to consider the values and beliefs of others” (McNamee & Miley).

Where McNamee & Miley’s article focuses primarily on the role of the writing center as a safe space for student tutors, this idea can easily be transferred to the student writer. Where McNamee faced oppression due to their status as a transgender youth, those who have mental health issues also face oppression due to the stigma and lack of informal resources supplied. The Trinity College Writing Center pushes against this by being a space where people can actively engage in discussion about deep topics - including mental health. These conversations are not only for the tutors to have amongst themselves but for student writers to also engage in.

Writing centers offer a place where we can self-renew in order to *begin* resisting, where we can mend our wounds in preparation to aid those who have not yet been offered that space for healing. Bravery occurs in the act of knowing when and how we need the safety to heal. And in so doing, we move towards a brave(r) space.” (McNamee & Miley)

McNamee and Miley are referring to how the personal growth and discovery that student tutors feel at writing centers allows for them to create a safe space for student writers in turn. At the Trinity College Writing Center, events that focus on writing therapy will allow for all students to have a space where they feel comfortable expressing their emotions - even if it is just on paper.

Emotional Intelligence and Writing Centers

Simply put, emotional intelligence is the “capability of individuals to recognize their own emotions and those of others” (Merriam-Webster). Emotional intelligence is important for both

tutors and students to learn as it allows for the individual to better understand themselves and their interactions with others which is where writing therapy comes into play. Writing centers can reach out to their institutions equivalent of a counseling center and have sessions on how writing can help you not only understand what you are feeling but also *why* you are feeling this way. Writing allows for individuals to develop an understanding of their inner world as they are granted complete autonomy over the diction and images that they explore in their writing.

Since emotional intelligence is a key part of mental health, without a proper understanding of your emotions, it is difficult to identify the true problem. Noreen Lape in her article “Training Tutors in Emotional Intelligence” examines how student tutors should focus on understanding emotional intelligence so they can have more successful session with their writers. Although this article is focused on the student tutor, the same sentiments can be extended to student writers and therapeutic writing. When training tutors, Lape wants them to focus on developing their ability to recognize a feeling as it happens while also developing the rhetoric and ability to manage their distress. By reaching out to students, writing center can help create a dialogue regarding the benefits that writing has on mental health. While writing therapy will not be the solution to mental health problems, it will allow for students to develop the skills they need to evaluate their own emotions. The development of their emotional writing skills will also help participants with their academic work as they use their diction and analysis skills in assignments.

Writing centers are not the primary space in which students get together to work on improving their mental health. Yet, there is scholarship that engages with the idea of writing centers as spaces where emotions may run high. Gayla Mills in “Preparing for Emotional

Sessions” explores the different types of emotional sessions that tutors may find themselves engaged in while working in the writing center. The one that stands out the most is the engaging with student writers on papers that deal with personal topics. Personal papers can be found both in academic work and work that the student may bring in for their own benefit. Regarding the idea of hosting writing therapy sessions, the students who participate in this program would be writing personal papers. Although these papers are not explicitly meant to be shared and graded, they will allow for the student to engage with their thoughts and emotions in a health mediated way while simultaneously improving their writing skills.

The tips that Mills provides student tutors for dealing with personal papers are that you should not ignore the emotions within the text. Instead, the student tutor should find ways to connect with the writer and control their emotions in a health way. Writing as therapy would present students with the option to engage with their emotions - regardless of how dark they may be - and do so in a space that would be monitored by both writing center staff and a mental health professional.

Whenever I mention writing as therapy, I am also referring to the practice of mindfulness within writing centers. This idea is prevalent regarding the benefits of mindfulness on student tutors. Yet, mindfulness through writing is helpful for all students even if they are not struggling with their mental health. In “The Connection Between Writing and Mental Health” by Rachel LeFevre, we are presented with information of how writing can aid those who are suffering with mental illnesses. Writing centers may find it difficult to host events that focus on writing as therapy on a weekly basis but to combat this, centers could have handouts on writing for mental health around the center. This can help the students who are struggling as well as students who

are more balanced to help improve their mental health status while also improving their academic performance by improving their writing skills.

While there are no set rules to writing therapy - besides the guidelines that the mental health professional may set - LeFevre presents her readers with three activities that may help them in their mental health journey. The first is that you should write whatever you desire even if it is just scribbles: “Your journal might look like a two-year-old got ahold of it, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that you're getting all your emotions out on paper without inhibition” (LeFevre). One of the main reasons for mental health issues is stress. By releasing your stress onto paper, it is easier to understand why you feel this stress and how you can combat it in order to return balance to your life.

The second one is that those seeking to use writing as a supplement to therapy should keep a record of their symptoms and what forms of treatment can help them. LeFevre writes “not only can this be therapeutic, it also serves as a great way to keep track of your mood, medication side effects, and possible triggers that could be causing certain symptoms...plus it serves as a great way to track the trends in your behavior and identify ways to cope with situations as you encounter them in the future.” This is incredibly important especially for writing centers as the future oriented elements will allow for the student to know what may cause them to lose motivation academically and find ways to work around this. Additionally, hosting these events in the writing center will show students that even if they are struggling with their motivation and mental health, they can always go to the writing center to help them with their academic work.

The students who come for their mental health will most likely not sit down with student tutors and go over what they wrote in their personal time. Instead, by writing they will be

actively engaging with a topic in a similar manner to how they would with an academic assignment. The lines do become fuzzy with this comparison but it can be explained in a rather simple manner. Many students who struggle with their mental health also struggle with motivation in their academic work. Writing centers, generally thought of as an academic space, can use this status to their advantage by bridging the gap between academic spaces and spaces of comfort. By placing itself in the middle of this spectrum, writing centers would be able to aid students who struggle with motivation academically to find that motivation again. This will not be an easy process and unfortunately, many of the students who need this help the most may not be able to find the motivation to go to their institutions writing centers and join in with writing therapy events. Yet by connecting writing center resources with resources from the counseling center, the writing center can shift from an solely academic space to one that aids students with course work and their mental health.

Writing as Therapy

Writing centers serve numerous roles on college campuses and hold different meanings for different people. Student tutors may feel at home in the writing center as it is a space where they hold control and power. Some student writers may avoid their writing center as it may make them feel inadequate in their studies, while others make appointments for every paper they have. Throughout this paper, the underlying argument has remained that by creating a space on campus that combines the academic with the emotional, it will allow for students to simultaneously improve their mental health and their writing skills.

The creation of events that focus on using writing as a stepping stone towards mindfulness and the improvement of mental health would not solely be the responsibility of the writing center. Instead, a mental health professional - preferably someone who works on or near campus - would have to be present as to ensure that the proper aid is available if needed. Moreover, mental health and illness are very serious topics that most workers in writing centers are not prepared to manage. Without the aid of a mental health professional, writing therapy could occur but it would not have the same effect on students who require professional guidance. Writing centers should host writing therapy sessions as it will help students regardless of their mental health status and their academic status.

Through writing therapy, students may be able to reach closure regarding the stressful and traumatic experiences they are writing about. Therapy alone is not as effective as having a multifaceted approach that includes supportive spaces, such as the writing center. Although students will continue to struggle with their mental health and mental illness, writing therapy sessions can help alleviate some of the pressure and emotional duress experienced while in college.

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