

RAISING AWARENESS OF SUICIDE ON COLLEGE CAMPUS  
THROUGH STORYTELLING AND MUTUAL-AID

A Project Presented to the Faculty  
of  
California State University, Stanislaus

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
of Master of Social Work

By  
Amber E. Simmons  
May 2017

CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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Date

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this Graduate Project and the entire culmination of my education to my family. To my father who wanted more from me at a young age, instilling the drive and determination that I hold to date. From enrolling me into college level courses when I was only in high school to pushing me into the direction of college and never allowing my fears to get the best of me. You saw something in me that I did not, and I thank you for allowing me to want more for myself. To my mother, what can I say? You are my rock. I thank you for being the most supportive person in my life. Words cannot express the connection we share. You are my person. I thank you for being the shoulder I can cry on and a listening ear when I needed to vent. To my brother who gave me multiple summer jobs that kept a roof over my head, food on the table and money towards tuition; words cannot express how thankful I am. Last but certainly not least, to my sister, I thank you for opening my eyes to the world of Mental Health. If it were not for you, I probably would not be in this profession determined to help others who struggle with suicidal ideations. You taught me to never fear mental illness by teaching me there was always light at the end of the tunnel. Each one of you stuck by my side, even when I shut down and isolated myself by pushing you all away. This was true especially during the darkest moment in my life and I thank you for never giving up on me

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## ABSTRACT

The National Vital Statistics reports that suicide is the second leading cause of death among 10 to 34 year olds (Kochanek, Murphy, XU & Tejada-Vera,2016). Although suicide is the number two cause of death for 10 to 34 year olds, it is the second leading cause of death among American college students (Schwartz,2006). In an effort to reduce suicide and increase suicide prevention on the campus of California State University, Stanislaus, this Graduate Project held an event to raise awareness and enhance suicide prevention resources on campus. Furthermore, the aim of this current Graduate Project was to create a safe space for students to discuss the topic of suicide with peers with the utilization of a panel, storytelling and Mutual-Aid. The Project Designer utilized evaluations to determine if the panelist were effective in raising awareness of suicide and enhancement of suicide preventive resources on campus. A total of 38 students attended the event. The evaluations showed that 78% of students found the panelist were most effective in raising awareness of suicide. The data also showed that 58% of students discussed how impactful the sharing of personal stories by the panelist were and 32% wrote how they felt the event created a safe space for them to talk about the topic of suicide and suicide prevention openly. In addition, 50% of students felt that they would not change anything to enhance their learning. While answering one of the question, one student wrote “nothing, what I experienced I did not expect but I can honestly can say I loved every minute of it.” The implications for this Graduate Project, in terms of social work practice, was to bring awareness to the stigmatized topic of suicide on college campuses. This current

Graduate Project did this by creating a safe space where students could start the conversation regarding suicide and suicide prevention. As there is little research around the utilization of storytelling and Mutual-Aid in regards to the topic of suicide, future research should include these measures as a means in raise awareness of suicide and suicide prevention on college campuses.



## INTRODUCTION

### **Project Background**

The National Vital Statistics reports suicide is the second leading cause of death among 10 to 34 year olds (Kochanek, Murphy, XU & Tejada-Vera,2016). On average, there are 117 suicides per day, or one every 13 minutes, with men's rate of suicide being 17.7 compared to women's 4.5. This means men complete suicide 3.5 times more often than women. White males accounted for seven out of every 10 suicides in 2014 (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2017). Though men complete suicide more, women attempt suicide at a higher rate (Emory University, 2016). In 2014, 14.7% of Caucasians completed suicide compared to 10.9 of American Indians and Alaska Natives, 6.3% of Hispanics and 5.5% of African Americans (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2017).

Although suicide is the number two cause of death for 10 to 34 year olds it is the second leading cause of death among American college students (Schwartz,2006). Each year U.S colleges and universities reports more than 1,350 suicides are committed by students, which computes to about three completed suicides per day (Peer Project, 2014b). One in 10 students has made a plan to attempt or complete suicide at one point in their life. (Emory University, 2016; Rao, Taani, Lozano & Kennedy, 2015).

Stedman's Medical Dictionary defines suicide as an act of intentionally causing one's own death (Stedman, 2005). Self- Injury or self- harm is where an

individual attempts suicide with the desired outcome to end one's life that does not result in death (Krug, 2002). Suicidal ideations, on the other hand, is when an individual has a thought to end one's life but has made not active effort to do so (Krug, 2002). In 2014, roughly eight percent of adults ages 18-25 had serious thoughts of suicide compared to four percent of adults over the age of 26, which indicates that college students are an at-risk population for suicide (Lipari, Piscopa, Kroutil & Miller, 2015).

One study utilizing a stratified random sample of 108,538 students across 70 participating U.S colleges and universities found that at some point in their life, over half of the college students reported some form of suicidal thinking (Drum, Brownson, Denmark & Smith, 2009, p.216). The researchers found that 18 % of undergraduates and 15 % of graduate students had seriously considered attempting suicide at some point in their life (Drum et al., 2009). Among the students who had seriously considered attempting suicide, 47 % of undergraduates and 43 % of graduate students had three or more periods of this serious ideation (Drum et al., 2009). In addition, the study found that 37 % of undergraduates and 30% of graduate students held suicidal thoughts at some point within the past 12 months (Drum et al., 2009). Within the previous 12 months, six percent of undergraduates and four percent of graduates have seriously considered suicide (Drum et al., 2009). Of those students who seriously considered suicide, 93 % of undergraduates and 90 % of graduate students had thoughts of some way of ending their life or a specific plan (Drum et al., 2009). Young adults who identify as Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual are at

higher risk to have suicidal behavior (Peer Project, 2014b). College students who identify as queer are 63 % more likely to feel overwhelmed by all that they had to do and roughly six percent felt depressed compared to their heterosexual classmates (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Ramirez, Aragon, Suchard & Hurtado, 2014).

Social science research points to several reasons why college students may attempt or complete suicide. One reason has to do with the stigma surrounding suicide. Stigmas are essentially dishonorable labels attached to a person or population (Takahashi, 1997). Suicide continues to be riddled with shame, stigma, and a mystery on college campuses (Rao, Taani, Lozano & Kennedy, 2015). Shame, fear, lack of knowledge surround the topic of suicide and the stigma attached contributes to the high hurdle that prevents college students from discussing and seeking help (Sudak et al., 2008). Students who are at increased risk of suicide rarely seek help (Rao et al., 2015). One study has shown that up to 80 % of students who completed suicide had not received on-campus counseling services (Kisch, Leino & Silverman, 2005). Many high-risk students do not seek help because they do not want to be perceived as weak, lacking the willpower if they discussed their suicidal ideations (Sudak, Maxim & Carpenter, 2008). Stigma can also prevent friends and family members from helping students by not providing them the support they may need or acknowledgement of there being a problem (World Health Organization, 2014). Stigma plays a prominent role in the battle to increase awareness and implement suicide prevention programs (World Health Organization, 2014). With the stigma associated with suicide, college students are unwilling to seek help during their time

of need. These above statistics presented shows addressing stigmas associated with suicide begins with the individual seeking help. Thus psychoeducation must be provided to students, their friends and family members to reduce stigma.

Increased emotional distress is another explanation for why college students may attempt or complete suicide. One study of 227 full-time enrolled freshman college students who entered four-year Colleges and Universities were asked to rate their emotional health (i.e. feelings of anxiety, overwhelmed by all that they had to do...) in relation to others their age and the prevalence with which they felt depressed. The research showed that student's emotional health decreased to 50.7% which is at the lowest ever (Eagan et al., 2014). In addition, the study found that 10 % of college freshmen reported frequently feeling depressed within the previous year, which is roughly four percent higher than in 2009 where frequently depressed was at its lowest percentage (Eagan et al., 2014). The study also found that the amount of time an incoming freshman is socializing with friends has declined. Compared to approximately 38% when the study was conducted 27 years ago, 18% of incoming freshman spend about 16 hours per week socializing with friends (Eagan et al., 2014). The decrease in peer socializing relates to suicides on college campuses because other factors contributing to college students suicide attempts were feelings of isolation and hopelessness (Westfield et al.,2005).

Another contributing factor suggested in the social science literature is the impact of college on students. A 2014 annual report conducted by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, surveyed over 280 U.S universities and colleges and found

that 16.4 % of college students attended counseling for mental health concerns after starting college; the study also found that 12.9 % of college students started taking prescription medication for mental health concerns after starting college. At some point in their life, almost 31 % of college students have seriously considered attempting suicide. In addition, the study found that 16.5 % of students have seriously considered attempting suicide within the last two weeks with 18.8 % of males seriously considering attempting suicide within the last two weeks and females at 15.2 % (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2014).

In addition to student's emotional health, there are many other risk factors correlated with suicide on college campuses. Family history of suicide, violence in the home, experience of sexual abuse, and stressful life events are also risk factors correlated with suicides (Beautrais, 2000). In summary, the stigma associated with suicide, an increase in depression and isolation, and the impact that college has on students contribute to suicide on college campuses, among other factors.

### **Objectives of the Project**

The topic of suicide is a taboo especially on college campuses. Over the last two years, California State University, Stanislaus has taken the initiative to reduce the stigma associated with suicide by implementing the Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) program. The QPR provides an hour training for students, faculty and staff members where individuals identify the signs of suicide and learn basic prevention skills. In addition to the QPR training, CSU Stanislaus implemented the RED Folder program in classrooms on campus, which allows students and faculty to help individuals in

distress. The motto of the Red Folder program is to encourage members of the CSU Stanislaus community to do something should they see something. The Red Folder contains different scenarios of how an individual should respond when they see an individual in distress and includes information about the appropriate person to contact (The California State University, 2013).

While there are great resources to have on campus, the goal of this Graduate Project was to raise awareness and enhance suicide prevention resources on the California State University, Stanislaus campus. The target population was specifically students on campus, which differed from the QPR and Red Folder initiatives that focuses on students, faculty and staff. The current Graduate Project utilized a panel consisting of a Licensed Psychologist, Master of Social Work Inpatient Clinician, a parent and student to give an array of experts who have experience with the topic of suicide. The aim of the current Graduate Project was to create a safe space for students to talk about the topic of suicide with their peers. According to Fougère (2008), narratives are ways in which identities are fashioned and social belonging is constructed. Fougère argues that through narratives, people draw on spatial metaphors to indicate their belonging in a particular space. By creating a safe space, students would have the opportunity to have a sense of belonging through narratives of peers' discussion of suicide. Because the target population had an array of participation from students who may have considered or attempted to those wanting a safe space to freely discuss the topic of suicide and suicide prevention, Mutual-Aid was utilized with the hope to be a contributing factor in creating a safe space. Mutual-Aid as

discussed by Schwartz (1985) is a group of individuals who help one another on a common problem, in this case suicide on college campus. The enhancement of Mutual-Aid through narrative storytelling would aim at creating commonality amongst college students in the hopes to start decreasing the isolation and begin to strip away the stigma associated with suicide on college campuses. The goal of this Current Graduate Project was start the conversation of suicide and suicide prevention on college campus in a safe space.

### **Significant of the Project**

With suicide being the second leading cause of death among American college students, this Graduate Project was significant to the social work profession because it can bring awareness to the stigmatized topic of suicide on a college campus (Schwartz, 2006). According to the National Association of Social Workers “social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people...These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social Workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services and resources...” (2008, pg. 3, par.7). This Graduate Project strived to adhere to the original mission of the National Association of Social Workers specifically the social justice aspect as it created a safe environment where students feel open enough to share their experiences in an attempt to strip away this stigma associated with individuals who are suicidal. This Graduate Project also targeted only students on California State University, Stanislaus campus. Targeting only students is

fundamental to this Graduate Project and the social justice aspect because in the responsibility of social workers to help vulnerable and disenfranchised individuals who may be unable to speak up for themselves because of fear of being stigmatized. With the social justice aspect in mind, the project designer targeted only students because research shows that students who are at an increased risk of suicide rarely seek help. This Graduate Project was designed to start the conversation of suicide in an attempt to empower vulnerable and disenfranchised students to seek help. Finally, this Graduate Project attempted to raise awareness of how common suicide and suicidal thoughts are by bringing together students who may have experienced similar situations to provide support to one another through narrative dialogues



## LITERATURE REVIEW

The topic of suicide continues to be riddled with shame, stigma and a mystery on college campus (Rao et al., 2015). Drawing upon past research, there is an understanding that researchers are continuously discovering the prevalence of suicide on college campus including some of the risk factors that may contribute to suicide, such as, an increase in emotional distress, as well as, the stigma surrounding suicide. It is fundamental to fully understand, not only the statistical component of suicide on college campuses, but the progression of events that gave birth to suicide prevention in the United States. In addition, this literature review will look at some of the research representing suicide rate on college campus, the historical context and suicide prevention endeavors in the United States, as well as, how storytelling along with Mutual-Aid is beneficial in raising awareness of suicide on college campus.

### **Suicide on College Campuses**

According to the Centers of Disease Control (2014), suicide is the second leading cause of death among 10 to 24 year olds. It is also known that the average age of college students ranging from 18-24 year olds (American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment [ACHA-NCHA], 2011). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder-5, (American Psychiatric Association) [APA], 2013, defines suicide as:

Suicidal behavior is seen in the context of a variety of mental disorders, most commonly bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, schizophrenia,

schizoaffective disorder, anxiety disorder (in particular, panic disorder associated with catastrophic content and PTSD flashbacks), substance use disorders (especially alcohol use disorder), borderline personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, eating disorder and adjustment disorder. It is rarely manifested by individuals with no discernible pathology...(p.803)

Taking this into consideration it is important to consider the mental distress many college students experience, as a variety of these mental disorders are prevalent amongst the student body. A National survey conducted by ACHA-NCHA (2011) with a sample of 84,760 undergraduate students found that within the last year, about half of the students felt overwhelmed with anxiety. In addition, nearly 32% of undergraduate students felt so depressed that it was difficult to function with roughly 59% feeling lonely and 63% feeling very sad within the last 12 months. The findings also showed that within the past 12 months, nearly 88% of students felt overwhelmed by all that they had to do. Furthermore, the researchers found that within the last 12 months, roughly seven percent of students have seriously considered suicide with one percent attempting. The survey also found that 11% of undergraduate college students had been diagnosed or treated by a professional within the last 12 months for anxiety with 10% of students being diagnosed or treated for depression. The findings also showed that roughly seven percent of students reported being diagnosed or treated by a professional for both depression and anxiety.

As mentioned in a previous section, there are many other risk factors correlated with suicide on college campuses. Family history of suicide, violence in

the home, experience of sexual abuse, and stressful life events [academic, financial, family problems, death of family member or friend, intimate relationship, sleep difficulties, career-related issues, personal health, personal appearance etc....] are also risk factors correlated with suicide (Beautrais, 2000). In the National survey conducted by ACHA-NCHA (2011) within the last 12 months, roughly 46% of students stated academics and 35% of students reported finances was traumatic or very difficult to handle. Other traumatic or very difficult to handle examples the researchers gave as an option to choose from were the following: family problems, death of family member or friend, intimate relationship, sleep difficulties, career-related issues, personal health issues and personal appearances. The researchers found that almost 50% of students reported having three or more of the above listed traumatic or very difficult to handle examples.

### **Overview of Suicide Prevention in the United States**

In 1958, the United States opened its first suicide prevention center in Los Angeles, California with funding from the U.S. Public Health Service (US Surgeon General et al., 2012, p.10). It was not until 1983, when the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) established a violence prevention unit, that the alarming increase in youth suicide rates was finally brought into public light. This was a great start in raising awareness for suicide but was met with little funding and support. In the mid-1990s, the problem of suicide was starting to gain speed on a National level when families who's loved ones completed suicide mobilized grassroots organizations demanding the problem of suicide be acknowledged on a National scale (US Surgeon

General et al., 2012, p. 96). These grassroots organizations did not go unnoticed because in 1996 the United Nations (U.N.) recognized suicide as a National problem and suicide prevention as a National priority. With this new-found recognition, studies began to examine suicide and suicide prevention. Soon after, many other key milestones paved the way of the advancement of suicide prevention nationally.

Among these milestones was a 2002 report *Reducing Suicide: A National Imperative*, that identified gaps in knowledge about suicide, prevention strategies and research designs for the study of suicide (Goldsmith, Pellmar, Kleinman, & Bunney, 2002).

In 2004, one of the most important pieces of legislative achievements in the field of youth suicide prevention made its debut. The Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act (GLSMA) established the first significant federal grant program specifically targeting suicide prevention of youths; this funding included universities and colleges (Goldston et al., 2010). The Act was named after Senator Gordon Smith's son, a college student who ended his life in 2003. The GLSMA set aside funding for campuses and tribal communities to develop, evaluate and improve early intervention of suicide prevention programs (Goldston et al., 2010). This legislation has three broad provisions which are as follows: 1. establishes suicide prevention resource center, 2. provides States and Tribes funds for youth suicide intervention and prevention, 3. provides funds to College and Universities to provide mental health and substance use disorder services, as well as, outreach on campuses (Goldston et al., 2010).

Recent progression in suicide prevention in the United States includes the revision of the National Strategy in 2012 (US Surgeon General et al., 2012, p. 17). One of the most relevant revisions of the National Strategy, relating to suicide prevention on college campuses, dealt with increase knowledge of the different types of intervention that are more effective for suicide prevention and increased awareness of the importance of enforcing suicide prevention efforts in an effective manner (US Surgeon General et al., 2012, p.11). These milestones, demonstrated throughout recent years, shows ongoing progression of suicide prevention on college campuses.

#### **Suicide Prevention at California State University, Stanislaus**

Over the last two years, California State University, Stanislaus has taken a prominent role to reduce the stigma associated with suicide on campus by implementing two major initiatives: Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) training and the Red Folder. QPR is an hour training designed to educate gatekeepers about the warning signs of suicide and how to appropriately respond. Gatekeepers are individuals that may encounter a distressed person; gatekeepers can be anyone such as teachers, family, neighbors and law enforcement (Quinnett, 2012, p. 3). QPR covers three sequential steps which are as follows: 1. Question the distressed person's longing or determination in wanting to end of their, 2. Persuade the individual to look for and come to terms with getting help, 3. Refer the distressed person to relevant follow-up care (Quinnett, 2012, p. 3). Throughout the training, at minimum, gatekeepers should be able to recognize the signs of someone who is at high risk of suicide, appropriately intervene with the individual at risk and refer the individual to

relevant follow-up care (Quinnett, 2012, p. 3). One study done in Tennessee found that over 42% of gatekeepers identified at least one at-risk youth and intervened within six months after taking the course (Quinnett,2012). Furthermore, a study where the participants were Master of Social Work students found that those who received the QPR training showed greater improvements in suicide prevention knowledge including identifying the warning signs and appropriately intervening (Jacobson, Osteen, Sharpe & Pastoor, 2012).

The Red Folder, like QPR in some aspects, is a guidance table designed to help students and faculty aid individuals in distress. Reminisce of the GLSMA legislation piece is displayed in this guidance table as the Red Folder is a prevention resource provided to the student body. The table consists of three situations, Red, Yellow and Green, and the appropriate contact the observer should utilize given the situation that the distressed person falls under (The California State University, 2013). The Red category is utilized with an individual is clearly putting themselves in a dangerous or life threatening situation which including self-harming behavior. The observer, in this situation, should contact 911 or campus police (The California State University, 2013). Yellow is employed when the individual shows signs of distress but the observer is unclear of the severity of distress the individual is exhibiting. In this case, the observer should contact the Counseling and Psychological Service on campus. The last situation, Green, is when the individual is having serious academic and/or personal issues and could use some appropriate resources. In this situation, the observer is not concerned for the individual's immediate safety as the individual is

not displaying any alarming unsafe behavior. In this case the observer should refer the individual to proper campus resources (The California State University, 2013). In addition to the table, the Red Folder has examples of indicators observers should look for in distressed individuals. Some safety risk indicators include making statements about harming self and others, unwarranted anger outburst and academic assignments riddled with themes of extreme anger, worthlessness, isolation and acting out behavior. Some psychological indicators include extreme amounts of tearful moments and revealing personal distress such as depression, thoughts of suicide, money and family problems (The California State University, 2013).

### **Benefits of Storytelling**

The utilization of storytelling or narrative has been relevant in multiple practices within social sciences since the 1980s (Lee, 2014). Storytelling is an application for evoking one's own experience (Lee, 2014). Through storytelling, individuals can convey their perspective and understanding of social issues upon others (Lee, 2014). Storytelling is a common practice for the human language. Through storytelling, individuals can situate themselves in relation to others. In addition, individuals have a better understanding of the cultural and social expectations of a particular space (Lee, 2014). Researchers and social work practitioners utilize storytelling as it is a useful tool to explore participants experiences and accounts of their lives; storytelling attempt to provide a deeper and more intimate view of an individual's life (Lee, 2014). Per Fougère (2008), narratives are ways in which identities are fashioned and social belonging is constructed.

Fougère argues that through narratives, people draw on spatial metaphors to indicate their belonging in a particular space. Fougère's argument is a powerful one that could lend its ear to one's sense of belonging (Lee,2014). According to Sacks (1997), engaging in narratives allows us to live "in a world of strangers" (pg.10), where we are able to choose who we want to connect with and give meaning to those narratives that will cultivate our own sense of the world. One study Fougère conducted showed that gaining knowledge in others narratives gives one the opportunity to expand their narrative and/or gives one a sense of belong in a particular space (Fougère,2008).

In the case of this current project, storytelling would give the students the opportunity to have a sense of belonging and/or expand their knowledge base as peers discuss the topic of suicide. According to Bruner (1991), utilizing narratives gives the narrator the opportunity to give meaning to their experiences while organizing their experiences. Most importantly, Bruner argues, narratives allow the narrator to verbally conceptualize their experience in a discernible manner. In this regards, researchers benefit from storytelling because they are able to discern the process through which narrators navigate their experiences and most importantly how their experiences impact their connections to others and understanding of their social context to which they interact with (Bruner 1991). Through storytelling, listeners become more intrigued with the narrator's experience. This desire of understanding other's stories drives us to tell and listen to each other stories (Blum-Kulka, 1993). This current project would lay the foundation for students to give voice to their



experience as well as motivate others to actively listen and share their stories with regards to the topic of suicide.

### **Benefits of Mutual- Aid**

The technique of Mutual-aid is a group where individuals with similar experiences help one another work through issues (Schwartz, 1985). Mutual- Aid ran groups have been seen in various 12-step programs such as Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA). Mutual-aid is beneficial because within these groups a system is created where individuals come together with others who are in the same boat, essentially creating a network of support. In addition, the group members learn they are not alone by understanding they are not the only one confronted with the same problem. This process essentially attempts to decrease the isolation of the experience had as group members discover there are others who have had similar experiences. Through these Mutual-Aid ran groups, individuals can self-disclose information fundamentally divulging their stories, stressors, feeling and issues related to the common topic (Shulman, 2012).

There have been many studies exploring Mutual-Aid ran groups. One study in which rural Bachelor of Social Worker or BSW students participated in a stress-management group learning group work skills, found mutual-aid ran groups reduced stress and taught self-care strategies (Clements & Minnick, 2012). Another study conducted with 192 Master of Social Work Graduate students focusing on developing group work skills found roughly 90% of students felt mutual-aid groups was an excellent approach for learning group skills (Molina & Jacinto, 2015). In addition, the

study found that 49% of student felt the mutual-aid group improved their confidence running groups presently or in the prospective future a great deal (Molina & Jacinto, 2015). Furthermore, the study found that 62% of students were more willing to participate in a mutual-aid group in the future (Molina & Jacinto, 2015). Moreover, the study discovered that through the Mutual- Aid groups, students developed different strategies to cope with stress. In the same token, this Current project utilized Mutual-Aid groups with the hopes that individuals would discover different strategies in understanding suicide and suicidal prevention for themselves and/or for others.

### **Conclusion**

The literature review has served as a guide for this current project. This literature review highlights additional statistical evidence of the suicide rate on college campus, the development of suicide preventions in the United States along with current suicide preventions on the campus of California State University, Stanislaus, and benefits of utilizing. storytelling and Mutual-aid in a group setting. The utilization of storytelling and mutual-aid will allow the group members to open up about their experience with the topic of suicide. Therefore, the purpose of this current Graduate project was to raise awareness and enhance suicide prevention resources on the campus of California State University, Stanislaus.

## METHODS

### **Project Design**

This Graduate Project took place at California State University, Stanislaus campus on Tuesday, February 28, 2017 from 5:00 pm-8:00 pm in the South Dining Hall. This date was chosen in order to give students time to acclimate to their new Spring semester which started on January 26, 2017. This project developer wanted to facilitate the project before Spring break, which was from March 20-24, 2017 so the students could utilize the skills and newfound knowledge in their daily lives and remainder of the school year. This project designer chose dates towards the end of February beginning of March in case students had midterms during the last week prior to Spring Break.

This current Graduate Project collaborated with different departments on campus to further enrich the project as a whole. One of the departments this Graduate Project collaborated with was Peer Project located on the campus of California State University, Stanislaus. Peer Project, under the guidance of Megan Rowe who is the Health Education Coordinator, focuses on prevention and education classes geared towards eliminating the stigma associated with mental health. This organization is also geared towards reducing the risk of suicides on college campus. Peer Project empowers students to support their peers who are at risk of suicide on campus as well as creating a safe space for students to find solace. The services that Peer Project provides includes presentations on Mental Health Awareness and suicide prevention,

peer support groups, Suicide Prevention Training such as QPR and referrals to outside agencies. The Peer Project department also holds a Mental Health First Aid training where individuals from the public can understand and appropriately respond to signs of mental illnesses such as depression and self-injury (Peer Project, 2014a).

Another department this Graduate Project collaborated with is the Student Health Center- Health Education and Promotion department located on the campus of California State University, Stanislaus in the Student Health Center. Health Education and Promotion, led by Megan Rowe, believes cultivating one's health is key to a student's success in college. This department focuses on providing wellness support so a student can transcend academically. Qualified staff provides educational classes concentrating on topics such as nutrition, stress management, alcohol and sexual health (Stanislaus State, 2014a). Under the direction of Megan Rowe, these two departments contributed to this Graduate Project by reserving a room for up to thirty people, place a short description of the event on the Stanislaus State Calendar of Events, helped design and promote the flyer for the event, provided a catering budget of up to three hundred dollars and incentives for students. This project designer emailed and held monthly meetings with Megan Rowe discussing the progress of the project as well as any areas of improvement. This project designer choose to collaborate with Peer Project and the Student Health Center-Health Education and Promotion because their goals align with the ones of this current Graduate Project such as suicide prevention on campus, Suicide Prevention Training and education on overall wellness.

Another department this Graduate Project collaborated with is the Psychological Counseling Services located on the campus of California State University, Stanislaus. The Psychological Counseling Service, under the direction of Dr. Dan Berkow, focuses on promoting and cultivating students psychological and emotional well-being. The services that this department provides are individual and group counseling to students on campus. In individual counseling, students work on common issues such as anxiety, negative or depressed mood and stress management to just name a few. In group counseling, students can contribute and relate to other peers. In doing so, they can normalize their experience and have a sense that they are not the only one going through things in their life. This project designer decided to collaborate with the Psychological Counseling Services because this department works closely with students going through negative or depressive symptoms (Stanislaus State, 2014b). In addition, the project chair was consulted on every step of the project.

### **Panelist**

The Psychological Counseling Services contributed to the current Graduate Project by having the Director of the department speak as a panelist. The other panelist consisted of Joella Brewer who has her Associate Clinical Social Work, this project designer and a mother whose son ended his life. The panelists were chosen because part of the aim of the current Graduate Project was to give an array of experts who have experience with the topic of suicide in order to discuss the topic of suicide and suicide prevention in a safe environment. The first panelist was Dr. Dan Berkow,

who is the director of the department of the Psychological Counseling Services. Dr. Berkow is a licensed psychologist who has worked with students in counseling dealing with thoughts about suicide and previous experience presenting on suicide prevention. Dr. Berkow discussed the risk factors and warning signs he sees as a psychologist as well as preventative measures to help a peer who is a risk of suicide. The project designer emailed and held monthly meetings with Dr. Dan Berkow to collaboratively discuss his role as well as what both him and this project designer would like to see come out of the current Graduate Project. The second panelist was Joella Brewer, who has her Masters of Social Work and currently working towards getting licensed as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. Joella works at a locked psychiatric facility as an inpatient clinician. Individuals that come to the facility that she works at are adults who have been held on a 5150 meaning they are being involuntarily held on the ground of being a danger to themselves, to others and/or unable to care for themselves. As a panelist, Ms. Brewer discussed what she sees as an inpatient clinician working with individuals who have been held on the ground of danger to self. The third panelist was this project designer who shared her experiences with suicidal ideations she held during college. The last panelist was mother who son ended his life, the identity of the mother and son's name will not be given to maintain their confidentiality. As a panelist, the mother gave her insight on the impact that suicide can have on a family as well as the importance of raising awareness of suicide prevention.

### **Advertising Project**

To promote this current Graduate Project, this project designer created a flyer in December 2016 that was distributed when Spring semester began on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017. This project designer chose this date to distribute the flyer as it gave students a month to sign up for the event. In December and January, this project designer created an email that was sent to faculty promoting the event to their students. In addition, a short description of the event was posted on the Stanislaus State Calendar of Events. The flyer was also posted in the Psychological Counseling Service and distributed to each of the Psychological Counselors to be given to students who may benefit from the event. In addition, the flyer was distributed throughout the students' dorms on campus and posted on the Master of Social Work, California State University, Stanislaus website as an advertisement measure.

### **During the Project**

At the beginning of the event, a short disclaimer was given for individuals attending the event. The disclaimer informed the individuals that if at any point, they needed to excuse themselves from the event, they were free to do so and rejoin when they were ready. Follow-up resources were given to all attendees. In addition to the short disclaimer, this project designer asked students to verbally identify some common rules the group can agree upon in order to create a safe atmosphere. The agreed upon rules was written down and displayed throughout the event for reference

Throughout the event, this Graduate Project utilized the Mutual- Aid approach to enhance the event. As mentioned earlier Mutual-Aid is a group where individuals

help one another on a common problem, in this case, suicide on a college campus. In this sense, Mutual- Aid works as a helping system where group member along with the leader need one another to work through the common problem (Schwartz, 1985). This helping system cultivated many helping relationships that groups can utilized in other group settings when a peer may be in need. This graduate designer used parts of the Mutual-Aid process to enrich this Graduate Project that included the concept of sharing data, discussing a taboo area and the all in the same boat phenomenon. Under the Mutual-Aid process, sharing data argues that group members can benefit from one another through sharing of pertinent data (Shulman, 2012). Sharing data formulates that each group member has different unique life experiences that could benefit others in the group (Shulman, 2012). This concept has a similar ideology of that of disclosing one's narratives as described by Fougère as through narratives, people draw on spatial metaphors to indicate their belonging in a particular space (Fougère, 2008). Discussing a taboo area, under the Mutual-Aid process, believes that group members bring with them norms and societal taboos that already exist in society (Shulman, 2012). Norms are guidelines of behavior that is for the most part accepted by the majority of society (Shulman, 2012). As mentioned earlier, discussing suicide is a taboo topic, so this graduate designer created a safe space where group members can begin to develop new norms and challenge some of the existing norms surrounding suicide. Under the Mutual-Aid process, the all-in- the-same-boat phenomenon argues that as a group members express their feelings of a taboo area, other group members may start to discover unaware similar feelings of the taboo area



that they had not thought or considered prior to the group (Shulman, 2012). Through this process, group members discover a comforting fact that they are not alone in these new feelings and begin to understand that they are all in the same boat (Shulman, 2012). This project designer choose to utilized sharing data, discussing a taboo area and the all in the same boat phenomenon in the group in order to enhance the creation of commonality amongst college students by decreasing isolation and stripping away the stigma associated with suicide on a college campus.

At the end of the event, an evaluation was given to participates to determine if the panel was effective in raising awareness of suicide, if the information was informative, some of the things participants liked about the program, some things that would have been done differently, as well as, if the students would recommend this event to another student. This graduate designer utilized Newman & Kreuger (2003) to analyze the evaluation. Newman & Kreuger proposes a five-part plan looking for patterns and themes in data. The first part consists of sorting and classifying the data. This stage consists of reading and organizing the data. The second part is Open Coding. During this phase, the project designer identifies the themes, labeling themes into categories. The themes are created from the evaluation questions. The third part is Axial Coding which consist of developing a coding scheme from the initial themes. During this phase this graduate designer will organize themes and identify key concepts through the coding process. The fourth part is Selective Coding. This phase is to examine the data for the last time for any coding that might have been left out. The final stage is Interpreting and Elaborating. During this stage, the project designer

analyzed the evaluation to look for themes in order to determine the effectiveness of the event.

## CONCLUSION

### **Overview of Project Experience**

This Graduate Project took place at the California State University, Stanislaus campus on Tuesday, February 28, 2017, at 5:00 pm in the South Dining Hall with a total of 38 participants. Upon arrival to the event, guest signed in and was provided a raffle ticket for prizes that were distributed throughout the event. In each of the five raffle prizes were a Peer Project t-shirt, water bottle, pen and a \$10 gift card to Starbucks all of which were donated by the Student Health Center. Once inside, students helped themselves to a spread of pasta, salad, and refreshments which were also donated by the Student Health Center. At each table that students were sitting at were pens, index cards, exit ticket evaluations and resources about suicide and suicide prevention including local and campus resources for them to take upon departure.

At the start of the event, this project developer introduced themselves and welcomed students to the event. This project designer went over some housekeeping items such as explaining the materials at the table especially the purpose of the exit ticket evaluations, index cards, and resources. In addition, this Project Designer gave a trigger warning since the topic of suicide is a sensitive subject. This project designer explained to the group that if at any time the content trigger something or made anyone feel uncomfortable then they were welcomed to leave and rejoin when they were ready. Furthermore, the writer stated they were available after the event to debrief the content discussed. Since the event was about creating a space for

individuals to discuss the topic of suicide, the students were asked what a safe space looked like for them and some common rules the group as a whole could agree upon in order to create a safe space. The student's answers were written on a white poster paper that was displayed in plain sight to serve as a reference point throughout the event. To get a unified sense that a safe space was created, this project designed asked students if they agreed with and would be able to adhere to the standard rules to which they all agreed. After the housekeeping items had been discussed, this projected designer commenced with the event.

In the opening of the event, general background information on college statistics of suicide on a national and statewide level was given. A TED talk was shown of an individual who had experienced suicidal ideations and attempt; the TED talk also discussing why an individual might consider suicide in the first place was shown. A trigger warning was given prior to the video. After the video was shown, the group processed the general background statistics and TED talk and many students shared their opinions. When the discussion digressed about forty minutes later, a quick five-minute break and raffle prize were given. Once the break was over, this project designer moved to the panel section of the event.

Prior to the panelist speaking, a trigger warning was given. This project designer introduced each panelist in the following order: this Project Designer, the mother whose son ended his life, Ms. Brewer and Dr. Berkow. This was the same order that each panelist spoken in. The panel section lasted about an hour. Once the panel section ended, there was a quick five-minute break and raffle prizes

distribution. After the break was finished, the questions and opportunity to share experience portion of the event commenced where students got to ask the panelists questions and share their experience with the topic of suicide. Prior to this session beginning, this project designer briefly went over the common rules that were agreed upon at the opening of the event to solidify the creation of a safe space. During the question and share experience portion, panelists answered questions such as how to approach someone who has suicidal ideations, how to start a conversation with someone who is actively suicidal and some of the resources on campus just to identify a few questions. Some students shared their experiences with suicidal ideations and attempts, as well as, siblings who struggle with suicidal thoughts. The panelists also answered written questions that were on index cards from students who did not feel comfortable asking questions in front of the group. The questions and sharing of experience section lasted roughly an hour. In closing of this section, this project designer thanked everyone for coming to the event especially to each panelist. A friendly reminder to take the resources about suicide and suicide prevention, as well as, filling out the evaluations was given. The event, in sum, created a space for students to learn and discuss the topic of suicide and suicide prevention.

Implementing this project has given voice to this Project Designer. Prior to this event, this project designer was an extremely shy and timid student who was unwilling to step out of her shell. This Project Designer has stepped out of her shell by speaking to the different departments that contributed to the success of the Graduate Project such as the Student Health Center, Psychological Counseling

Services and coordinator at the dorms on campus. The experience with implementing this project has taught this Project Designer the importance in raising awareness of suicide and suicide prevention on campus by the number of students that were in attendance.

### **Lessons Learned**

This project designer invited the participants to fill out an exit evaluation upon completion of the event to determine if this graduate project was effective and educational in raising awareness of suicide and suicide prevention on campus. There was a total of 36 out of 38 students who completed the evaluation. The evaluation consisted of scaling and write in questions. One of the scaling questions asked the students to rate on a scale of one to five with five being most effective and one being less effective, how effective was the panel in raising awareness of suicide. The evaluation showed that 78% of students found the panelists were most effective in raising awareness of suicide with 19% stating effective and 3% remaining neutral. The other scaling question focused on how informative the event was by asking students to rate on a scale of one to five with five being very informative and one being not informative, how informative would they rate the event. The results determined that 81% of students felt the program was very informative with 19% stating informative. The evaluation also asked the students if they would recommend this program to another student. The results determined that 100% of the students reported they would recommend this program to another student. The data also

revealed that more than half of the students felt the event was effective and informative in raising awareness of suicide and suicide prevention on campus.

This project designer utilized Newman & Kreuger (2003) to analyze the open-ended responses of the evaluations. The first write-in question asked students to identify some things they liked about the program. The major themes that emerged from this question were storytelling, panelists, and safe space. Under the major theme of storytelling, 58% or 22 students discussed how impactful the sharing of personal stories by the panelists were. One student wrote “having the panelist share personal stories were amazing. As someone that has dealt with this, it really helps to hear from others” while another student wrote “I like how everyone got to share their stories. It was very empowering listening to everyone talk about the issue.” As Fougere argues and this data demonstrates, Storytelling gives individuals the opportunity to expand their knowledge and/or a sense that they belong in a particular space. The data also speaks to the benefits of Mutual-Aid groups as students came together with other who were in the same boat, essentially creating a network of support.

Under the second major theme of panelists being effective, 42% or 16 students wrote how they liked the versatile and authenticity of the panelists. One student noted they liked “the diversity of the panelist, they all had something different to offer” with another student stating “I really enjoyed the panel presentation. I thought it was very insightful.” In sum, this major theme shows the utilization of panelists can be effective for students to talk about the topic of suicide and suicide prevention. Under the last major theme of safe space being effective, 32% or 12

students discussed how they felt the event created a safe space for them to talk about the topic of suicide and suicide prevention. A couple of the remarks shared by students were that the safe space “invited students to attend and talk about issues of suicide and mental illness”, “talk about safe space allowed others to talk about their experience” and “I loved that we set rules from the start, I felt safe and comfortable.”

The second write-in question asked students to discuss what could this program have done differently to enhance their learning. The major themes that emerged from this question were nothing to change, the volume of video, target population, statistics, and resources. Under the first major theme of nothing to change, 50% or 19 students felt that they would not change anything to enhance their learning. One student wrote “this program answered most of my questions. I would not change much about it. It was informative” with another student shared “I really liked the format the PowerPoint, the video and panel. Done very well.” Another student noted how they would not change anything writing “nothing, what I experienced I did not expect but I can honestly say I loved every minute of it”. Under the second major theme of the volume of video, 21% or eight students shared that the TED talk was hard to hear as the volume was low. Although a positive sound check was conducted prior to the start of the event, one thing that this project designer would have done differently would have been to bring a backup speaker if that the first one did not function properly. The third major theme of target population found that eight percent, or three students, felt like the event focused on how to help another person who is having suicidal thoughts rather than focusing on students who have their own suicidal



thoughts. One student stated the program “seemed to be more geared towards people who want to aid those who know people not people who feel suicidal themselves.” One thing that this project designer would have done differently would have been to advertise the Psychological Counseling Services on campus as a resource for individuals who are having suicidal thoughts. The fourth major theme of statistics showed that five percent, or two students, felt that more information, visual statistics and research would enhance their learning. The last major theme of resources found that five percent, or two students, shared that going into more details about internal and external resources available would enhance their learning. One thing that this project designer would have done differently would have been to go through the resources that were placed at each table which included information on the Psychological Counseling Services on campus and National Alliance on Mental Illness or NAMI. All things considered, this project designer learned that this event was much needed on campus but is just a stepping stone in stripping the stigma of the topic of suicide and suicide prevention on the campus of California State University, Stanislaus.

### **Implications**

One implication for this Graduate Project, concerning social work practice, was to bring awareness to the stigma associated with suicide on a college campus. This current Graduate Project did this by creating a safe space where students could start the conversation surrounding the topic of suicide and suicide prevention. In addition, in terms of social work practice, this Graduate Project strived to target only

students because as social workers it fundamental to help a vulnerable and disenfranchised individual who may not be able to speak up for themselves because of fear of being stigmatized. With that said, little to no research has been done on the utilization of Storytelling and Mutual-Aid to discuss suicide and suicide prevention as a means to decrease the stigma associated with the topic. In doing so, it is with the hope that this current Graduate Project will serve as a stepping stone to promote research surrounding the utilization of Storytelling and Mutual-Aid to promote suicide and suicide prevention on college campuses. This Graduate Designer had reached out to Megan Rowe, who is the Health Education Coordinator, with the hopes of continuing this as an annual event on the campus of California State University, Stanislaus in the upcoming years. From the meeting with Megan Rowe, this Graduate Designer sent out an email to the Master of Social Work student body on campus with the hopes that suicide prevention events such as this current Graduate Project continue on campus. This is because the implications of this Graduate Project demonstrated that utilizing panelists to evoke Storytelling and Mutual- Aid was effective and informative in raising awareness about the topic of suicide on college campus.

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