

Award Title

Friends Helping Friends Campus Suicide Prevention Program

Awards Categories

Student Health, Wellness, Counseling, and related

Executive Summary

According to the American College Health Association (ACHA, 2007), students face increased psychological and environmental stressors during the college years: 40% of college students reported having depressive symptoms, and roughly one in ten has “seriously considered suicide” in the last 12 months. In fact, suicide is the second leading cause of death among the college-age population (Kisch, et al., 2005; Westefeld, et al., 2006). About 1,088 college students take their own lives each year – roughly one every eight hours (National Mental Health Association, 2002) – with an estimated 100 to 200 suicide attempts for every one suicide completion (American Association of Suicidology, 2004).

It has been shown that many of the factors that put college students at particular risk for suicide can be treated before the situation reaches a critical point if students can be connected with available mental health services (Kadison, 2004). Unfortunately, 80-90% of those who die by suicide do not seek help from their college counseling centers (Kisch, et al., 2005) and only a minority of those at potential risk ever seek counseling services at all (Furr, et al., 2001). However, studies have shown that during times of distress 80% of college students planned to seek guidance and/or advice from a peer (Sharkin, et al., 2003). It is from this platform that The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, in collaboration with securing a suicide prevention grant from the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), created FHF Campus Suicide Prevention Program, a peer education and outreach program with a mission of empowering students to better understand mental health concerns and educating them to effectively assist a peer in gaining access to professional counseling services during times of distress.

The purpose of Friends Helping Friends (FHF) is to improve the help-seeking behavior of students in distress and those with potential suicide ideation. The program trains UNCG student volunteers as peer educators whose intent is to raise awareness and knowledge about mental health problems, mental disorders, and suicide warning signs on the UNCG campus; it helps reduce stigmas associated with mental health problems, mental disorders, and the utilization of professional counseling; it encourages the use of healthy strategies for managing mental health problems; and promotes UNCG’s Counseling & Testing Center and Wellness Center with both direct and indirect outreach initiatives. Peer educators involved with FHF possess a general knowledge of mental health concerns as well as a specific understanding of risk and protective factors of suicide among college student populations. They are rigorously trained using innovative materials created collaboratively by UNCG faculty and staff, including an original FHF Handbook. In addition, FHF offers a unique two-level gatekeeper training called I.C.A.R.E. (Identify, Connect, Ask, Refer, Encourage), which teaches participants how to intervene and

support a student demonstrating warning signs of suicide. Through these efforts, Friends Helping Friends strives to increase the likelihood that peers will identify and refer at-risk students, and to improve the help-seeking behavior of at-risk students themselves.

Award Description

The Mission and Vision Statement of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro is to "...redefine the public research university for the 21st century as an inclusive, collaborative, and responsive institution making a difference in the lives of students and the communities it serves"(UNCG Office of the Chancellor, 2009). Within the university, the mission of Student Health Services "...is to provide collaborative health care designed to empower students to develop lifelong skills that enhance their physical, psychological, and wellness status in an inclusive and affirming environment" (UNCG Student Health Services, 2010).

The Friends Helping Friends Campus Suicide Prevention Program fulfills both these missions in several ways. It is a collaborative effort between the Wellness Center, the Counseling & Testing Center, Student Affairs, peer educators, faculty, staff, and the student body; it helps contribute to UNCG's culture of care by building upon current campus programs such as UNCGCares Students Helping Students program facilitated by the Dean of Students' Office; it creates awareness of and reduces stigma for mental health concerns, and in so doing, serves to increase student wellness, safety, and health. This program directly impacts students' lives, not only in terms of promoting healthy living, but also through enabling safe developmental transitions, facilitating student learning, and ultimately, increasing student retention on campus. In sum, by improving the likelihood that an at-risk student would seek out available mental health services, FHF reflects UNCG's commitment to being a responsive, collaborative, caring institution that makes a positive difference in the lives of its students.

Recent tragedies on college campuses nationwide have highlighted the fact that suicide is a major problem affecting college students today. Unfortunately, it has also been documented that college students report having limited knowledge of the availability of mental health counseling and often do not see its relevance to supporting their life goals (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1998). Furthermore, the American Psychiatrist Association (2006) revealed that close to 50% of adult participants in a recent study reported having a limited understanding of mental health illness. At the university level, a Senior Survey from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (2008) revealed that almost 70% of UNCG seniors reported not being aware of or never utilizing The Counseling & Testing Center. These statistics highlight the relevance of FHF and how it addresses this critical campus need. Specifically, the program addresses this need by laying a foundation for a campus environment that is aware of, sensitive to, and sensitive about, the real mental health concerns of college populations today. In addition to making an impact on the UNCG campus, the adoption and implementation of FHF could facilitate similar scenarios at other institutions: this program, its materials for peer educators, the I.C.A.R.E gatekeeper training materials, and the extensively researched handbook could easily be adopted by other colleges and universities desiring to increase knowledge about and access to timely and appropriate mental health services. While FHF is a service of Student Health Services at UNCG, it is relevant and important to every program in the Student Health, Wellness, Counseling, and Other category as well as to other departments and organizations within student affairs, academic

affairs, and in the local community. Specifically, student wellness increases with the dissemination of knowledge about and the concomitant reduced stigma around mental health concerns; general student health stands to benefit from increased awareness, access, and use of available mental health services on campus; and the appropriate use and effectiveness of college counseling services increases when students take advantage of their services before a crisis point is reached.

FHF benefits other departments on campus through collaborative efforts with, for example, the Office of Housing and Residence Life (training is required for all RAs on campus) and the Office of New Student and Spartan Family Programs in that it has a presence in university orientation sessions. It is also connected directly to the academic program as part of the Foundations for Learning (FFL) classes for freshmen and transfer students; it is required training for all PALs on campus (Peer Academic Leaders); and it is available for presentations to classes and departments on request. The FHF program also extends beyond UNCG via connections with the Mental Health Association of Greensboro (MHAG), presentations for community groups (such as the Girl Scouts) and other local universities (such as Elon University), and a visible presence at tabling events for World Suicide Prevention Day, just to name a few. All of these connections are the product of FHF's TM collaborative, integrated, preventative, educational approach to suicide prevention and student wellness.

Aligned with its mission to improve mental health literacy on UNCG's campus, FHF also connects students with a variety of mental health resources through its extensive and informational website. (<http://www.uncg.edu/shs/fhf/>) This attractive and user-friendly website is a "one-stop shopping" experience for students, faculty, staff, and parents alike. Specifically, the website links viewers with information about collegiate subpopulations at greater risk of suicide, the components of good mental health, the more common mental health problems, and suicide prevention. With the student population in mind, there are sections devoted to promoting campus mental health literacy, resources for helpers, and even a link to a campus film series devoted to mental health. The website has information for parents: the section entitled "What can parents do?" offers information regarding the symptoms of depression and warning signs of suicide. Most importantly, the FHF website provides links to local and national services for suicide prevention, including the National Suicide Prevention Hotline. The aggregation of all this information in one place allows users to find the information quickly so that they can help others when needed.

Empowering students to effectively assist their peers in times of need was the overarching aim behind the joint effort between UNCG's Student Health Services and the SAMHSA grant that created FHF. However, the program's vision is not to limit this outcome only to students at UNCG, but rather to create a groundbreaking model with cutting edge materials that could be easily adopted by other colleges and universities across the country, thereby extending the benefits and potential positive outcomes exponentially. At the national level, therefore, FHF has the potential to dramatically increase student literacy and awareness of mental health issues, which could, in turn, reduce suicide rates on America's college and university campuses. It is unmatched by any other program in the nation and stands to effect great positive change. Given the current grim statistics about suicide and attempted suicide among U.S. college students, Friends Helping Friends stands not to only help stem this tide, but to improve mental health,

wellness, retention rates, and most importantly, the quality of life, for students on college campuses nationwide.

Assessment Data

UNCG's Friends Helping Friends program is orchestrated by a team of eleven faculty, professional staff, graduate, and undergraduate students. The collective experiences and skills of the team, combined with their passion for suicide prevention, enable them to be effective forces for change at UNCG. In its third year, the success of FHF is evident in several ways, including results of campus-wide surveys as well as outcomes associated with different levels of suicide-prevention trainings.

As part of the cross-site evaluation of FHF, the SPEAKS (Suicide Prevention Exposure Awareness and Knowledge Survey) was administered to a random sample of UNCG students and faculty. Of the student respondents (n=233), 28.3% reported they had been exposed to suicide-prevention materials at UNCG; 15.0% did not know. On a Likert-type scale of 1-5 (1= not confident, 5= very confident), the students who had been exposed to suicide prevention materials reported between a 0.2-0.4 increase in their self-rating responses when compared to peers who were not exposed to the presentations. Abilities rated included the ability to recognize suicidal behaviors, ask a fellow student if they were considering suicide, and refer at-risk students to appropriate resources.

Of the faculty/staff respondents (n=136), 25.0% reported they had been exposed to suicide-prevention materials at UNCG; 16.2% did not know; 5.9% reported they had directly participated in suicide prevention activity at UNCG; 14.0% reported they had received training in suicide prevention. On a scale of 1-5 (1= not confident, 5= very confident), those faculty/staff who had been exposed to suicide prevention materials had a 0.3-0.7 increase in their self-rating responses when compared to peers who were not exposed to the materials. Abilities rated included the ability to recognize suicidal behaviors, ask students if they were considering suicide, and refer at-risk students to appropriate resources. These results indicate that the suicide-prevention trainings met FHF's™ goals of training participants to a higher level.

FHF reaches students, faculty, and staff in several different ways. The major outreach programs include the I.C.A.R.E. Level 1 and Level 2 trainings. I.C.A.R.E. (Identify, Connect, Ask, Refer, Encourage) Level 1 is the educational outreach program, which is given by request to groups on campus, including the elective Foundations for Learning (FFL) course for first-year students, Student Academic Success (SAS) program for students on academic probation, and select courses in the Counseling and Educational Development (CED) program. By the end of the grant period, almost 100 presentations have been requested for I.C.A.R.E. Level 1.

In its second year, FHF developed an I.C.A.R.E. Level 2 program, a suicide prevention gatekeeper training program. By Fall 2011, over a dozen Level 2 presentations have been given to students on campus. Following participating in I-CARE Level 2 training, participants (n= 106) reported, on a scale of 1-10 (1= not confident, 10= very confident), they could:

- Identify someone at risk for suicide = 7.93

- Develop open communication with someone at risk for suicide = 8.5
- Ask someone directly if they were thinking about suicide = 8.12
- Refer a person at risk of suicide to the appropriate campus or local resource = 9.32

A follow-up survey of those participants who completed FHF I.C.A.R.E. Level 2 gatekeeper training also found that 43% of respondents (n= 14) said they encountered one or more students who displayed one or more of the warning signs of suicide. 83% of those who encountered an at-risk student attempted to intervene using the skills learned in the presentations. Specifically, of these 83%:

- Talked with the student.
- 80% referred the student to on-campus resources (specifically the Counseling & Testing Center - CTC).
- 60% walked the student to the CTC.
- 20% notified the Coordinator for Residence Life (CRL) and Dean of Students Office.

None of the respondents who intervened reported their level of comfort in handling the situation on the negative end of the scale (i.e., all who intervened felt either comfortable or very comfortable while handling the situation). When asked how confident they would feel about intervening with an at-risk student, all of the respondents (not just those who had intervened) responded at the neutral or positive end of the scale. 78% of respondents found the training helpful in increasing their overall knowledge of suicide; 86% indicated that the training increased their knowledge of referral resources; 93% indicated that the training increased their knowledge of how to refer at-risk students. Overall, 78% would recommend the training to others. Among those whom respondents believed should be trained as suicide gatekeepers were: resident assistants (RAs), Peer Academic Leaders (PALs), academic advisors, and faculty members.

Since its inception, FHF has been offered to these exact populations plus other interested students. By the third year of the grant, six presentations were given to train Peer Academic Leaders (PALs) in identifying and assisting students in distress. In addition, all RAs benefit from this program as it is a key component of their training. To date, 287 RAs have received the I.C.A.R.E. Level 2 program training. FHF has embraced technology and been innovative in its means of educating and providing resources to the campus and the wider community. Since the creation of the FHF website on July 1, 2009, the site has been visited by approximately 7,500 people both on and off campus. Parents of UNCG students have also been reached through a regular column on mental health issues in the UNCG Parent Family Association's e-newsletter, Family Connections. Through these and many other ongoing activities, FHF is an active and well-known initiative on campus. Interviews from a recent Campus Infrastructure Key Informant Interviews Report indicated that all respondents (key informants selected from a group of faculty, administrators, counseling center staff, and student leaders) knew of the FHF program

and its initiatives (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2011). All emphasized that awareness of suicide-related issues had been increased among the campus community. They noted improved capabilities of faculty and staff in identifying and referring students demonstrating suicide risk factors, and that FHF has significantly helped combat stigma among students regarding mental health issues. They noted how well-designed FHF activities are in catering to the specific needs of students. “When asked to identify the most important parts of the program to continue, almost all respondents [of the Campus Infrastructure Report] cited the need to continue education efforts targeting students, including the Friends Helping Friends presentations using peers to educate students” (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2011, 13).