

Award Title

The Reality Show: NYU

Awards Categories

Enrollment Management, Orientation, Parents, First-Year, Other-Year and related

Executive Summary

Approximately 1,500 college students commit suicide each year. That is a fact. But when six student suicides happen on your campus in one year, as they did here at New York University between September 2003 and September 2004, the statistics hit way too close to home. These catastrophic events gravely affected everyone on campus, and all hands were needed on deck to keep students safe and healthy. We quickly realized that the campus culture around health, mental health, and wellness needed to be addressed – and it had to be done in a manner that truly reached students. The result was the birth of the NYU Wellness Exchange and *The Reality Show: NYU*.

The NYU Wellness Exchange was the result of high-level conversations between University administrators, NYU's health experts and external suicide professionals and researchers following those tragedies. Together with input from the people involved in these terrible events (faculty, students and relevant administrators), we learned that the missing piece in our system was an "anonymous entry point" for those students suffering from suicidal depression, and their friends, parents and teachers who worried about the mental health of someone they knew.

Reality Show: NYU – easily the most compelling program we have developed to address the mental health needs of our students – is a theatrical performance written and performed by NYU undergraduate students. It is a mandatory orientation event for all new incoming students (freshmen and transfers), and it has lit up the stage of the Theatre at Madison Square Garden, as well as Radio City Music Hall. It is a production for NYU students by NYU students that portrays the complicated decisions, situations and issues students may face during their college experience including depression, suicidal ideation, academic stress, safety in New York City, sexual assault, anxiety, alcohol and other drug dependence, sexually transmitted infections and eating disorders. It also familiarizes students with the Wellness Exchange, the 24-hour hotline, the Residential Life staff, Public Safety and other resources they may need. The production is directed by Tisch School of the Arts faculty member, Elizabeth Swados, who has composed, written, and directed over 30 theater pieces including the Broadway production, *Runaways* and who is an expert in working with young people to portray compelling personal and social issues.

Here are NYU, *The Reality Show* has become a much anticipated part of each school year for freshmen and upperclassmen alike. It has certainly changed the student culture and ethos at New York University, making mental health issues more accepted and respected, and making students less apprehensive about seeing help. *The Reality Show* is also performed to faculty, staff and Resident Assistants as part of an extensive training program and outreach campaign to teach them how to identify a student in distress.

After receiving national press attention, *The Reality Show* is now being used as a model for other institutions.

Award Description

Introduction:

The Reality Show: NYU performance demonstrates a complex yet extremely successful collaboration between Student Affairs, central administration and each of the seven undergraduate schools of New York University. Realizing that sound mental health is essential for a student to succeed academically, each year all schools incorporate this important theatrical orientation performance into their own extensive orientation program for freshmen. It has been performed for students for the last four years and will remain the most important part of all NYU students' orientation to our campus.

Objectives:

The Reality Show: NYU performance was created to address three key objectives:

- Introduce scenarios and issues that NYU students may face (e.g. depression, suicidal ideation, academic stress, safety in New York City, sexual assault, anxiety, alcohol and other drug dependence, sexually transmitted infections, eating disorders, etc.)
- Introduce the resources available to help NYU students
- Decrease the cultural and social stigmas that students may have about seeking help

The Facts:

Approximately 1,500 college students commit suicide each year. According to Robert Gallagher, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of Pittsburgh who conducts an annual survey of directors of college counseling centers, 85% of College and University counseling centers are reporting a significant increase in the number of "students with severe psychological problems" over the past five years. 30% are reporting having experienced a student suicide on their campus.

Despite these statistics, the unfortunate reality is that many students who are in need of counseling do not seek it. Colleges and universities have acknowledged that serious mental health issues can be addressed and suicide prevented if they proactively outreach to those students who are most at risk for serious mental health problems. Our answer to effectively advertising and saturating the student body of the resources available to them is the student-written theatrical performance *Reality Show: NYU*.

The Context:

New York University is a large, complex, decentralized urban research university. Of our almost 40,000 students, 20,212 (51.3%) are undergraduate students, 15,884 (40.3%) are graduate students and 3,312 (8.4%) are enrolled in a first professional degree program (DDS, JD, MD). 41% of the NYU student population is male and 59% is female. There are 12,000 students living in residence (11,000 undergraduates and 1,000 graduates). International students make up 9.7% of NYU's student body (3,823).

Although the opportunities for growth and learning are limitless at NYU, the size and disaggregation of the campus can be stressful for students. Without effective support and outreach, the experience of entering and adjusting to life at NYU can be much more challenging for students than at smaller, more self-contained campuses. According to the annual ACHA survey, NYU students exceed national averages for experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, alcohol and drug use. In addition to the environmental stressors and underlying mental health, drug and alcohol abuse that accompany living in New York, the NYU community also experienced six student suicides between September 12, 2003 and September 7, 2004.

The NYU Wellness Exchange was the result of high level conversations between University administrators, NYU's health experts and external suicide professionals and researchers following those tragic events. Together with input from the people involved in these tragic events (faculty, students and relevant administrators), we learned that the missing piece in our system was an “anonymous entry point” for those students suffering from suicidal depression, and their friends, parents and teachers who worried about the mental health of someone they knew.

The signature program of the Wellness Exchange – a conglomeration of wellness services described below – is a private, 24/7 hotline which acts both as a single point of access for all health and mental health at NYU as well as a counseling and crisis hotline for students in distress. Students can dial 212-443-9999 or 999 from any campus phone to access master’s level mental health professionals who can help them address day-to-day challenges as well as other health-related concerns including medical issues, academic stress, depression, sexual assault, anxiety, alcohol and other drug dependence, sexually transmitted infections and eating disorders. Students can call the hotline anonymously, if they prefer. The number is printed on the back of their ID cards. In this way, we encourage students to feel safe to reach out for help, we eliminate the need for students to know where to go for help and we decrease the fear involved in taking that critical step.

The Challenge:

On a large campus like the one at NYU, how do we successfully promote the Wellness Exchange, spread the word about the hotline and embed it into the NYU culture as a safe place for students to reach out when they need help?

The Research:

Mental health psycho-education outreach programs represent one mechanism for modifying help-seeking behavior among college students. Empowering these potential users of psychological services with engaging, comprehensive and accurate mental health knowledge (including campus resources) may help to increase their help-seeking behaviors and improve their ability to help their peers with non-professional support (Gonzalez et al., 2002)*. The foundation for these outreach programs rests on the theory that the lack of help-seeking behavior demonstrated by college students are due, at least in part, to stigma (i.e., negative or inaccurate opinions about mental illness), low treatment expectations and fearfulness, and lack of knowledge regarding treatment services and options.

The Answer:

Reality Show: NYU is the most compelling program we have developed to address the mental health needs of our students. This is a mandatory orientation which comes in the form of a theatrical performance written and performed by 10 NYU undergraduates. It is performed for all new incoming undergraduate students. It is a production for NYU students by NYU students that portrays the complicated decisions, situations and issues students may face during their NYU college experience including depression, suicidal ideation, academic stress, safety in New York City, sexual assault, anxiety, alcohol and other drug dependence, sexually transmitted infections and eating disorders. It also familiarizes students with the Wellness Exchange, the 24-hour hotline, the Residential Education staff, Public Safety and other resources they may need. The production is directed by Tisch School of the Arts faculty member, Elizabeth Swados, who has composed, written, and directed over 30 theater pieces including the Broadway production, *Runaways* and who is an expert in working with young people to portray compelling personal and social issues.

Assessment Data

Assessment:

At the end of every show, an evaluation is distributed to each audience member. The data reveals that after seeing this performance, 93% of the 1100 students who responded to our evaluation said they were mostly or very confident that they have the information they need to access the services and supports NYU provides. Additionally, 85% reported that they would use mental health services at NYU following the viewing of the Reality Show.

The Reality Show: NYU is certainly changing the student culture and ethos at New York University, making mental health issues more accepted and respected, and making students less apprehensive about seeing help. The Reality Show is also performed to faculty and staff as part of an extensive training program and outreach campaign to teach them how to identify a student in distress. Student affairs/academic partnerships have nurtured and developed this initiative at the highest level of the University, the Office of the Provost.

News, Media, and Clips:

To truly appreciate the success of the *Reality Show: NYU*, please visit the following website for clips and pictures from previous shows:

- [Media Clips \(2009 performance\)](#)
- [Media Clips \(2006 performance\)](#)
- [Photos \(2007 performance\)](#)

The Reality Show was twice featured in the *New York Times*:

- [July 23, 2010](#)
- [September 11, 2006](#)