

**Research Brief**  
**A Pilot Study: Promoting Understanding and Peer Success (PUPS)**  
**in the Campus Community**

Laura Pruitt Walker, DHed, MSN, RN, COI, CCTP, CNE  
Kimberly D. Helms, DHed, MSN, RN, COI, CFD, CNE  
Jacksonville State University

**ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Suicide is one of the leading causes of death in the United States and is escalating in some populations, such as college students. Suicide is the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of death among college students (Caruso, 2018). The number one cause of suicide is depression (Caruso, 2018).

**Aim:** The aim of the Promoting Understanding and Peer Success (PUPS) project is to explore innovative approaches to teaching and learning in a psychiatric mental health course and to provide early identification and intervention for students or staff who are identified as “at risk” for suicide, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.

**Methods:** Researchers are utilizing a qualitative approach when collecting data from nursing students involved in this study. The Nursing Students are asked to engage in focus group interview questions and to complete a self-reflection activity focused on the PUPS project.

**Results:** Nursing students have conducted suicide, depression, anxiety and substance abuse screenings on approximately 500 campus student and staff participants thus far. Many of these screenings have resulted in distribution of educational resources, referral and follow up with counseling services.

**Conclusions:** Researchers are continuing to collect data in the form of focused group interview questions, anecdotal comments, and end of the term course evaluations from the nursing students. Thematic coding is pending. Based upon anecdotal comments from the nursing students, the course faculty/researchers of this study believe the PUPS Project is successful.

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Suicide is a major health issue in society and amongst the leading causes of death in the United States. According to College Degree Search (2015), “In America, someone attempts suicide once every minute and someone completes suicide once every 17 minutes” (p. 8). Suicide is escalating in some populations, particularly in college students. Suicide has been identified as the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of death among college students (Caruso, 2018; American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2017; Iarovici, 2015). In fact, suicide rates peak among those age 20-24 years (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2017). Depression is closely linked to and recognized as the leading risk factor for suicide (Caruso, 2018). Male students account for the majority of completed suicides (Boyd, 2018; Suicide



Prevention Resource Center, 2014); however, females attempt suicide more often (Boyd, 2018). This is likely due to males using more lethal means (Boyd, 2018).

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), 2017 reports, “Statistics show 5,481 suicides in ages ranging from 15 - 24 years old and 6,947 suicides in ages ranging 25-34 years old” (p. 2). Approximately one-half of college students surveyed reported having suicidal thoughts (Iarovici, 2015; Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2014). The purpose of the PUPS project is to explore innovative approaches to teaching and learning in a psychiatric mental health nursing course and to provide early identification and intervention for students or staff participants who are identified as “at risk” for suicide, depression, anxiety and substance abuse.

## **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to Caruso (2018), a recent study cited that “one in five college students believe their depression level is higher than it should be; however, only 6% say they would seek help” (p. 1). In the past 15 years, depression has doubled and suicide has tripled (Tartakovsky, 2016; College Degree Search, 2015). In the Healthy Minds Survey (Healthy Minds Network, 2017), 31% of college students scored positive on the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ<sub>9</sub>) for major and moderate depression and 11% reported having suicidal ideations (p. 3). In fact, 6% of undergraduate and 4% of graduate students have “seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year” and “one in twelve United States College students have made a suicide plan” (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2017; College Degree Search, 2015, p. 1).

Tartakovsky (2016) reported, the typical age of onset for mental health issues in college students occurs between the ages of 18 - 24 years and that anxiety has been identified as a prevalent problem on college campuses (p. 2). The Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA; 2007) reported, “Universities have seen an increase in students seeking services for anxiety disorders” and “College students whose anxiety disorders go untreated may isolate themselves from their peers, have difficulty in their classes, drop out of school or, in extreme cases, even attempt suicide”(p. 2). According to Brown (2016) “a Penn State Study in 2014 found that anxiety had surpassed depression as the leading mental health issue facing college students” (p. 2). Brown (2016) further elaborated that the 2015 National College Health Assessment survey found that “1 in 6 students had been diagnosed with and/or treated for anxiety. Additionally, Brown (2016) found that 21.9% of students said anxiety had affected their academic performance in the past year” (p. 2). In the Healthy Minds Survey (2017), anxiety disorders were indicated at 26% using the Generalized Anxiety Disorders GAD<sub>7</sub> screening tool and 31% a positive on the Counseling Center Assessment of Psychological Symptoms (CCAPS-34) screening tool for an elevated level of generalized anxiety (p. 3).

Rosenberg (2018) discussed a study finding saying that almost 50 % of college students indicated they woke up at night to answer text messages. The same study found that the more individuals use technology during their sleeping hours, the poorer the quality of sleep and the higher rates of depression and anxiety (p. 2). Rosenberg (2018) further postulated that “college students who reported being victims of cyberbullying in high school (which has nearly doubled in the past decade) also had significantly higher rates of anxiety and depression” (p. 3). According to Iarovici (2015), “The American College Health Association's National Health Assessment survey revealed that more than half of the 80,000 students in 140 colleges/universities, felt overwhelming anxiety and that more than one third of the students felt so depressed it was hard to function” (p. 3).

The AddictionCenter (2018) reports that 80% of United States college students have used alcohol and 31% of United States college students report actual symptoms of alcohol abuse (p. 12). In addition, 110,000 college students

between the ages of 18 - 24 are arrested every year for alcohol related violations such as Driving Under the Influence (DUI) and public drunkenness (p. 17). More than forty% of college students reveal they binge drink (Addiction Center, 2018; p. 10). Finally, 21% of college students report abusing prescription or illegal drugs. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA; 2017) reports, “twelve percent of college students reported using one or more types of prescription drugs not prescribed to them” (p.1). According to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD; 2017), “Four of five college students drink alcohol and about half of those who drink, also binge drink (p. 3). The reality of these staggering statistics is that students enrolled in higher education are dying from treatable psychiatric illnesses which often lead to completed or attempted suicide or accidental death.

## **PROJECT AIM**

The aim of the Promoting Understanding and Peer Success (PUPS) project is to explore innovative approaches to teaching and learning in a psychiatric mental health course and to provide early identification and intervention for campus students or staff who are identified as “at risk” for suicide, depression, anxiety and substance abuse. The researchers are nurse educators, and have developed an innovative project which involves working collaboratively with campus counseling services to facilitate a mental health fair conveniently located on campus. During this mental health fair, nursing students actively conduct mental health screenings for campus students and staff and facilitate psychoeducation groups. Local vendors are also a vital component of the health fair as they provide valuable resources focused on mental health for campus students and staff.

This learning experience allows real life application of theoretical concepts learned in the classroom setting. This dual approach to teaching and learning is designed to enhance active student nurse learning experiences about psychiatric mental health issues in the campus community (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000). The researchers are hopeful that participation in this learning experience will enhance learning and address the needs of the campus as community as peers and staff identified as “at risk” are provided with educational resources to improve mental health or referred to counseling services for timely, appropriate assessment and follow up.

## **METHOD OF DESIGN**

### **Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

The IRB at the university is a specified committee charged with the responsibility of safeguarding the rights of human subjects. The nursing researchers proactively completed human subject training prior to submitting an application to the IRB committee. The certificate and training has been maintained throughout the research study. The nursing researchers submitted the proposed research application for initial review and were granted IRB approval from the university IRB committee.

### **Informed Consent and Confidentiality**

Basic ethical considerations were emphasized to the nursing student participants prior to engaging in the mental health fair. Emphasis was placed on the concepts of respect for persons, confidentiality, beneficence, and justice. Training related to the basic ethical principles occurred in a face to face classroom setting. In the classroom setting nursing researchers shared clear, real world examples of these principles in action. The concepts were continually emphasized

throughout the semester to ensure the nursing student participants were fully aware of the importance of displaying these basic ethical principles when interacting with vulnerable populations, such as the staff and student population at the university.

Prior to the mental health fair, nursing student participants are provided with knowledge related to the research study and are provided with clear instructions indicating that their participation in the study is strictly voluntary and non-participation will not result in any negative consequences for the student. Nursing students who elect to participate in the study sign a confidential, informed consent form. These forms are signed and witnessed by the nursing researchers while adhering to well established procedures to maintain confidentiality. The nursing student participant's signed informed consent forms are stored in a locked cabinet in the nursing researcher's offices. The door to the office remains locked at all times when the nursing researchers are not in the office.

### **Study Setting and Population**

The study was conducted at a small rural university in the southeast United States. The course is a 2<sup>nd</sup> semester psychiatric mental health nursing class. Nursing student participants were recruited as a cohort sample. Inclusion criteria were nursing students that are actively enrolled in the course, exclusion criteria were nursing students who were not enrolled in the course. The nursing student participants are readily available to all campus students and staff at the university during the mental health fair. The mental health fair is held in a common area which is easily accessible to all campus staff and students and the event was promoted through diverse marketing strategies.

### **Research Design**

The nursing researchers used a qualitative research design for this study. According to Rebar & Gersch (2015),

Qualitative methods focus on understanding the complexity of humans with the context of their lives. Research that uses qualitative methods involve the collection of information as it is expressed by people within the normal context of their lives. Qualitative methods focus on subjective information and never attempt to predict or control the phenomenon of interest (p. 35).

The qualitative research design was chosen for many reasons. Nurse researchers wanted to assess if completing the PUPS Project facilitated development of empathy in nursing students, decreased stigma related to mental illness, to make a connection with the theoretical knowledge obtained in class and how that translates to helping others in the campus community, and to further develop their psychiatric nursing assessment skills. Additionally, students learned how to conduct groups, work in teams, and saw first-hand how prevalent anxiety, depression, suicide, and substance use/abuse is on college campuses. Furthermore, nurse researchers are interested in student's honest feedback regarding educational experiences.

### **Data Collection and Instrumentation**

Qualitative data which includes the collection of focused group interview questions has been and will continue to be utilized as a method of collecting data each semester. To maintain rigor in this qualitative study, a strict, consistent

process is used in the collection of focus group questions. Trustworthiness, a vital component of qualitative research rigor, is established throughout the semester as the nursing researchers establish rapport with the nursing students. Students are encouraged to communicate their feelings, insights related to learning experiences throughout the semester. Rapport is established as the nursing researchers show continual interest in obtaining feedback from students.

Confirmability is used by the nursing researchers by using the same format and approach to collecting data each semester. The nursing researchers have developed an audit/checklist system approach to ensure a consistent approach to collecting and maintaining data security. During the data collection process, focus group questions are asked in a virtual classroom setting where anonymity is maintained by a secured, limited access learning management system. Students from each semester are asked the same focus group questions and allotted the same amount of time to respond in this virtual, anonymous forum. This data is downloaded into an excel file, where security is maintained in a locked storage system within the nursing researcher's offices. Transferability is displayed as the nurse researchers assess for emerging themes which surface in different cohorts of students each semester (Rebar & Gersch, 2015; p. 154-156).

During the focus group interview session, each nursing student is asked the following seven questions:

1. How did this learning experience promote empathy for individuals with mental disorders?
2. What aspects of the Mental Health Fair influenced connecting concepts you learned in the classroom to real-life situations?
3. How did completing the mental health screenings facilitate your understanding of mental health resources available to students on campus?
4. How did your perception of the prevalence of mental health issues on campus change after actively participating in the Mental Health Fair?
5. What aspect of the Mental Health Fair did you find to be most beneficial? Why?
6. Discuss your confidence level in appropriate identification and referral of "at risk" mental health fair students to counseling services?
7. Describe how participation in the Mental Health Fair fostered teamwork and collaboration with your peers.

### **Data Safety and Monitoring**

The researchers have a clear plan to protect the integrity of the data obtained from the focus group interview questions. The anonymous nursing student participant responses are maintained in a secure learning management system with limited, secured access. Data is de-identified by using an anonymous response tool in the learning management system. Risk of accidental disclosure is minimized by using this structured process for securing private information. As mentioned earlier, this data is downloaded into an excel file, where security is maintained in a locked storage system within the nursing researcher's offices.

### **Data Analysis Strategies**

Diverse methods are used to analyze the data obtained from the focus group questions. One approach used by the nursing researchers is to read the responses from the focus group questions and organize the responses into sentences or groups of sentences which address the same ideas. Ideas are then paired with other responses which focus on the

same ideas or concepts in an effort to find meaning and relevancy. By organizing, ordering and synthesizing the data the nursing researchers are able to successfully describe the feelings, behaviors, experiences and ideas of the nursing student participants. Coding is used to break down and label the data collected. Themes are identified as ideas or concepts that are recurrent in the focus group question responses. The nursing researchers seek to categorize the responses, understand the meaning behind the words expressed, and to conceptualize the data into emerging themes.

### Implementation of Project

The implementation of the PUPS Project occurs in portions throughout the semester with the culmination of the project – the mental health fair - being a few weeks before the end of the mental health nursing course each semester. There are two doctoral prepared faculty members supervising this integrative learning experience along with three to four licensed professional counselors who are readily available to assist “at risk” campus students and staff. There are four components to the PUPS Project: pre-class, in-class, the mental health fair, and the self-reflection assignment.

In the pre-class or first component, nursing students complete assigned readings focused on suicide, depression, anxiety and substance abuse. Nursing students also complete interactive case studies on anxiety, depression/suicide, and addiction. Additionally, nursing students review instructor narrated PowerPoints on anxiety, depression/suicide, and addiction.

The in-class or second component is accomplished through mini-lectures on anxiety, depression, suicide, and addiction. Active teaching strategies such as an unfolding case study on suicidality and computer-based patient simulations on anxiety, depression, and addiction are used to enhance learning of the content. Counseling services provide on-site training and review of the screening tools which will be utilized by nursing students at the mental health fair. These tools include the Patient Health Questionnaire Nine (PHQ-9), General Anxiety Disorder Questionnaire Version 7 (GAD-7) and the CAGE Alcohol Questionnaire. Nursing students role-play with “peer to peer” practice sessions in the classroom environment.

The Patient Health Questionnaire - Nine (PHQ-9) is a depression screening instrument, which scores each of the nine Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) depression criteria as "0" (not at all) to "3" (nearly every day; Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001). The Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale-7 (GAD-7) is fast becoming a gold-standard measurement tool for generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). It is a 79, anxiety questionnaire designed to assess the patient's health status during the previous two weeks (Spitzer, Kroenke, & Williams, 2006).

The CAGE Questionnaire has been used for many years by clinicians to screen patients for alcoholism. The CAGE focuses on the following four questions.

C = Have you ever felt you needed to **Cut down** on your drinking?

A = Have people **Annoyed** you by criticizing your drinking?

G = Have you ever felt **Guilty** about drinking?

E = Have you ever felt you needed a drink first thing in the morning (**Eye-opener**) to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover?

The CAGE tool can identify alcohol problems over the lifetime. Two positive responses are considered a positive test and indicate further assessment is warranted (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2018).

During the third component, the mental health fair, nursing students conduct screenings for students and staff on campus. These screenings include a suicide risk assessment, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse screenings utilizing the PHQ-9, GAD-7, and CAGE questionnaires. At risk campus students and staff are appropriately referred to counseling services. The nursing students ensure all “at risk” campus students/staff are aware that our university offers free counseling services and that the number of sessions is unlimited. Counseling services have implemented policies and procedures for appropriate intervention. Master’s prepared counselors are on site for immediate private and confidential emergency sessions for campus students and staff who need it.

Nursing students also conduct psychoeducational mental health groups every 30 minutes during the mental health fair. These groups are focused on topics of stress and anxiety management including deep breathing, guided imagery, muscle relaxation, mindfulness, meditation and therapeutic coloring. Local vendors from the community setting are invited to the mental health fair. Vendors provide vital resources focused on promotion of health and wellness, mental health awareness, stress re-education, self-awareness and mindfulness. An example of this is a local chiropractor provides free chair massages from licensed therapist for students and staff who attend the mental health fair. Other examples, include local hospitals and clinics which provide inpatient and outpatient treatment for mental health issues. Other vendors provide valuable educational resources focused on diverse mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, suicide, and substance abuse. Several vendors provide free handouts, pamphlets, food, T-shirts and popcorn during the mental health fair.

The final and fourth component includes a self-reflection assignment. Nursing students receive 1% of their final course grade for participation in all aspects of the PUPS Project and for successful completion of the self-reflection assignment. Nursing students are required to submit a journal entry where they reflect on the learning experience, provide anecdotal comments related to their thoughts and feelings related to the learning experience, elaborate on what they learned about themselves and others in the experience, and to share if they believe the PUPS project is beneficial to the campus community. Feedback is also encouraged as to how the PUPS project could be improved.

## **RESULTS**

The PUPS Project has been conducted for four semesters and plans are established to collect data for two more semesters. At this time, approximately 500 campus students and staff have participated in the mental health fair screenings. Many of these screenings have resulted in the distribution of educational resources being given, emergency interventions and the scheduling of follow up appointments with counseling services. As mentioned earlier, researchers will continue to collect data in the form of focused group interview questions and anecdotal comments from nursing students. Thematic coding has not been conducted at this time due to the fact that data collection is ongoing. However, we do have some anecdotal comments to share as follows:

“We, as nursing students, had the opportunity to speak with students who were struggling with mental disorders. We were able to hear their stories, and they got to share their perspectives with us. Hearing the perspectives of people who were actually struggling with mental disorders helped me gain a better understanding of the challenges they face every day”.

“Being able to sit and speak with the student I screened helped me to see firsthand how mental health can affect the college-aged population. In previous clinical experiences I had dealt with older patients, and I found I had to employ a few new methods of therapeutic communication in order to maintain empathy, trust, and professionalism”.

“This project helped me realize how prevalent mental disorders are in our community. It is important to be available to those who need/want help. The disorder does not define the person. We are all human and deserve the same respect and attention”.

“In a way, this learning experience allows you to walk in another’s shoes. It makes you wish that there was no stigma for mental health disorders. This experience allowed me to talk to several people. By doing so, I was able to see how just talking to people can make a huge difference”.

The researchers anticipate some limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results. These limitations could include a potential for bias as this is a risk associated with the use of convenience sampling. Also, there are geographic limitations related to the research study being conducted in a department of nursing in a rural area.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based upon nursing student feedback obtained thus far, the researchers believe the PUPS Project to be a success. One nursing student summed up the PUPS Project in such a profound way stating, “We have helped so many campus students today; however, I feel if we only helped one person who is contemplating suicide; this project and the work is well worth it!”

The researchers believe the PUPS Project benefits our nursing students by increasing their awareness of mental health issues on campus, fostering engagement, nurturing empathy for their peer group, reducing stigma and stereotyping, cultivating their assessment skills using mental health screening tools, enhancing critical thinking and problem solving ability, improving therapeutic communication skills, reinforcing understanding of course concepts, supporting a connection to our campus and their peer group, as well as connecting academics, nursing career choice, & “real-life” issues.

The benefit for our campus students is that they can identify with a peer their own age, going to college like them; someone the student believes will “understand them”. Additionally, campus students and staff benefit as the PUPS project allows a platform to “talk” to someone about problems and issues, facilitates easy access for relevant mental health screenings, fosters immediate access to licensed counselors who can provide prompt interventions, provides a venue which promotes awareness and valuable resources and provides students and staff with unlimited free follow up counseling service appointments.

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Author correspondence may be addressed to:

Laura Pruitt Walker, DHed, MSN, RN, COI, CCTP, CNE  
Associate Professor  
Jacksonville State University  
School of Health Professions & Wellness  
Department of Nursing  
700 Pelham Road N.  
Jacksonville, AL 36205  
[lpwalker@jsu.edu](mailto:lpwalker@jsu.edu)

Kimberly D. Helms, DHed, MSN, RN, COI, CFD, CNE  
Associate Professor  
Jacksonville State University  
School of Health Professions & Wellness  
Department of Nursing  
700 Pelham Road N.  
Jacksonville, AL 36205  
[khelms@jsu.edu](mailto:khelms@jsu.edu)

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