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TW: Story includes mentions of suicide

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College is the best four years of your life, allegedly. By nature, college is a transition. Many students struggle with leaving home and entering a new environment, especially when under the expectation that this is as good as it is going to get.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked an especially difficult time for students. At UNC, professors had one week to transition classes online before in-person operations shut down. “We all wanted to fulfill our responsibilities, both students and faculty. But everyone was a little bit isolated, a little bit overwhelmed,” Professor Jamie Blake said. “Everyone was in survival mode.”

Fall 2021 marked the beginning of the end of COVID-19 restrictions on campus, with increased in-person instruction and the return of freshmen to campus. Students entering the university had spent the past two years in isolation and were now tasked with navigating a new environment in an ever-changing world.

University-affiliated mental health resources such as Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) struggled to meet ever-growing student demand. During the fall 2021 semester, students seeking help from CAPS were placed on a waitlist for the first time in 14 years.¹

Even without a pandemic, the transition into college can be an isolating time. Special Projects and Communication Manager Sarah Stahlman noted that “the setup of college is inherently going to tax mental health.” Students must adjust to a new environment with new

¹ Crystal Price, “UNC-Chapel Hill Starts Waitlist for Counseling for the First Time in 14 Years amid Staffing Turnover,” CBS17.com (CBS News, October 14, 2021), <https://www.cbs17.com/news/local-news/orange-county-news/unc-chapel-hill-starts-waitlist-for-counseling-for-the-first-time-in-14-years-amid-staffing-turnover/>.

expectations, all while being far from home. It's a lot to try and navigate living on your own, new classes, and making new friends all while living under the expectation this is the best time of your life.

During the fall 2021 semester, UNC was rocked by four student suicides. With two occurring less than 24 hours apart,² students and faculty alike called upon the university to address the mental health crisis on campus. Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz addressed the university community through a mass email, establishing a wellness day on Tuesday, Oct. 12th, 2021, and calling for students to “reach out to a friend, a classmate, or colleague and ask them, ‘Honestly, how are you doing?’”³

As part of the university's immediate response, a mental health summit was held on campus. Here, it was announced UNC would be partnering with the Jed Foundation (JED), a non-profit devoted to suicide prevention. The Jed Foundation partners with colleges across the nation as part of a four-year program known as “JED Campus.” The program uses student and faculty input through surveys to support the development of programs designed to address student mental health. Stahlman explained that the process begins with a survey sent across campus to understand student perceptions of mental health and university-sponsored mental health resources. “Over the next three years we will work on implementing those changes,” Stahlman said. “At the end of the four-year process, they do those surveys and assessments again to be able to show what impact has been.”

Currently, UNC is approaching the end of the first year of the partnership. The initial survey found that 80 percent of respondents felt they needed help for emotional or mental health

² Price, “UNC-Chapel Hill”

³ “A Message from Chancellor Guskiewicz on World Mental Health Day,” *A Message from Chancellor Guskiewicz on World Mental Health Day*, October 10, 2021.

struggles. However, 45 percent were unaware of mental health outreach on campus and 32 percent heard negative opinions of university counseling services.⁴ JED then works in conjunction with the university to establish areas of improvement and develop programs to target weaknesses.

So, where can UNC students go to get help? The most common answer is the university's Counseling and Psychological Services, or CAPS. "As long as I've been at UNC, CAPS has been available to students as the first level of mental health direction and resources," Professor Jamie Blake said. "It is my understanding that they were a little bit overwhelmed during the pandemic because of the volume of needs to be filled."

I spoke with Hannah Zinn, a sophomore at UNC who sought treatment from CAPS this semester. Zinn has struggled with mental health issues throughout her life and decided to go to CAPS after speaking with her housemate Zoe Frederick. "I went to CAPS because of the accessibility," Zinn said. "I know CAPS doesn't exactly have the best reputation, but the process was smooth for Zoe, so I was more interested in trying it myself."

CAPS serves not only as a university-sponsored mental health resource, but an important avenue for students who may not have anywhere else to go. "I don't have health insurance or parents who support me; I'm navigating everything on my own and going to CAPS is far less threatening than trying to track down a local provider that accepts new patients with Medicaid," Zinn said. For students in situations like Zinn, the university may be their only option for mental health support.

As for the quality of care offered, Zinn described CAPS as "the dollar menu of psychiatric help." While CAPS offers initial assessments, students who wish to receive long-term

⁴ JED Foundation, "University of North Carolina Chapel Hill Healthy Minds Study Initial Report," n.d.

help are left on their own. Through CAPS, Zinn received an initial assessment, a medical evaluation, and two follow-up meetings via telehealth to assess the effectiveness of the treatment and receive recommendations for long-term care. Zinn was able to be prescribed medication, which she said has been helpful. However, when it comes to long-term care, Zinn was left on her own. “Because I do not have student blue, the on-campus health plan, I was told I could not receive therapy through CAPS,” she said.

Instead, Zinn was provided with a list of possible therapists to call. Juggling school and socialization while struggling with mental illness makes it difficult for students to take the initiative and seek help. “That's the beauty of trying to make a mentally ill person do something for themselves—sometimes it just won't happen,” she said. “Sometimes people need a guiding hand.”

Concern regarding the quality of mental health resources on campus extends beyond the student body. For parents, college also represents a difficult transition. Donna Martin is a mother of three from Greenville, North Carolina. Her youngest daughter, Sydney, is a sophomore at UNC. “It's not easy at all, the separation and the uncertainty,” she said. “To go from seeing them every day to just talking on the phone every so often, you just really want to know they are being taken care of.”

Martin notes that many students may be uncomfortable or unable to discuss mental health with their parents. “You hope that they would come to you no matter what, but I mean I know that's not how it works,” Martin said. “It's hard sending your child out in the world, and you just hope that they have someone to talk to, even when you can't be there,” Martin said. “That's why you want to be sure that there are resources available for them.”

On Oct. 14th, 2021, a group of parents planned a Community Rally for Suicide Awareness & Prevention to support students. It was at this rally Cathy Emrick befriended Noel-Beth Sipe, and the two became fast friends. Emrick and Sipe quickly saw how positively students responded to the event. The two eventually connected with Michelle Young and the three came together to form Hugs and Pups Posse Encouraging and Empowering (HAPPEE).⁵ “We were watching a mental health crisis unfold on campus before our very eyes,” Emrick said. “It was really wonderful to be able to make a little bit of a difference, even for a moment.”

After receiving a positive reception from students, it became clear that HAPPEE was making a difference during a dark time. When describing the experience, Emrick said “We could see the stress just roll off the students. It was a very powerful experience for us- and we could see for the students as well.”

Emrick said after the first campus rally, interest in the organization grew as more and more people signed up to volunteer through the group’s Facebook page. On Nov. 5, 2021, HAPPEE made their first official stroll through campus, setting up at the corner of Skipper Bowles and Manning drives during a home basketball game.

While the schedule is adjusted depending on volunteer availability and weather, HAPPEE can be found on campus at least once a week. Emrick noted that the on-campus presence always includes one volunteer hugging students and one volunteer with a dog. Prior to bringing dogs on campus, volunteers must fill out a questionnaire designed to make sure all dogs would be a good fit to bring on campus.

After making appearances at different corners of campus, the organization can now be found on a sidewalk corner between Wilson Library and the Undergraduate Library. Emrick calls

⁵ Cathy Emrick, “About,” HAPPEE Hugs and Pups (HAPPEE, Inc., 2022), <https://happeenational.org/>.

this “Blue’s Corner,” named after Blue, a therapy dog, and a staple of the organization’s on-campus presence.

HAPPEE can be found on campus approximately four days a week, depending on weather and volunteer availability. Emrick said the goal of the organization is to let students know they aren’t alone and to create a supportive community. “If you can just get through this really difficult day, then you’ve survived to try again tomorrow,” she said. “And then maybe tomorrow you’ll have enough sleep, or you’ll have something better to eat and you feel better after talking to someone who cares about you. There are students for whom, if you could just get through that day, you may be okay. You will be able to come out of it. We hope and pray that we can interact with someone on that day.”

In its mission statement, HAPPEE also emphasizes a commitment to advocacy. Emrick said she has felt like the university is out of its league in terms of adequately addressing student mental health. “[Students] need access to counseling, and they need, you know, the support, the understanding from the professors and the support of a community on campus. Where they can really be vulnerable and say, ‘I’m really struggling,’” she said. “We saw there were a lot of students for whom none of that was true, and that’s scary.” Emrick has reached out to the university in hopes of establishing a partnership but said that her emails have gone unanswered.

Following the student suicides in October of 2021, the university announced measures to be taken to increase the availability and quality of mental health resources on campus. This response included the development of the Heels Care Network, a resource hub designed to connect students with different on and off-campus mental health organizations. The resource hub includes over 100 resources, all offering human-to-human support. The site also includes filters,

allowing students to seek help catered to specific needs. Sarah Stahlman described this as “expanding what possibilities exist for students who need mental health care.”

Stahlman also emphasized the role of CAPS in providing immediate care. While CAPS may not have the resources necessary to equip every student with long-term care, the CAPS phone number also serves as a 24/7 crisis helpline. Both the CAPS website and the Heels Care website serve as excellent resources for students seeking mental help. For students looking for something different, the resource hub on the Heels Care website allows students to search for resources specific to their needs and identities.

Over the past year, the university has made the effort to connect students with a multitude of resources to support mental health. The creation of the Heels Care Network as a way to connect students with resources has helped address some concerns regarding mental health on campus. “[College] is always going to be full of stress,” Stahlman said. “But it is full of wonderful, wonderful people that want to see students succeed, and who have based their entire careers on helping students succeed.”

As the university continues its commitment to addressing student mental health, HAPPEE is here to stay. Emrick hopes to expand HAPPEE into a multi-campus organization, setting up “franchises” at other colleges. Emrick notes that they are always looking for volunteers, especially students.

Students can access the Heels Care Network at <https://care.unc.edu/>. Anyone in need of immediate help can call or text the National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline by dialing 988. UNC Counseling and Psychological Services are in the James A. Taylor Building at 320 Emergency Room Drive., Chapel Hill, N.C. Students can access CAPS 24/7 by calling 919-966-3658. For more information regarding the JED Campus initiative, go to <https://jedfoundation.org/jed->

campus/. Anyone interested in working with HAPPEE can reach out by emailing HAPPEE.natl@gmail.com. HAPPEE can also be found on Instagram (@HAPPEE.natl), Reddit (r/HAPPEE_HugsandPups), Twitter (@HAPPEEnatl), and Facebook (@happee.unc.hugsandpups). Students can also join the HAPPEE discord by following this link: <https://discord.gg/74mzP82yFv>.