

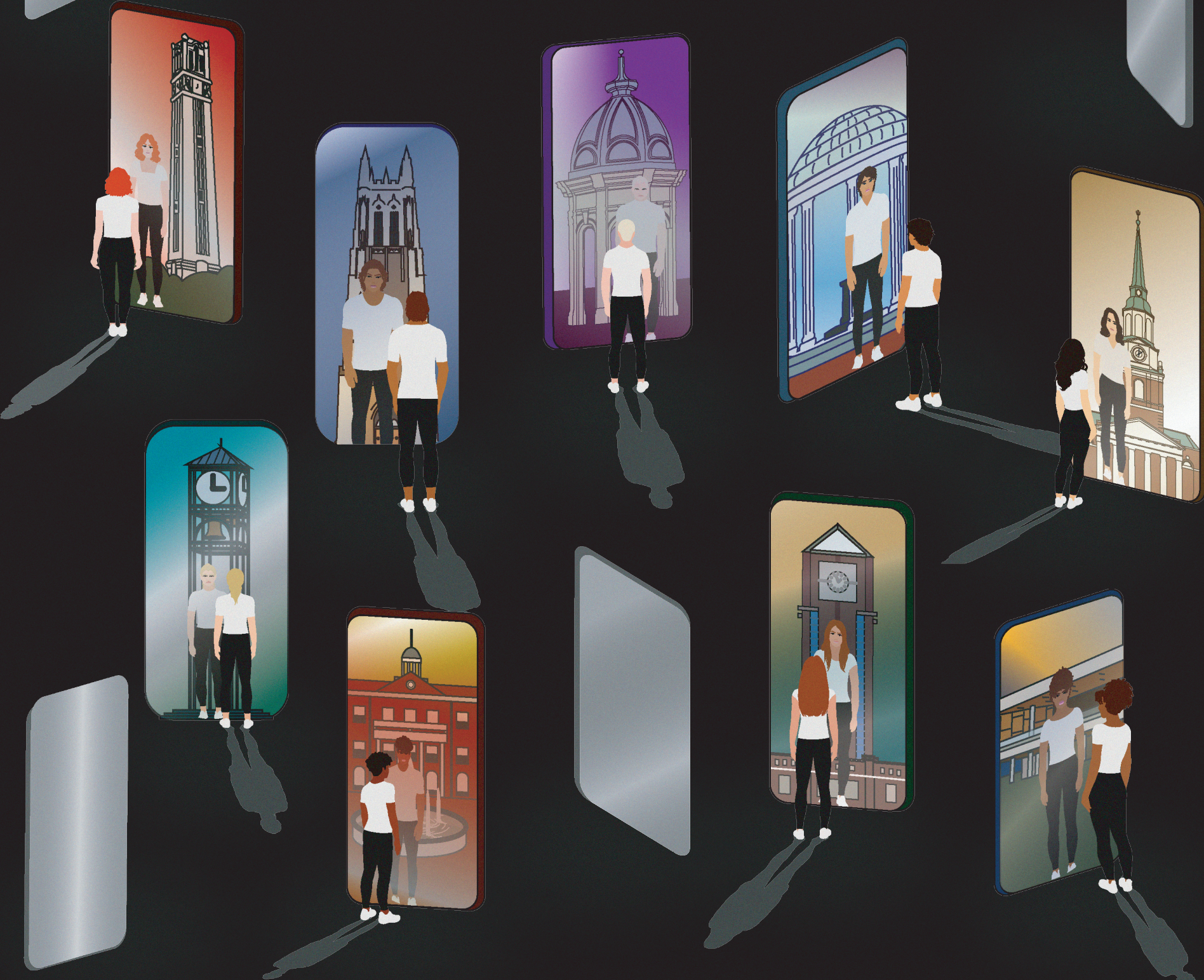
Student-driven news since 1947

NINERTIMES

Thursday, March 21, 2024

A STATEWIDE ISSUE

Nine N.C. college newsrooms partner to cover the mental health crisis.



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## Behind the Mental Health Collaborative

Sunnya Hadavi | Niner Times Editor-in-Chief

The United States is facing a mental health crisis, and UNC Charlotte is no exception.

Niner Times has worked with eight other college newsrooms across North Carolina to create this Mental Health Collaborative edition. The goal of this edition is to highlight the aspects of mental health that are shared and unique across the state and its different campuses. This initiative is the culmination of rigorous reporting, research, writing, editing and designing. From the stories to the data visualizations, this content aims to do more than just present a problem — it also explores solutions to this crisis.

With more than 40 reported stories and seven opinion pieces, this edition touches on many issues related to mental health. While the print edition only features a handful of content, all content is on the Mental Health Collaborative webpage on the [ninertimes.com](https://ninertimes.com) homepage.

Along with the Niner Times, the content featured in this edition comes from the following newsrooms:

- The Daily Tar Heel (UNC Chapel Hill)
- Technician (North Carolina State University)
- The A&T Register (North Carolina A&T)
- The Chronicle (Duke University)
- The East Carolinian (Eastern Carolina University)
- The Old Gold & Black (Wake Forest University)
- The Pendulum (Elon University)
- The Seahawk (UNC Wilmington)

This initiative began in 2023 when The Daily Tar Heel was awarded a grant from the Solutions Journalism Network as part of its Student Media Challenge initiative. That grant helped fund the collaborative work of this project and make this special edition of the Niner Times possible.

## Student-driven news since 1947

The Niner Times is UNC Charlotte's student-run news publication founded in 1947 and has received both state and national recognition.

The Niner Times aims to provide accurate and fair news to the UNC Charlotte community. We cover campus happenings, news and events in the city of Charlotte and North Carolina and topics that are important to students. We publish written, photo and video content online ([ninertimes.com](https://ninertimes.com)), on social media and through our weekly email newsletter (sent every Wednesday at 2:00 pm). We also produce a supplemental bi-weekly (every other week) in-print newspaper that hits stands on Wednesdays.

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## Resources at UNC Charlotte:

Students who are struggling or need someone to talk to can make an appointment with UNC Charlotte's Center for Counseling at Psychological Services (CAPS).

### Individuals may also call the Emergency Services & Hotlines Carolinas Medical Center:

- Behavioral Health/Emergency: 704-444-2400
- Mobile Crisis Unit: 704-566-3410
- Suicide Hotline: 1-800-273-8255 (or call 988)

### Charlotte campus police can be reached at:

- Emergency number: 704-687-2200
- Non-emergency number: 704-687-8300



# How UNC Charlotte’s student support organizations help international students with off-campus housing challenges

Sunnya Hadavi & AJ Siegel | Niner Times Editor-in-Chief & Copy Editor

As the population of international students at Charlotte grows, so do the challenges these students face, particularly with off-campus housing. International students rely on student organizations and initiatives for aid and avoiding exploitation.

As of spring 2024, 2,036 international students are enrolled at Charlotte and represent over 90 countries, according to the International Student and Scholar Office.

Indian students make up the majority of international students at Charlotte at approximately 60%. In fall 2023, 1,257 of 2,163 international students were from India, and the majority were pursuing their Master’s degree.

Before coming to campus and beginning their studies, these students are responsible for the research and costs associated with travel and living in the United States.

Despite not being in the United States to check their options, international students must secure housing before all off-campus apartments fill up. The Triveni Indian Student Association bridges the gap and represents the interests of students when securing housing.

“I help students get off-campus housing, so I see what was wrong with the housing because they are not physically present over here,” said

Pritesh Ambavane, secretary of the Triveni Indian Student Association. “[They] put that trust in me that this is the person who is telling me that this housing is good...[and knows] what Indian the mindset is like.”

The Triveni Indian Student Association is one of a few student organizations that actively aids international students at Charlotte. For the fall semester, the Triveni Indian Student Association helped approximately 600 new international students. For spring, they helped 100 new students.

Most international students tend to live off campus, which is largely due to rent costs and location. They tend to live in the same complexes, including University Terrace and Asheford Green, because they are within walking distance of Charlotte’s campus.

“Most international students don’t have cars,” said Yash Tadimalla, president of the Graduate and Professional Student Government (GPSG). “So they are forced to live close to campus within walking distance. The walk to campus [is] sometimes easy, but sometimes it’s not; it’s not always safe after dark.”

International students often do not receive their security deposits back. According to Ambavane, the building managers do not track

which tenets cause damage, so if there is damage to an apartment, the most recent tenant is charged, even if the damage was present before they moved in.

“When students come to the apartment, they leave the apartment in the same condition, but the owner thinks that things [have been] changed... and they charge accordingly,” said Ambavane. “But they don’t know that the students have not damaged the apartment; it was like that already.”

Security deposits not being returned is not a new issue.

“Our office has been meeting with international graduate students about off-campus landlord-tenant matters since the firm opened in May 2022,” said Ashley McAlarney, director of UNC Charlotte Student Legal Services, Inc. “The majority of our clients in landlord-tenant matters are international graduate students. And the overwhelming majority of our graduate student clients across all areas of law are international students.”

International students facing concerns with housing maintenance and damages often turn to the Triveni Indian Student Association, which advocates on their behalf and pushes landowners to resolve problems promptly.

“[International students] have not physically met the owners, but we have physically met the owners as an organization [since we secured their housing],” said Ambavane. “We try to maintain pressure over the owners so that the students are living the right kind of life since they’re paying rent on time... As an organization, we will try to do these things for our students so that they don’t face any bigger problems and anything like that.”

Oftentimes, international students recognize the issues they are facing but do not feel like they can advocate for themselves.

“The challenge is if there are exploitative owners who have very terrible living conditions, you still do not know that that is terrible living conditions because you don’t know what is better,” said Tadimalla. “So you ended up staying there for a while, and you’re too scared to pursue legal action because there’s this [mis]conception that if you go to Legal, you can get deported.”

Charlotte’s GPSG has also begun helping international students with housing concerns by creating the Graduate Student Housing Committee in September 2023. It is made up of

University officials from Student Affairs, Business Affairs, the Graduate School and Housing and Residence Life, in addition to GPSG.

According to Tadimalla, this committee is among the first University initiatives to address international housing.

“Before 2020, it was not a priority, [but] I think after COVID, the University is prioritizing it now,” said Tadimalla. “In the last seven years, this is the first time that the University is really serious about this issue.”

Regardless of University aid, members of the Triveni Indian Student Association help Indian international students at all stages of their time at Charlotte, from hosting informational seminars to ensuring all necessities are available upon arrival, relying largely on alumni funding.

“We collect funds from our alumni,” said Ambavane. “For example, if anyone has graduated and wants to donate to our committee, that’s where our funds come from. That’s not the case with the rest of the student organizations because they are dependent on the college funds. We do apply for the college [funds], but we are not dependent.”

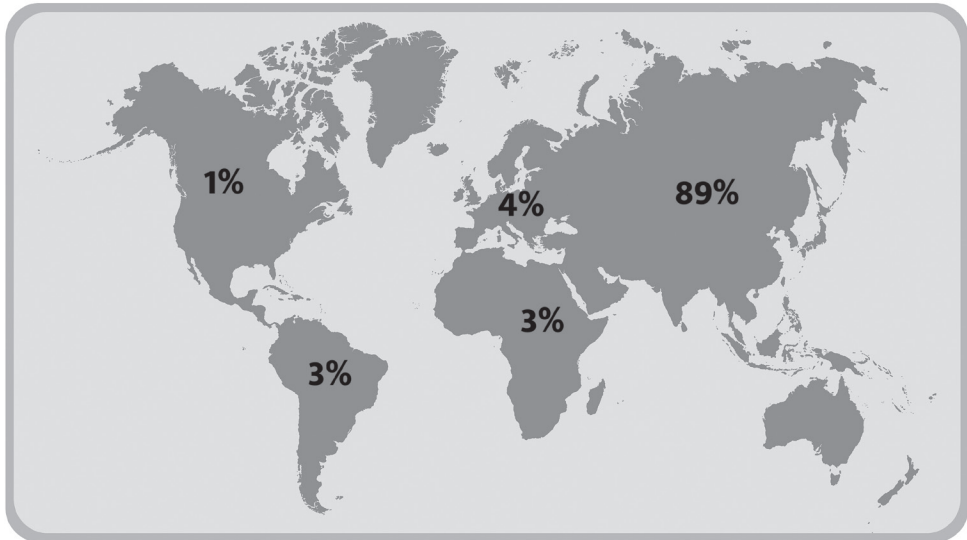
The organization uses these funds to help international students once they arrive in Charlotte by providing rides from the airport and first meals to ease stress and give them a taste of home.

“If you are coming to an unknown country for the first time, you don’t have access to that kitchen, [and] you don’t have anything or... any idea about the kitchen,” said Ambavane. “So what we do is we provide them a first-day meal. Basically, the meal will be like some kind of Indian food which we buy for them. We provide them with the first-day meal so that they don’t have to cook as soon as they come over here.”

The support international students receive from the organization is what makes them want to help future students.

“The motivation for me to help students was that there was somebody who helped me last year. That’s the reason I didn’t face any problems,” said Ambavane. “My seniors, who were in the planning committee, helped me secure this apartment... There was always a senior who was going to reply to my texts, and he was always there to help me with everything.”

## Distribution of international students by continent (fall 2023)



Data from UNC Charlotte International Student and Scholar Office  
Data visualization by Sunnya Hadavi



# Partnership between AthleteTalk and Charlotte Athletics is helping student-athletes grow mental health literacy

Bryson Foster | Niner Times Outreach Coordinator

Mental health is becoming a central talking point in college athletics. Athlete suicide forced the issue into the spotlight as in 2022, five athletes committed suicide as universities looked to find resources for student-athletes.

A report from Global Sport Matters stated that despite the benefits of sports participation for women student-athletes, the risk of suicide persists. For male student-athletes, the stigma of mental health issues makes it hard for some to ask for help. In a world where conversations about mental health are becoming normalized, athletes are still not talking, as only 10% seek mental health assistance.

When asked about the mental aspect of competing in college athletics, Charlotte cross-country junior distance runner Maddon Muhammad said caring for his mental health is critical.

“When it comes to cross-country, 95% of the sport is mental, and the other 5% is your ability and training,” said Muhammad. “This year, the biggest thing holding me back was my mentality. If you get into your head, no matter your training, your brain will always beat your body.”

The need for mental health resources at Charlotte is crucial, and AthleteTalk, LLC is stepping in to help universities deal with these tragedies and the mental grind. AthleteTalk is a mental health and wellness app that provides daily plans on a social media wellness feed. These plans include wellness videos, mental health “workouts” and a sharing feature.

AthleteTalk has created partnerships with multiple universities, such as the University of Detroit Mercy, Texas Southern University and the University of Texas at Austin. In December 2022, the company partnered with the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

The company is in the second of a three-year partnership with Charlotte Athletics. Founder and former Charlotte student Emmett Gill, Jr. said the partnership means a lot to him.

“We are really thankful to be partners with Charlotte and Charlotte Athletics. It really is a full circle for me to be able to serve the athletes at my alma mater,” said Gill. “The elements are there, and the fact that this was a top-down is really special. As a former student-athlete at UNC Charlotte, it was one of the first schools we wanted to build that partnership with.”

## The basics

AthleteTalk has 87 mental health and wellness

plans that student-athletes can engage in. Each plan lasts about four minutes to fit into their busy schedule. Gill said AthleteTalk wants to help student-athletes cultivate mental health practices.

“Our goal is to have athletes engage in the app daily,” said Gill. “These programs help with mental health literacy because we know that if a person is literate in their mental health, they are more likely to visit a provider. Athletetalk helps to build and extend that bridge.”

The app has a leaderboard, daily plans, and assessment links that help student-athletes learn healthy coping mechanisms. AthleteTalk’s plans relate to the transfer portal, NIL (name, image and likeness) deals, academic progress and social media usage.

Gill said that these topics directly relate to student-athlete mental health.

“We discuss topics like gratitude, kindness, your why and your circle. We examine topics like that because those are a part of mental health. The more kindness we display, the more positive impact it has on mental health,” said Gill. “We talk about topics that aren’t normally connected to mental health as a way to normalize it, especially when we talk about normalizing it from a strength-based perspective.”

Gill said the challenge is to find a way to squeeze into the busy schedule of student-athletes.

“One of the challenges we know about health, in general, is that student-athletes do not have much time,” said Gill. “We are only asking for 5-10 minutes on the app daily, which is still challenging. We are trying to find a space for mental health. We are trying to find ways to fit in and not add to their plates but make it richer.”

## Partnership with Charlotte

The partnership at Charlotte came to be through a connection with former Associate Vice Chancellor Dr. Mari Ross. Gill said that after working together at North Carolina Central University, they both saw the need for the program.

The partnership with Charlotte was the first that was started in student affairs. Gill said that the University administration cares deeply for its students.

“Charlotte is the first partnership where it emanates from students’ affairs, which is important because it demonstrates that the care goes beyond the athletic department,” said Gill. “Student-athletes are students first and athletes

second in the grand scheme of things.”

Charlotte has a student-athlete development and sports psychology unit, showing commitment to student-athlete mental health endeavors. AthleteTalk is looking to help create a third department focused on social work.

The goal of the divisions is to help increase the likelihood that Charlotte athletes will seek counseling services when needed.

## Benefits to student-athletes

AthleteTalk looks to help student-athletes by growing their mental health literacy and enhancing wellness.

“It is one of my beliefs that student-athletes who invest in their mental health now will see the dividends later,” said Gill. “Many athletes face challenges such as sports termination, graduation, transfers and injury. They don’t know how to deal with it all. Now is the time for them to learn how to invest time in their mental health and take some of the things they are learning from the time they invest and implement.”

Gill said helping athletes now is crucial for their development as athletes and people.

“If they don’t learn how to invest in it now, they will be put in situations where they have to do it on the fly. The point is to help student-athletes learn how to invest in and practice good, healthy coping skills and learn about mental health techniques,” said Gill.

## Looking ahead

As AthleteTalk continues to expand with partnerships at multiple universities, Gill said he wants to leave behind a legacy.

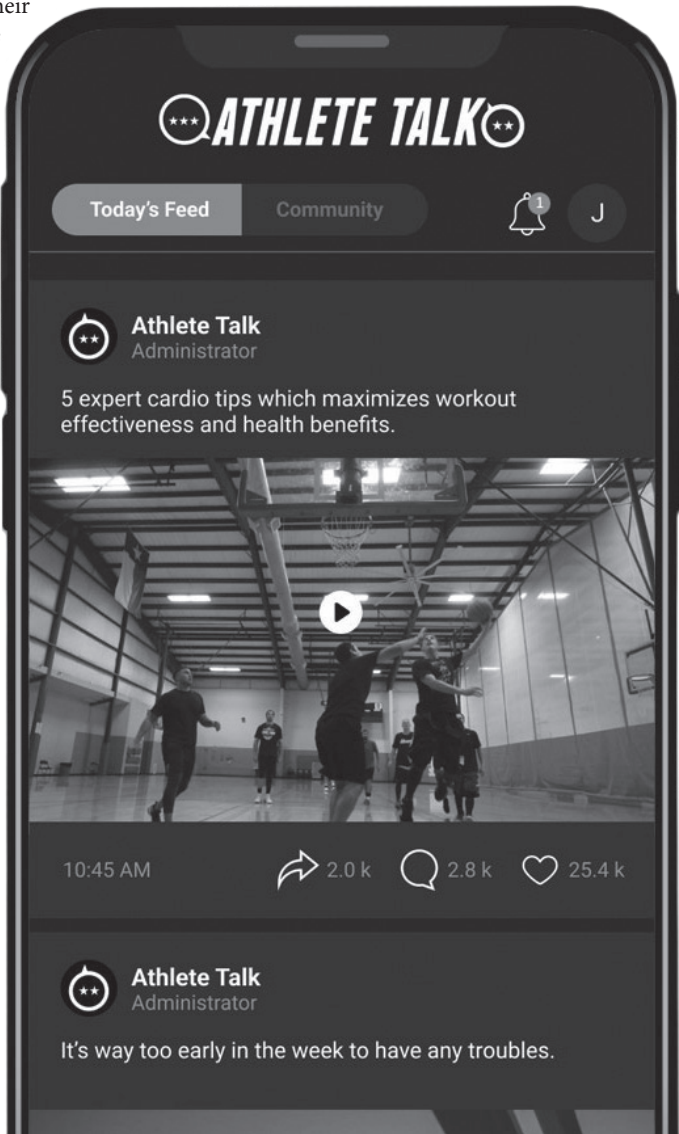
“Our legacy at every school is that we want to pour into athletes, whether

AthleteTalk application | Courtesy of Emmett Gill, Jr.

through student-athletes positive mental health or going into the industry to pour into other athletes. That is the way we are going to normalize mental health and break down the stigma,” said Gill.

At Charlotte, impacting the journey of student-athletes is the mission.

“At Charlotte, we hope that just one athlete can say that our app impacted their journey,” said Gill. “We want to impact athletes’ lives while they are at Charlotte and help them build positive habits. I also hope we get some athletes to become interested in mental health in sports.”





# ‘Testament to how seriously the state is taking suicide prevention’: State launches mental health lifeline dashboard

Lola Oliverio | The Daily Tar Heel Senior Writer

In December 2023, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services launched a performance dashboard to track calls made to the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

The lifeline is a free, confidential service created by the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration in partnership with Vibrant Emotional Health, launched in 2005. Upon calling, users are connected to local call centers within their state. The crisis line aims to provide callers with both acute crisis intervention strategies, as well as general mental health support.

“When you call, they will hook you up with anything,” Kelly Crosbie, the director of the Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Use Services at the NCDHHS, said.

She said that only about 15 percent of users who call are in active crisis.

Some of the data provided by the dashboard includes demographic statistics of callers, their

reasons for contacting the crisis line and what support or services the call center referred them to.

“I think the public can use the dashboard to continue to build faith in this service — being something that’s ready, available for when folks need it.

- Michael Kane, director of clinical data science and advanced analytics at UNC

“The dashboard, I think, is helpful to provide transparency about the impact that service is

having for our state,” Michael Kane, the director of clinical data science and advanced analytics and a child and adolescent psychiatrist at

UNC, said. “And so, I think the public can use the dashboard to continue to build faith in this

service — being something that’s ready, available for when folks need it.”

A nationwide 988 dashboard exists as well, detailing answer speed and call length across the country. The lifeline has subnetworks to provide individuals with specialized services, such as Spanish and LGBTQI+ subnetworks. Calls can also be routed to a separate Veterans Crisis Line that is operated in partnership with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Other states, such as Georgia, Louisiana and Wyoming, have similar dashboards that track 988 lifeline data on a state level. These dashboards are helpful for states to assess their suicide prevention efforts and identification of places in which more support is needed, Kane said.

Overall, there were 1,420 calls from Orange County residents, with the rate of calls being slightly higher than most other surrounding counties. The most common reason for contacting the crisis line statewide was interpersonal or family issues, followed by depression.

Virginia Rodillas, the director of helpline operations at the North Carolina branch of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, said that 988 Lifeline call center dispatchers are trained to de-escalate situations and provide callers with the appropriate resources, such as directing them to “warm lines” — as opposed to hotlines — which are for less intense or less time-sensitive situations.

Very rarely are law enforcement agencies involved when an individual calls the 988 Lifeline, Crosby said. Instead, mobile crisis units are deployed to those in active crises. These teams include a social worker in an unmarked vehicle to assess emergency situations. In 2023, only 11.8 percent of callers were referred to mobile crisis units.

As of 2021, North Carolina’s age-adjusted suicide mortality rate was 0.8 percent lower than the nation’s average. North Carolina’s average 988 Lifeline answer time in 2023 was 14 seconds, whereas the national average was 39 seconds.

“We’re doing so well nationally in terms of where our numbers, our benchmarks are compared to the national averages,” Kane said. “I think it’s a testament to how seriously the state is taking suicide prevention and the resources that they’re putting toward mental health in general.”

@LolaOliverio



A sign listing numbers for the suicide hotline and CAPS is posted on a light pole outside of Murphey Hall on Oct. 11, 2021. | Ira Wilder/The Daily Tar Heel



# Students and faculty reflect on university well-being days across North Carolina

Alli Pardue | The Daily Tar Heel Audience Engagement Editor

**Content Warning:** This article contains mention of suicide.

UNC-Chapel Hill senior Natalie Tuinstra said she sometimes finds it difficult to take a break.

“It’s the grind,” she said. “It’s the culture we’re in.”

In these moments, Tuinstra said she takes a step back and remembers a Dutch concept her dad taught her: “niksen,” the art of purposefully doing nothing.

Recently, a handful of universities across North Carolina seem to have employed a similar philosophy, including extra breaks in their academic calendars. During these days off, students are encouraged to take a step back from schoolwork and focus on their mental health.

These days, often called “wellness days,” arose in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A 2021 U.S. Surgeon General Advisory found that youth depression and anxiety symptoms — which were already on the rise — doubled during the pandemic, with 25 percent experiencing depressive symptoms and 20 percent experiencing anxiety.

Now, three years later, some individuals cited in the advisory have reached young adulthood and are attending college. A study of thousands of college students, both before and during the pandemic, found that depression, alcohol use disorder, bulimia nervosa and comorbidity were higher during rather than before the pandemic.

Universities across the nation have been enacting policies to combat these trends and improve students’ well-being with policies like wellness days.

Barbara Fredrickson, a psychology professor at UNC-CH, said these days off are beneficial for students.

“It kind of legitimizes taking a break in a way that wasn’t present before,” Fredrickson said.

However, adding wellness days to a university’s academic calendar may not be a perfect solution. Most North Carolina colleges don’t have wellness days, and some students and faculty at those that do have expressed suggestions on how to improve their impact.

## University wellness days in North Carolina

At least 14 universities across the state have implemented wellness days since 2020.

UNC-CH’s well-being days — initially called

wellness days — began in fall 2020 as a response to students requesting more breaks, UNC Media Relations said in an email. In the original announcement, former Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz and former Provost Robert Blouin said the days off would replace the campus’s 2021 spring break in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19.

A year later in fall 2021, N.C. A&T, the nation’s largest public Historically Black College and University, introduced wellness days to encourage students to practice self-care, Valerie Giddings, senior vice provost of academic affairs at N.C. A&T, said.

Then in 2022, following a string of student deaths, N.C. State University announced its first wellness day in an effort to let students “take a breath,” Chancellor Randy Woodson said in a video statement at the time.

This year, N.C. State, N.C. A&T, Guilford College and Saint Augustine’s University each scheduled two wellness days into their academic calendars. Elizabeth City State University scheduled four, and N.C. Central University and Shaw University each scheduled one. Winston-Salem State University scheduled one “Mental Health Day,” and William Peace University

scheduled two “Pacer Days.” UNC-CH scheduled five well-being days — more than any other school in the state.

At least four universities — Duke University, UNC Pembroke, UNC Greensboro and UNC School of the Arts — no longer include wellness days in their academic calendars.

## Hurdles to taking breaks

Although encouraged to do so, some students say they find it difficult to take a break from school work on wellness days.

Generally, it is recommended that professors suspend coursework and deadlines on or adjacent to these days, but students at universities across the state said they have had deadlines within those times.

“That really defeats the purpose, especially if it’s the day after the wellness day, because you have to then be using the wellness day to be doing those assignments,” N.C. State sophomore Sophia McCall said.

Eric Hastie, a teaching assistant professor in the UNC-CH biology department, said he hears similar complaints from his students. While he makes efforts to accommodate well-being

days, he said college students need to learn time management and study skills.

“I’m not negating their feelings at all,” he said. “College is hard.”

Hastie said he uses well-being days to work without interruptions. But others, like Fredrickson, completely disconnect from work to focus on personal wellness.

“I think it’s important to model for my students that they should take the day off,” she said.

Fredrickson developed the “Broaden-and-Build Theory,” which supports the idea that positive emotions contribute to human resilience and well-being. She suspects her students wouldn’t give themselves a break if she didn’t reciprocate by giving herself one as well, because society is “addicted to achievement,” she said.

While this mentality can drive students to succeed academically, it can also hinder their ability to take care of themselves by discouraging taking time off, N.C. A&T junior Kaylee Harper said.

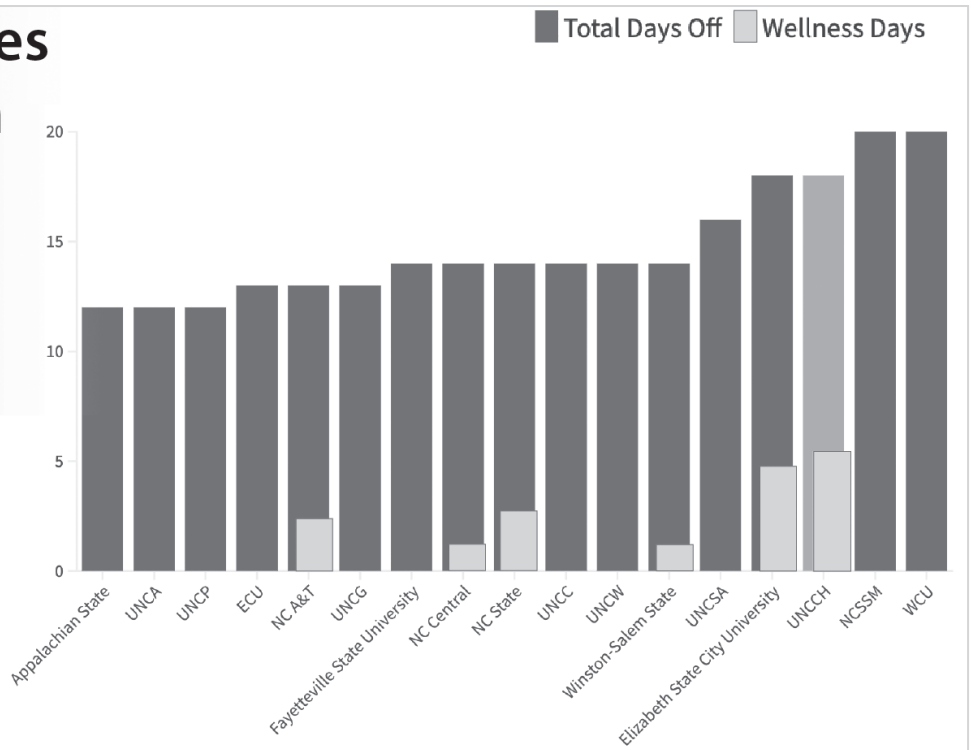
But Fredrickson said taking occasional breaks leads to more productivity, not less.

One study found that employees performed better at work when they took self-initiated short breaks in the afternoons, as well as following

## Only six universities in the UNC system have instituted wellness days this year

All universities have a variety of days off for students, but only six of the seventeen universities in the UNC system have days allocated specifically for student wellness.

Days off include breaks, excluding weekends, while classes are in session.





nights of good sleep. These pauses can help people become stronger and more resilient, Fredrickson said.

“There’s no value in burning somebody out,” she said.

Tuinstra, who leads the mental health advocacy group Active Minds at Carolina, said she has seen the consequences of stress and burnout first-hand.

“You can do things that make you happy,” she said. “You don’t need to work yourself to the point of being sick.”

### ‘A drop in the bucket’

Last spring, Emily Escobedo Ramirez wrote a column in Appalachian State University’s student newspaper, The Appalachian, urging her institution to not wait for a tragedy to occur before implementing wellness days.

“The necessity for wellness days is increasing, and will only continue if no action is taken,” she wrote.

At universities that do have wellness days, some schools schedule them to be weekend-adjacent, while others, like N.C. State’s, fall in the middle of the week.

McCall said she wishes her wellness days were on a Friday or Monday, rather than mid-week. She also said she wants professors to be required to respect these breaks when planning deadlines.

But wellness days, Fredrickson said, are just a “drop in the bucket” when it comes to solving the student mental health crisis.

Fredrickson said she believes universities like UNC-CH need to employ more mental health service providers and more flexibility with their students.

Students at UNC-CH can walk into Counseling and Psychological Services on campus and speak with a therapist without making an appointment or waiting on a waitlist. Last semester, 1,812 students visited CAPS for walk-in appointments.

On a smaller scale, Fredrickson said students can improve their well-being by intentionally prioritizing positivity, social connection and time in nature.

Tuinstra said she believes in prioritizing preventative measures like peer support and wellness education, while others advocate for fostering open communication about mental health between students and universities.

“Just keep talking about it and publishing articles about it and making everybody aware that it’s a problem,” Hastie said.

Rosegalie Cineus, editor-in-chief at The A&T Register, contributed reporting to this story.

@allipardont

# LGBTQ+ support groups provide community care for substance abuse

Eliza Benbow | The Daily Tar Heel Lifestyle Editor

When Jemm Merritt-Feder and their ex-partner moved to North Carolina in 2020, they felt isolated in their recovery from substance dependence and afraid to ask for outside help. Eventually, Merritt-Feder began to look for a therapist who would understand their experiences with both substance abuse and gender identity issues.

“There was nothing direct toward queer people, particularly queer people of color as well, who were looking for support,” they said.

Over the next year, Merritt-Feder became a certified peer support specialist and founded One Day at a Time, a peer support group for gender-diverse individuals to discuss their experiences with gender transition, mental health and substance abuse in a non-judgmental space. The group, which currently has about 15 members, meets monthly in person and on Zoom.

Despite having a clinical background, Merritt-Feder said their biggest role at peer support meetings is to humanize peoples’ experiences.

“This is a human issue,” they said. “And people dealing with substance abuse and all these mental illnesses, like, it comes from something else.”

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s 2021 and 2022 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health, adults in the LGBTQ+ community were over twice as likely to have a serious mental illness than straight adults.

Members of the LGBTQ+ community were also more likely than straight adults to have had a substance use disorder in the past year, according to the same survey.

Merritt-Feder said that members of the LGBTQ+ community may turn to substances because they don’t have support systems or know that there are other options to work through what they are going through.

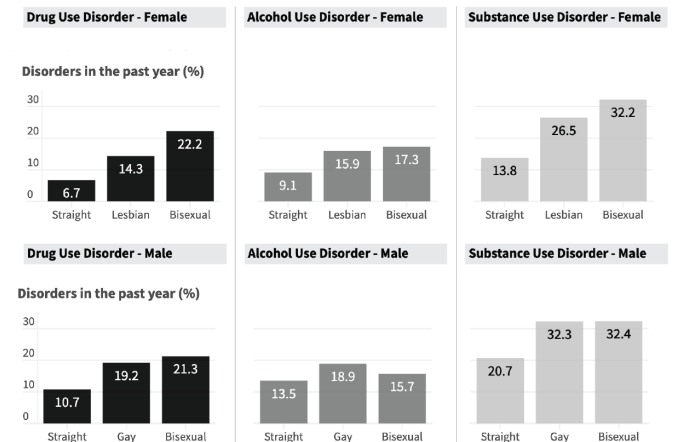
Since 2011, the North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition has hosted a peer-based discussion group for trans and gender non-conforming people in the Triangle with a harm reduction lens. The group currently meets twice a month — once virtual, and once at the LGBTQ Center of Durham.

The coalition is a statewide non-profit founded in 2004 providing grassroots harm reduction services and advocating for the dignity, autonomy and self-determination of people who use drugs.

Loftin Wilson, the Harm Reduction Programs Manager at NCHRC, founded the group after noticing a lack of community resources for trans and gender questioning people in the area. He said that his inspiration for the group was a mixture of

## LGBTQ+ community members see higher rates of drug, alcohol and substance use disorders

The average gay/lesbian and bisexual identifying person is respectively 70 and 87 percent more likely to have a substance use disorder than the average straight person. Bisexuals have the highest rates for all disorders except for alcohol use disorder amongst males.



Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) • According to SAMHSA, substance use disorders are “characterized by impairment caused by the recurrent use of alcohol or other drugs (or both).”

his passion for harm reduction and his own desire for community support during his transition.

The group is open to people experiencing any of the stages of drug use, from those actively using to those in recovery, Wilson said, as well as people of all ages.

“Less and less these days, it seems like there are fewer and fewer real intergenerational community spaces where people can learn from people who have some sort of core shared experience that we all share, but we also are coming from different places in life and different perspectives and different cultures and all of that,” he said. “So being able to have that space to learn from each other is really incredible.”

At One Step at a Time, community building goes beyond the monthly meetings — the group takes outings to bowling alleys and the zoo and members affirm one another outside of sessions.

“I’m thinking that we’re just here talking, and then there are people who are getting to know each other and really making connections beyond this,” Merritt-Feder said.

They said that everybody heals differently, and there are people that need community-based support and education to meet them where they are, rather than going to hospitals or rehabilitation centers.

Peer support is not a replacement for traditional mental healthcare, they said, but it can provide the space for people to talk about things they wouldn’t bring up to a therapist or doctor.

“Historically, most mental health service

providers have been cisgender white women — and that’s changing and improving,” William Hall, an associate professor at the School of Social Work, said. “But I think it’s really important that I think the professionals providing these services to these communities have lived experience with the communities they’re trying to help.”

Hall, who researches mental health disparities among LGBTQ+ populations, said that much of the existing mental healthcare interventions and services for the LGBTQ+ community are not currently tailored to specific populations within the community.

Both healthcare providers and community members are interested in increasing training and representation within mental healthcare — which includes representation for immigrants, people of color and people with disabilities — but many of them are not trained to address LGBTQ+ specific issues in their care.

A few years after founding the peer support group, Wilson and other trans community members began offering training about how to care for trans and gender non-conforming people to healthcare providers.

“I feel like the level of education and knowledge has really increased over the past 15 years, and it’s nowhere near as dire of a situation as it was,” he said. “Although there’s still, obviously, room to grow.”

@eliza\_benbow



# How two flagship North Carolina universities responded after several student deaths

Emmy Martin & Emily Vespa | The Daily Tar Heel Editor-in-Chief & Technician Managing Editor

**Content Warning:** This article contains mentions of suicide and death.

When Sree Yallapragada found out her friend and N.C. State classmate died unexpectedly of health complications last February, she said she was struck with an indelible pang of shock, regret and deep sadness.

The death of Yallapragada's classmate, Toni Tutt, hung over their small, tight-knit cohort of students in N.C. State's English Department throughout the remainder of the semester, she said.

As she stood next to her classmates at their graduation ceremony, she said Tutt's absence was even more tangible.

"Someone is missing," Yallapragada recalled thinking.

A few days later, when she learned another N.C. State student had died, this time by suicide, she felt numb.

"I don't think there was enough time or way to process what was happening because it was so frequent," Yallapragada said.

By the end of the 2022-23 academic year, 14 students at N.C. State had died, seven by suicide. In the five years prior, an average of eight students died at N.C. State annually, and of those, the institution averaged three suicides per year.

In 2021, UNC saw a similar spate of incidents when at least three students died by suicide in one semester.

Neither UNC nor N.C. State publicly track the exact number of students who die during their time at the institutions, including those who die by suicide. This makes it hard to determine how many students die at the universities each year.

UNC does not internally track student deaths, UNC's Dean of Students Desirée Rieckenberg said. An N.C. State spokesperson did not confirm whether the University internally tracks student deaths, saying only that the process it follows when a student dies is "not necessarily a formal tracking mechanism."

The lack of record surrounding student deaths is not unusual. In 2018, The Associated Press found that out of the 100 largest public universities in the United States, 46 tracked suicides among their student bodies. N.C. State was one of two universities that didn't provide tracking data to AP at the time.

The mental health crisis UNC and N.C. State

face is not altogether unique. Universities across the country are also confronting a 62 percent rise in suicide rates among teenagers and young adults over 14 years.

This year, four students at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls died by suicide. During the 2020-21 academic year, three students at Dartmouth College died by suicide. In 2021, two students at the West Virginia University died by suicide.

Avery Cook, the director of Counseling and Psychological Services at UNC, said death by suicide has long been a risk factor for young adults, but that risk has increased in tandem with rates of other mental health concerns.

"I think there are a lot of stressors in the world right now," they said. "We're coming out of COVID, which was a really challenging, traumatic time for everyone, and we have to remember that each individual is dealing with their own configuration of events."

Shortly after each campus lost multiple

coordinator.

UNC published its postvention protocol on the Dean of Students website in 2022 after several student suicides in 2021 gained significant attention. Rieckenberg said the University made the decision in an effort to prioritize transparency.

"We felt like it was really appropriate and a good time to be able to open up the playbook for folks to be able to see and understand not only what we do, but some of the whys behind what we do," Rieckenberg said.

## What UNC and N.C.

### State's postvention protocols address

After a student death, both N.C. State and UNC ensure the family and friends have been notified, Hollingshead and Rieckenberg said. The two universities focus on identifying individuals who may be impacted by the death and work to provide care and resources to those deemed highly impacted.

statements can confirm a suicide if the death was public or if information about the suicide is already publicly known.

In campus communications that allude to student deaths, leadership at N.C. State and UNC have emphasized mental health resources available to students.

Last academic year, N.C. State Chancellor Randy Woodson released several messages to the community to acknowledge select student deaths and direct students to on-campus support. But this year, the university hasn't taken the same approach to publicly addressing the death of two students — one of unknown causes and the other, an apparent suicide.

"Sending a mass email out to tens of thousands is not a best practice," Hollingshead said.

The change is an effort to be mindful of suicide contagion, Hollingshead said, which is when exposure to suicide can influence others to attempt. Research has shown that teenagers and young adults can be more susceptible to suicide

“

I think there are a lot of stressors in the world right now. We're coming out of COVID, which was a really challenging, traumatic time for everyone, and we have to remember that each individual is dealing with their own configuration of events.

- Avery Cook, director of Counseling and Psychological Services at UNC

students to suicide, both UNC and N.C. State partnered with The Jed Foundation through the JED Campus initiative. The nonprofit collaborates with universities to improve mental health programs and suicide prevention efforts. UNC partnered with JED in February 2022, and N.C. State in September 2023.

N.C. State and UNC are also two of a growing number of universities that have established protocols for the aftermath of student deaths, commonly known as postvention protocols.

Justine Hollingshead, N.C. State's assistant vice chancellor for academic and student affairs, said the university adopted a formal postvention protocol in 2015, and it has evolved over the nine years she has served as the postvention

"We can't control social media or the local media coming with a camera, of course, so there's sometimes that time lag," Hollingshead said. "And that's viewed as a failure on our part, but that's not a failure. It's a best practice to make sure we're being respectful of the family and their notification."

At UNC and N.C. State, discussion of student deaths can spread quickly on social media. Both universities' policies concede that speculation about the circumstances of a student's death may circulate long before any official information is released.

In the circumstance that either school finds it necessary to send a campus-wide communication, details like the cause of death typically won't be included. At N.C. State, official

contagion and clusters.

UNC's response regarding deaths on campus has been similar. When a student died on campus in April 2023, the sixth death that year, the University would not provide details to local media.

UNC Police only release an Alert Carolina message if there is an ongoing threat to the community. However, students did receive an Alert Carolina message in September 2021 about the suicide of a student at The Forest Theatre, despite the message stating there was "no ongoing threat to campus."

## Steps taken by both universities

Following the suicides on UNC's campus in



fall 2021, the institution launched the Heels Care Network, a website that provides a comprehensive list of mental health resources, events, news and a peer support chat. Similarly, N.C. State established the Wolfpack Wellness website in November 2023 to provide a single place to explore the University's mental health and well-being resources.

Now in its third year of JED Campus, UNC is focused on implementing recommendations from JED and community participation.

In fall 2022, UNC launched a Healthy Minds Survey for the student body and the JED Task Force developed a strategic plan based on the results of the survey. Currently, a group composed of University administrative officials, students and mental health professionals are in the process of implementing initiatives from the strategic plan.

Amy Johnson, vice chancellor for student

affairs and co-chair of the task force, said several of JED's recommendations for supporting student mental health are either completed or in progress at UNC. Of the 79 recommendations, only four had not been started.

During the final stage next year, UNC will readminister the Healthy Minds Survey and complete a post-assessment. JED will provide a progress summary and guidance on how to continue improving mental health resources.

"While not all recommendations may be implemented at every campus, we think these findings speak to our strong commitment to supporting student well-being and are grateful for our community's partnership," Johnson said in a statement.

In fall 2022, N.C. State launched a Student Mental Health Task Force. Since the group issued its final report in spring 2023, implementation teams have worked to address several

recommendations. The university scheduled regular wellness days, embedded counselors in each college across campus, reviewed its postvention protocols and engaged in the JED Campus program.

N.C. State is in the first stage of the Jed Foundation's four-year program, which will continue through spring 2027.

Hollingshead said the partnership with the Jed Foundation has already brought about change to parts of the postvention plan to align it with best practices. The University has provided training for some campus entities that had not previously been trained in the protocol due to high turnover, she said.

"We had kind of missed that piece," she said. "People come and go, so we had not done as good a job of training individuals who might have to respond."

Hollingshead and other university leaders

will continue to enhance N.C. State's approach to mental health, she said. JED will conduct a campus visit to N.C. State from March 28 to 29 to help inform its assessment and planning process.

Yallapragada said students coping with the loss of a friend or classmate should seek help, adding that it is crucial to lean on resources like crisis helplines and well-being support provided by their university.

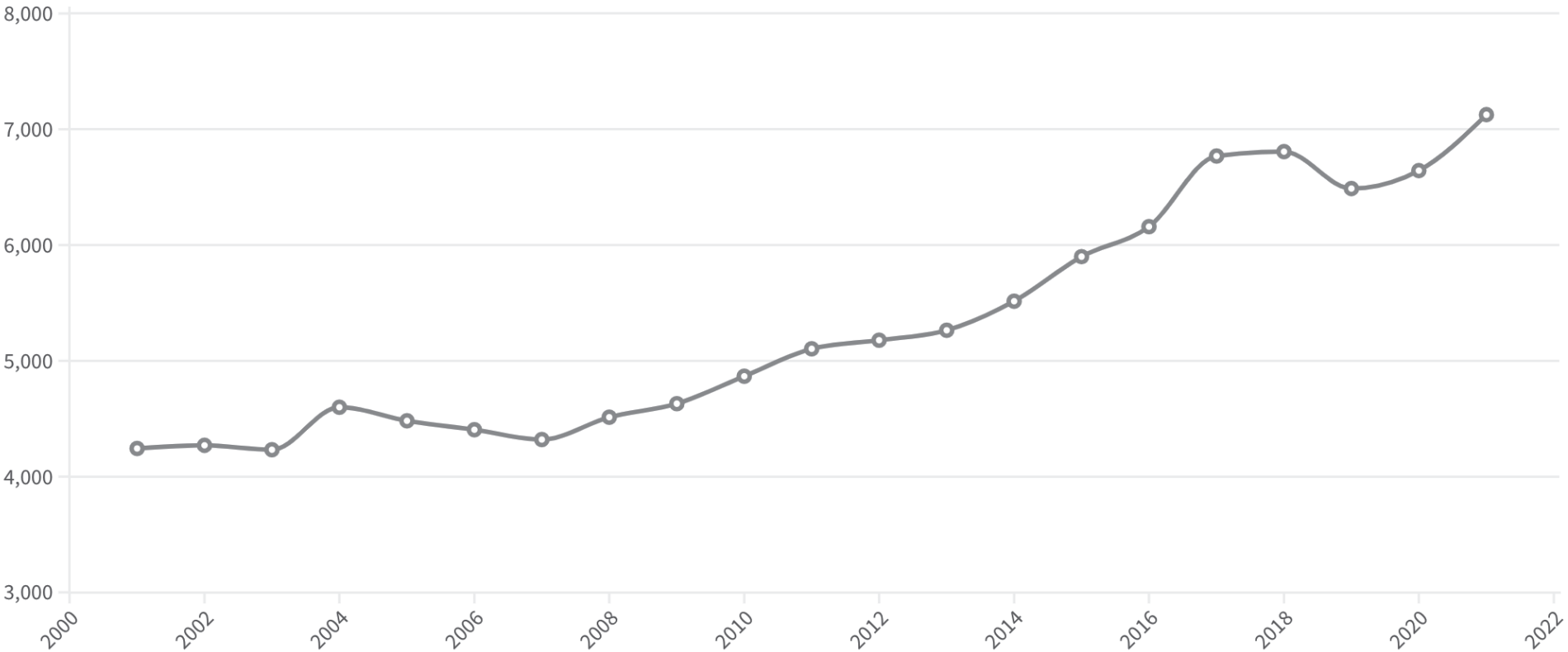
"It's like when you're traveling and the flight attendants are showing the oxygen mask demo and they're like, 'Put it on yourself before you help people,'" Yallapragada said. "Take care of yourself before you tackle everything else."

@emmymartin | @emily-vespa

# Among U.S. teenagers and young adults, the suicide rate increased from 2007 to 2021 after remaining stable from 2001 to 2007

The suicide rate increased by 62 percent among those aged 10 to 24 during the latter 14-year span, from 6.8 percent in 2007 to 11 percent in 2021.

Number of suicides nationally among 10- to 24-year-olds



Source: [National Center for Health Statistics](#)  
Data Visualization by Emmy Martin



# Column: How we talk about suicide online matters

Ethan Bakogiannis & Jameson Wolf | Technician Editors-in-Chief

**Content Warning:** This article contains references to suicide.

A week into our tenure as editors-in-chief, we woke up to a Google Chat message discussing an apparent student suicide on campus the night before.

After reaching out to the University for confirmation and a statement on the rumor, we opened Reddit and YikYak, knowing that, for better or worse, any rumblings around campus would end up there.

While constantly refreshing the pages, we found separate rumors of another student death at a residence hall quickly making their way across NC State chat rooms and message boards.

Countless emails, two breaking news staffers and one canceled final exam later, we had spent all day working our way through how to report on two student deaths in less than 24 hours — the sixth and seventh student death suicide of the academic year.

Throughout that process, we had the benefit of having attended trainings and participated in numerous conversations about the most responsible ways to report on mental health and suicide. Most students on campus who were reading, writing or reposting information about the deaths did not have that benefit.

But when everyone has access to an online platform, the responsibility to minimize harm online extends beyond established reporting outlets to everyone who posts content. What information we share and the way we share it has an effect on those who view it — and that effect can be immense.

Media coverage is a primary driving factor in suicide contagion, the process by which exposure to a suicide death leads to increased risk of suicidal behavior in those exposed. Over the past several decades, researchers have developed guidelines for responsible reporting on suicide, and, when followed, these guidelines can successfully reduce the risk of contagion.

It is a greater challenge, however, to establish and encourage these guidelines on open online forums and social media platforms.

But that shouldn't stop us from using our own platforms responsibly. With college students spending hours on social media weekly, what we see from the non-news accounts we follow has the capacity to be just as much, if not more, impactful than formal news coverage.

One of the first things to be mindful of is that suicide is not inevitable. Presenting it as a common or acceptable response to struggle rather than a public health issue creates an aura

of hopelessness that may prevent people from seeking help.

In the vast majority of cases, mental health treatment is effective. Sharing treatment resources along with stories of successful treatment can provide hope and offer a way forward for those who are struggling.

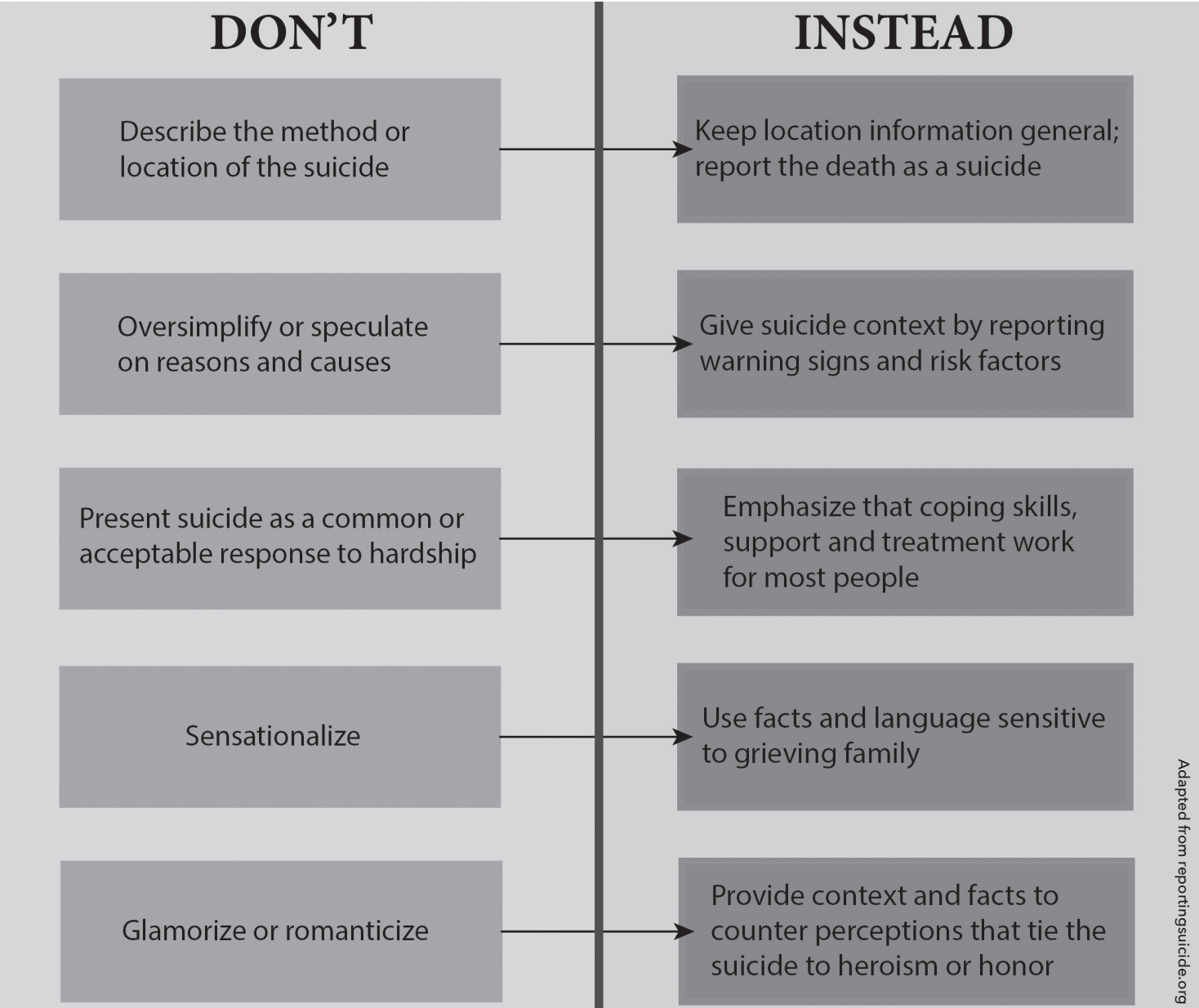
As students on NC State's campus last year, it was often frustrating to not quickly receive any official communication about student deaths on campus as the University navigated privacy concerns, verification of facts and how to responsibly keep students informed and supported. In lieu of official communication, many took reporting what they knew — or thought they knew — into their own hands.

From our experience, though, one of the most pervasive ways social media users posts don't align with responsible reporting protocols is through speculation of causes and sharing oversimplified explanations. In any instance of suicide death, the causes are complex and numerous. Speculations and oversimplifications, in addition to spreading potentially false information, contribute to a sense of hopelessness and sensationalization surrounding suicide.

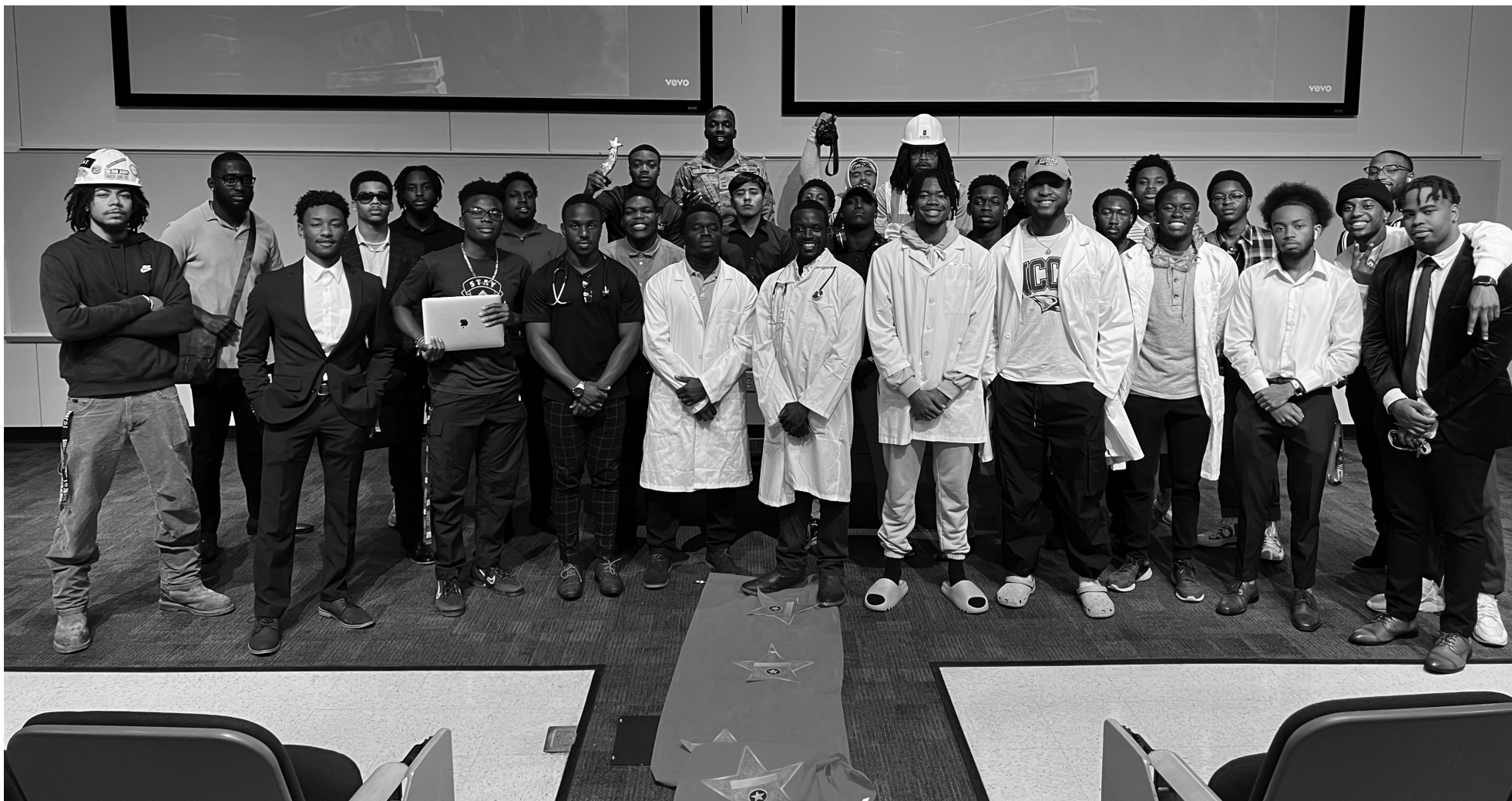
Sharing details such as method and exact location in an instance of suicide can also contribute to the risk of contagion and should be avoided.

Our tendency in grief is often to celebrate the life of the deceased; however, it is important to avoid pushing narratives of heroism and honor that have the potential to glamorize or romanticize suicide.

This is not to say that we should stop talking about suicide. It is currently the third leading cause of death in college-age Americans, and the stigmatization that comes from not discussing mental health is directly linked to decreased likelihood of help seeking. But we must have these conversations responsibly in order to increase education, help seeking and hope.







Members of T.E.A.M. and special guest speaker George Cherry dressed up as their dream careers on Oct. 27, 2022. | Courtesy of Anyanso Kalu

# The community building within East Carolina University

Kiarra Crayton | The East Carolinian Editor-in-Chief

When going to college, most students leave their family and their community — a move that can take a toll on their mental health, especially because college is most students' first time away from home for an extended amount of time.

Anyanso Kalu, a senior public health major at East Carolina University found his community in the Talented Empowered Aspired Men (T.E.A.M.) organization. Kalu is a first-generation Nigerian student whose cousin who attended ECU around the time Kalu was a first-year.

His cousin introduced him to T.E.A.M. and asked the other members of the organization to treat Kalu like a brother.

Now the president of T.E.A.M., Kalu still says the organization has a close community. For example, he said if a member were to text the organization's group chat saying they were stranded, a member would go and help them. Even in the

pouring rain.

"That's why I'm so big on T.E.A.M., because I've seen what it's done for me and for others," Kalu said. "It's like when you come into college you need somebody of the same gender who has your best interest in mind, and that community offered it. And for Black men, there's nothing else besides fraternity life."

Without being a part of T.E.A.M., Kalu said he wouldn't have met his lifelong friends and it wouldn't have taken longer to get to his current level of confidence. Kalu said he was very shy coming into college. But this past year, he ran for student government association vice president.

ECU senior public health major Genesis Ray said she feels a strong sense of community with African American students of ECU, but it's different than the larger Pirate Nation community.

She said being a part of the Black community at ECU has made her feel heard and understood.

Ray said that's because there are some things no one else can relate to other than Black students.

"Even though they might say like 'We're all welcome,' or try to make us feel welcome, that feeling isn't universal," Ray said. "I just feel like some of the, even down to the activities and things, aren't really catered to Black culture."

At least once a semester, the Black Student Union hosts a showcase which Ray described as a way for students to dress up for the theme and celebrate. It's a time for students to embrace their culture with music, art and performances by various organizations around campus.

When white students wanted to join the Black Student Union, Ray said other members questioned if that was something the organization would do. Ray was open to the idea: "We have allies and people wanting to learn more about our culture."

In the upcoming years, Ray hopes that the

general ECU community and the Black community will come together more often.

Victor Ihuka, an international student from Nigeria, is the president of the International Students Association at ECU. He said international students face a lot of challenges normal students might not be aware of.

The ISA helps international students find a community at ECU. Recently the organization has hosted weekly coffee hours for international students to come and socialize with other international students.

"What we try to do is create a community for everyone," Ihuka said. "Everyone really has to create a community and what that means is people don't realize the challenges. I mean, how difficult it is to move from a different culture."



# How Wake Forest trains its faculty to be on the frontline of mental health care

## STUDENTS FACING MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES OFTEN TURN TO FACULTY FIRST

Christa Dutton | Old Gold & Black Senior Writer

At Wake Forest and universities across the nation, students are fighting an unprecedented battle with mental health struggles, and faculty are often on the frontline of defense.

“Often a student first shares with their faculty person,” Dr. Warrenetta Mann, assistant vice president for health and wellbeing at Wake Forest, said. “Students care a lot about their academics here, so [for] anything that negatively affects academics — or even has the potential to — a student is likely to go to [their] faculty person and say, ‘Hey, you just need to know that this thing is going on.’”

According to Matt Clifford, Wake Forest’s dean of students, faculty and staff are the primary referral source to Wake Forest’s CARE case management team, which reviews referrals submitted by students, faculty and staff when they are concerned for their own wellbeing or the wellbeing of a friend. The referral is then reviewed by a case manager who connects them to the appropriate campus resource, like the Counseling Center or Safe Office.

The University does not require faculty to attend trainings but offers optional sessions such as Care 101, a training series that includes a 1.5-hour in-person session, a one-hour online session and access to a resource workbook. Mann and Clifford both agree that requiring training would be difficult, as it would add to professors’ already busy workloads. Still, they want to equip faculty with the tools they need to help students.

“We want to make sure that faculty don’t feel like they’re left alone to figure out how to respond in the right way,” Mann said.

According to Mann, 18 faculty and staff members were trained at the beginning of this year to be ambassadors who will host their own mental health care training sessions this semester.

Clifford says that the University’s philosophy is to create a culture where faculty care enough to learn how to recognize and respond to mental distress in their students on their own.

“What we find is that a lot of our faculty voluntarily engage in not only mental health things but the Alcohol and Drug Coalition and other coalitions to address specific issues on campus,” Mann said.

Mann says that Wake Forest takes a “concentric circles” approach to mental health training.

“The people who really care will come to all the trainings, and then they’ll go back to their departments, and it’ll rub off on some of the other people, and then that’ll rub off on some other people,” she said.

Dr. Meredith Farmer is an associate professor of core literature at Wake Forest who has taught at Wake Forest for 11 years. She says she often receives anxious emails from students, and it is not uncommon for students to show up to her office crying, often about an issue in another class.

“Students are absolutely struggling,” she said.

Across campus, in the Department of Health and Exercise Science, Dr. Abbie Wrights teaches a required course for first-year students called HES 100: Lifestyles and Health. She says that

she has frequent conversations with students outside of class about their mental health, but her students are not all experiencing crises.

Wright’s says that signs of mental distress in students can be summarized into three categories: actions, appearance and academics. With a front-row seat to how poor mental health is affecting students in her classroom, Wrights knows the telltale signs — not coming to class, diminished quality of work or communicating hopelessness in their assignments.

“I feel like we’re on the front line,” Professor Crystal Dixon, who also teaches a HES 100 course, said.

Without required training, faculty are left to decide how they will practically address the current mental health epidemic in their

classroom. Many professors look for ways they can minimize stress during class time. Wrights decides not to cold call. Farmer does not require students to explain their absences and offers extensions when students need them.

Wright’s, Farmer, Dixon and other professors at Wake Forest are all aware they are not licensed mental health professionals but view themselves as liaisons to campus resources.

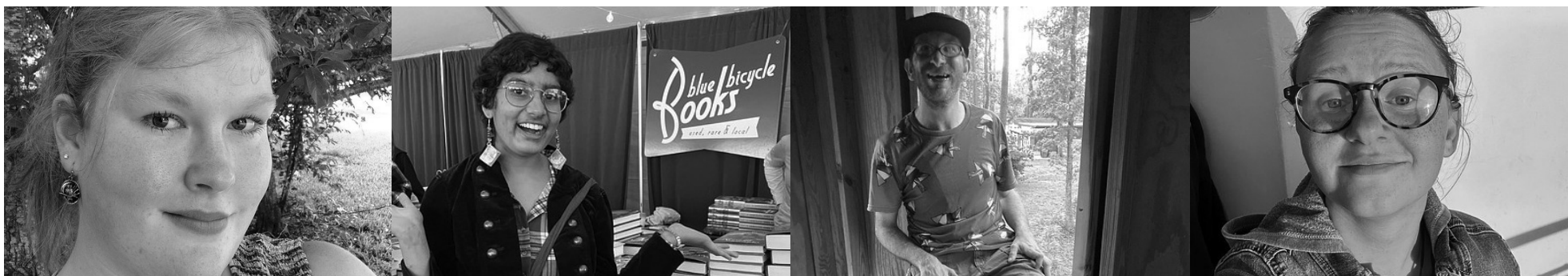
“We have a responsibility to at least refer students,” Dixon said. “I don’t think we have to be the solution ... I think we should always have someone that we can hand off [to].”

If you or someone you know needs mental health assistance, 336-758-CARE is available 24/7 during the week, weekends and holidays.



Dr. Meredith Farmer, an associate professor of literature at Wake Forest, mitigates stress in her classroom by not requiring students to explain absences and offering extensions on assignments when needed. | Evan Harris/Old Gold & Black





(Right to left) Hannah Lowman, Nitya Budamagunta, Michael Friant and Jaden Hager shared their experiences as queer students at UNCW. | Courtesy of Lowman, Budamagunta, Friant and Hager

# Community, Isolation and Politics: The mental health of queer students at UNCW

Hannah Markov | The Seahawk Staff Writer

UNCW is no stranger to conversations about the queer community. LGBTQ issues have largely moved to the forefront of political discussions and legal battles in both Wilmington and North Carolina as a whole. In addition to the immediate legal and educational impact, recent book bans, “Don’t Say Gay” policies and other anti-trans laws across the country are also having mental health implications for members of the queer community.

A recent study conducted by The Trevor Project, an American organization dedicated to suicide prevention efforts for LGBTQ youth, found that 75% of LGBTQ youth nationwide often felt stress or anxiety due to threats of violence against queer spaces; as a result many experienced cyberbullying (45%), in-school bullying (24%) or physical assault (10%). Twenty-nine percent of queer youth also reported not visiting their doctor or hospital due to personal safety concerns.

At UNCW, a university with an overwhelmingly straight and cisgender population, The Seahawk spoke with a few students and recent graduates on their experiences as members of the queer community.

“Being here at UNCW has been good,” Hannah Lowman, a junior criminology student said. “Luckily there’s Mohin-Scholz, which has been a really big blessing to me because they’re very open, accepting, and it’s helped me discover my true identity and learn a lot more about being queer than ever before.”

Lowman received an associate degree from Coastal Carolina Community College before transferring to UNCW. She came out as lesbian in March 2023, and described Mohin-Scholz, the LGBTQ+ resource center, as her “found family,” noting that her family at home were not so supportive.

“Even though there’s a lot of students who are

cisgender, straight, it’s not forced. I do have to say that UNCW is very accepting to students who are queer,” Lowman said.

The Mohin-Scholz LGBTQIA Resource Center is located on the first floor of Fisher University Union and provides resources such as an LGBTQIA prom, trivia nights and SAFEZONE, which are four workshops geared toward faculty and staff that educate them on the queer community.

The director of Mohin-Scholz, Brooke Lambert, joined the center in 2016. She entered the position after a year of it being vacant and described the post-pandemic years as the most difficult in her time of working as director.

“The whole climate on campus felt a little different than we have experienced before,” Lambert said. “That’s not how I feel things are now, but last year things were not quite as supportive and welcoming as they have been previously.”

Discussion groups, called “Building Q\*mmunity,” are another one of the resources provided by Mohin-Scholz. The program is not designed to be therapy, but rather to connect students with the UNCW Counseling Center. The collaboration brings an openly queer therapist to Mohin-Scholz’s space in Fisher every week.

“Knowing that queer youth experience more mental health issues, we want to make sure that that is an accessible resource; for everybody, but we certainly want to make sure that our queer students feel like that’s an accessible resource [for them],” Lambert said.

Nitya Budamagunta is a student in the Creative Writing Department at UNCW. She moved to Wilmington from Cary, N.C., and described both cities as being fairly conservative but with “pockets” of queer people. The main difference, Budamagunta explained, was the diversity,

or lack thereof, in the queer community in Wilmington as compared to Cary. Budamagunta spoke too on her experiences as a queer person of color and immigrant.

“With my experience as a queer person of color, the big thing for me is dealing with ‘how do I blend the culture that I come from with queerness, especially when a lot of the culture I come from is already affected by colonial ideals,’” Budamagunta explained. “Maybe my culture was more accepting of queer people in the past, but colonialism happened and it isn’t anymore.”

Budamagunta has not met people at UNCW with the exact same background as her but finds acceptance and a support system through the LGBTQ community at the University. She described struggling for over a year to find people who understood her culture and traditions, as well as her experiences as a queer person.

“I was going to transfer my freshman year because I felt so isolated,” Budamagunta said. “It was not just the fact that I was dealing with the isolation of being in a place where nobody knew what Diwali was, but also on top of that I was dealing with being in a place that was pretty conservative and not very open to queer people. It was really isolating.”

Recent graduate Michael Friant struggled to find a community with shared experiences as well, noting that having more than one identity made it difficult for him to connect with others like him. He explained choosing Wilmington out of convenience reasons, and initially attended CFCC before transferring to UNCW.

“As a person with a disability, cerebral palsy, it would not be feasible to just start in another city/state,” Friant said. “I never really felt I belonged. I can count on my hand the number of times people have asked me about my sexuality and stuff.”

Friant also shared a fond memory from his

time at UNCW, describing the visibility he felt during one moment with a friend.

“I was at a house party with some friends. I was hanging out on a hammock when one of my friends came over and said ‘All you need now is a cute boy by your side,’” Friant said. “In that moment, I felt seen and heard.”

When asked what advice he would give to queer people considering attending UNCW, Friant marked the importance of connecting with the local LGBTQ community. He also noted that LGBTQ students should expect to feel lonely and be strategic about those whom they disclose their identity to.

Jaden Hager is another recent graduate of UNCW who shared their experiences with The Seahawk. They moved to Wilmington from Mooresville, N.C., a town in the Charlotte metropolitan area. Mooresville has a small queer community, but hosts a pride parade every year.

After starting at UNCW, Hager was conflicted when deciding whether to come out to people or not, explaining that after living in Mooresville their entire life, many people already knew about their personal identity. Hager often felt uncomfortable and avoided having conversations about their pronouns.

“It would be made into something bigger, so I just kind of avoided it a lot,” Hager said. “I didn’t want to be known as ‘the non binary person’ in class. Even though I would have my pronouns in my Canvas profile, I would be misgendered a lot. It just feels like it’s going to happen no matter what.”

Read more at  
theseahawk.org



# The state of mental health at N.C. A&T and where it can improve

Rosegalie Cineus & Kaila Collier | The A&T Register

Mental health awareness has become a topic at the forefront of many discussions nationwide.

At N.C. A&T, students are actively looking to improve their mental health and implement various activities that help them maintain a well-balanced lifestyle centered around taking care of themselves.

Sophomore psychology student Mulekesa Dorckasa grew up in a household where mental health was not talked about as much — crediting it to being Congolese and growing up in a community that doesn't necessarily highlight its impact.

"As I got older, I started to see the importance of my mental health," Dorckasa said. "I do a lot of self-care, and I do video diaries which are pretty much like a journal, I'm just recording it. I go to therapy as well and that has been something that has improved my mental health in a big way."

As students, the constant hustle culture that has permeated society has produced a lifestyle of toxic productivity.

Toxic productivity is defined as "an obsessive need to always be productive, regardless of the cost to your health, relationships, and life."

For students, toxic productivity may appear more often than not, making it hard for many to take a break and rest.

The University-wide wellness days are a way of implementing measures to force students to take that break.

Asha Taitt is a senior multimedia journalism

student who sees wellness days as a time for students to realize that it is OK to stop working for a moment and take a break.

"Because what I think people realize is, there's a lot of conversations about mental health and mental wellness, that have always occurred on this campus before us even being here," she explained. "But it wasn't until recently that they realized, 'Hey, maybe we can take some of the load off people by actually giving them a break.'"

Cameron Williams, a junior supply chain management student, actively chooses to take breaks, recognizing the importance of giving yourself time to take a breath in the constant environment of hustle and grind.

"I'm all for pushing myself to be better, but there always comes a time when you slow yourself down by trying to do too much," he explained. "I plan my rest days & leisure activities whether it's golf, watching a basketball game, writing, painting or just taking a rest."

At A&T, counseling services are a measure from the university that is available to students through the school.

Assistant Director of Counseling Services Victoria L. Dalton describes it as "a place that provides individual and group counseling."

Mixed reviews have plagued counseling services over the years.

Mattie Moore, a junior journalism student, tried A&T's counseling services but her experience fell flat.

"After realizing the therapist I was paired with

wasn't a good fit, I decided not to return," she shared.

However, Dorckasa had a great experience, saying that it allowed her to grow for the better.

"I can honestly say that I am so happy that I started counseling services because I found the perfect fit when it comes to a therapist or counselor."

Counseling services may not be the solution for everyone. When looking for other ways to prioritize mental health, there are also students on campus who are advocates and actively have events focused on the importance of self-care.

Taitt serves as the vice president of A&T's Student University Activities Board (SUAB), the organization dedicated to enhancing student life through diverse programs.

As vice president, Taitt has overseen various mental health-focused events and has pushed for more advocacy on the topic.

"I've been mental health trained for about like two years now. I've even pushed for the executive student leaders on campus to be mental health trained. So we all got that done, this past August so that people feel as though we are somebody they can confide in. Because at the end of the day were students too."

Dalton says that, there has been a change in the way mental health is dealt with now versus then.

"Less stigma is attached to asking for help now," Dalton shared. "Society appears to be more receptive to reporting mental health concerns as

evidenced by seeing increased advertisements to seek help."

Although there are resources available for students throughout the University, things can always improve.

Moore suggests more transparency with counselors and the areas they specialize in to give students more information on who may be the best match for them.

Taitt sees a solution in advocating for mental health training, not only for leadership but for students across the board. She also mentions how counseling services could work better for students.

"I also think that we just have to push for more counselors in counseling services; a lot of people are frustrated because they feel like their presence isn't known," she said. "Or that they don't get to consistently meet with the person they signed up to meet with. That's mainly because they're understaffed."

A measure that has worked well for the students at A&T is the various events that SUAB puts on, focused on mental health.

These events are some of the most popular with a high turnout and consistent requests from students asking for more things like R&B yoga and sound bath events.

"I think that the mental health events are the most personable for people and so we tend to get a higher attendance for those events. Just because it is about the students."



Courtesy of Pixabay



# Duke researchers work on mental wellbeing studies exploring how we think, feel and socialize

Winston Qian | The Chronicle Staff Reporter

## How we think - effects of urgency and curiosity mindsets

In July 2023, a Duke research team published a study exploring how different motivations can drastically influence a person's memory, thinking habits and mental health. The team included Alyssa Sinclair, current postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania who completed her doctoral studies at Duke, doctoral student Candice Yuxi Wang and Rachel Alison Adcock, the interim director of Duke Institute for Brain Sciences.

"People that study learning, modeling it formally, have tended to assume that you could describe learning rates for reinforcement.. depending on what the incentive was, whether it was big or small," Adcock said. "But the state of mind essentially, was not considered in how quickly people learned."

The research team used a virtual game modeled as an art museum heist to simulate a curiosity mindset and an urgency mindset.

"In both cases, the payoff they got was the same in terms of the game," Adcock said. "You learn where things are, you come back the next day, you get your money, and that was true for both people. The only thing that was different was what they were pretending to do in the game."

Despite having the same rewards, results showed that the 'urgent' group was better at finding doors that revealed more valuable paintings, while 'curious' participants were better at remembering familiar paintings the next day.

"There are many situations where the kind of urgency you might feel gets in the way of acquiring more information and coming to an adaptive solution in the longer term," Adcock said. "In a lot of psychotherapies, what we're doing is trying to create space for people to lower the stakes in a given situation and get a little more curious about what are the possible outcomes."

## How we feel - analyzing the health impacts of mindfulness

Moria Smoski, associate professor in psychiatry and behavioral sciences, and doctoral student Joseph Diehl, are leading a Bass Connection research project aimed at discovering the effects of mind wandering and practicing mindfulness, including anxiety and depression.

According to Smoski, when people regularly engage in practices to increase mindfulness,



Courtesy of The Chronicle/File

their "risk for depression, anxiety go down."

In the second semester of the project, the research team is preparing to recruit study participants. To collect data around mindfulness and mind wandering, the team has implemented several approaches.

"We ask our participants to just kind of sit and don't do anything at all. We also [ask] them to do a brief mindfulness practice. But afterwards, we [ask] 'what were you thinking about?'" Smoski said. "But we're also interested in using EEG as another way of measuring very brief microstates in the brain."

Based on findings of this study, Smoski and Diehl also anticipate using their research to improve existing mental health resources on campus such as Koru Mindfulness and to develop new resources.

"We have two purposes. One is to form our own community of people using these practices," Smoski said. "While Koru is wonderful... it's only four weeks...I think we could have more of an impact on wellness on campus [by having]

longer term support for mindful practice."

## How we socialize - cultural effect on self-transcendent emotions

In December 2023, senior Cai Liu received the 2023-2024 Jerome S. Bruner Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Research. Her research analyzes cultural influences on the way people experience love and gratitude.

"I was just really fascinated by cross-cultural differences because of my personal background," Liu said. "Emotions are super important to our well being and also social relationships, I just wanted to see [whether] those important emotions [are] going to vary as well across cultures."

Liu initially hypothesized that cultures emphasizing social interdependency, such as Latin American and East Asian cultures, would have similar perceptions of what love and gratitude meant. She asked 300 participants including European Americans, Latin Americans

and East Asians, to provide specific situations where they experienced love or gratitude.

The results, however, were surprisingly contrasting. "The Chinese [group] paid more attention to instrumental aspects of these experiences. For instance, they will mention more tangible actions such as [a] partner cooking a meal," Liu said. "[The Chilean group] was more on the emotional and expressive side. They mentioned more cases such as emotional support during stressful times or physical intimacy."

Liu believes that the new and growing field of cultural psychology is extremely important to achieve goals on diversity and inclusion in mental health.

"If the study is based only on a segment of the population, then how are we going to say, 'hey, take this technique, it will work for you, it will work for everyone,'" Liu said. "If we want to make psychology work applicable to people from all cultural backgrounds, then we have to include more diverse samples in our studies."



# Elon professor and clinician Bilal Ghandour sheds light on college students with eating disorders

Nia Bedard | Elon News Network Staff Writer

Eating disorders generally begin to develop between the ages of 18 and 21, the college demographic, according to the National Eating Disorders Association. Elon psychology professor and clinician, Bilal Ghandour, whose research revolves around perfectionism and impulsive behaviors has found that eating disorder behavior evolves from a strong sense of needing to be perfect and an inability to let go of high demands.

“College is a really tricky period because you’re thrust into a new world as a young adult, you’re asked to do so many things all at once and the pressure is high,” Ghandour said. “One way to contain that pressure and gain some level of satisfaction is through control. It can be by restricting ourselves to feel more powerful and in control, or you can feel out of control and have a desire to binge eat or eat excessively.”

10 to 20% of women and 4 to 10% of men within the college demographic, suffer from an eating disorder according to The Child Mind Institute, a charitable organization focused on providing psychological and psychiatric services to children and their families. There is also concern for college athletes with eating disorders.

Ghandour said college athletics could make an eating disorder worse due to the environment and expectations of college athletes. He also said being in sports can create an environment of competition, sacrifice and perfectionism, which could lead to athletes creating certain negative eating habits or changing their perception of food.

Apart from athletics, Ghandour said eating disorders can manifest in both men and women. The National Eating Disorders Collaboration reported that a third of the people with eating disorders are males.

“For men the manifestation of eating disorders has gone up a bit, but it usually manifests itself through a kind of body physique,” Ghandour said. “So if you want to gain muscles there can be a dysmorphic or an inappropriate way of looking at food and your body.”

Ghandour said that within the last 10 to 20 years there has been a shift in the way that women want to look from tiny and thin to strong and skinny due to the body fitness movement making its way onto social media. This can manifest in different eating disorder behaviors such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa or avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder.

There have been developments across college campuses to bring more awareness to the

issue of eating disorders developing for college students. Elon Campus Recreation & Wellness is raising more awareness and held a Love Your Body Month in February. SPARKS peer educator, students who promote holistic well-being throughout the Elon student body, Ruby Glynn is excited to celebrate the month and raise awareness to an issue that can affect anyone on a college campus.

“I am especially passionate about this kind of targeted space, because it is so prevalent on college campuses,” Glynn said. “It’s definitely a huge thing that everyone faces, it doesn’t matter who you are.”

Throughout Love Your Body Month, Campus Rec and Wellness is holding group exercise classes, pop-up events and having speakers come to talk about mindful eating, disordered eating, and loving your body.

“We do ladies lift, which is going to get women into the gym and break that stigma of gym bros and focus on how intimidating it can be for a girl to be in the gym,” Glynn said. “We also have a keynote speaker coming to Elon, nutritionist Leslie Williams, who focuses on the multidimensional aspects in personal wellness, nutrition, eating disorder recovery and lessening the stigmas around certain foods and fear foods.”

While there are treatment options for people with eating disorders, such as psychotherapy, medical monitoring, nutritional counseling, medication, or a combination of these approaches, people suffering from eating disorders cannot be treated unless they ask for help.

“We need to make sure that people still feel comfortable reaching out,” Ghandour said. “It’s so imperative that people feel like your friend, or your roommate, or your classmate, or your athletic cohort, feel that they are doing something right when they actually report this.”



Elon Campus Recreation and Wellness talks to students about Love Your Body Month, a month dedicated to educating students at Elon about eating disorders, mindful eating, and loving your body, at College Coffee. | Nia Bedard/Elon News Network