Study highlights racism, sexual assault as contributors to college mental health challenges

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A text mining analysis of academic and news articles related to mental health issues in higher education finds that racism, violence and sexual assault are key contributors to mental health challenges for students. The research also highlights the need for mental health services, and outlines some ways that mobile technologies may be able to help address these needs.

"We had found in our previous work that students are concerned about mental health issues, and we wanted to better define the scope of mental

health challenges for students and what factors contribute to those challenges," says Fay Cobb Payton, corresponding author of a paper on the work and a professor of information systems/technology and University Faculty Scholar at North Carolina State University.

To address these questions, the researchers used text mining techniques to analyze 165 articles published between 2010 and 2015. The researchers drew on both peer-reviewed research literature and articles published in higher-education news outlets.

"We included news outlets because that allowed us to capture timely information that reflected conditions across campuses nationally," Payton says.

The most common theme that cropped up in the articles was an increased need for student mental health services, an idea that appeared in 68 percent of the analyzed material. Among factors that contribute to mental health concerns, the most common was racism and bias against ethnic groups, found in 18 percent of the articles. The researchers also pointed to violence and sexual assault – mentioned in 5 percent of the articles – as a significant contributing factor.

The researchers note that colleges and universities are taking steps to both provide mental health services and offer targeted outreach to students of color. But, the researchers say, many students are simply not taking advantage of the services that are available.

"More needs to be done to address the stigma associated with seeking help in the aftermath of violence or sexual assault, and more needs to be done to address the stigma associated with seeking help for mental health challenges," says Lynette Kvasny Yarger, co-author of the paper and an associate professor of information sciences and technology at Pennsylvania State University.

"Students who are facing the trauma of sexual assault are dealing with the dual stigma of seeking help for both the assault and the ensuing mental health challenges," Payton says.

The researchers also note that mobile technologies may help to meet some of these mental health needs.

"Mobile apps may be valuable for sharing information and resources with students, as well as providing students with improved access to treatment or to connect with communities that could offer peer support," Payton says. "Apps could also be used to create opportunities for peer training or for storytelling that could address issues related to stigma."

However, the researchers note, such mobile app interventions should be driven by evidence-based approaches – and the field of mobile interventions is still in its relatively early stages.

"Our study highlights salient mental health issues for researchers seeking to develop impactful mobile interventions," Payton says. "Additional evidence-based research is needed in this domain."

The paper, "Text Mining Mental Health Reports for Issues Impacting Today's College Students: Qualitative Study," is published in the journal *JMIR Mental Health*.

More information: Fay Cobb Payton et al. Text Mining Mental Health Reports for Issues Impacting Today's College Students: Qualitative Study, *JMIR Mental Health* (2018). DOI: 10.2196/10032

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