

The Stanford Daily

Task force eyes mental health issues

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Amid rising concern for mental health on campus, a select group of faculty, administrators and students have been working behind the scenes to better understand and improve mental health at Stanford.

The Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Task Force, as it is known, was organized by Vice Provost for Student Affairs Greg Boardman last fall and reports directly to his office.

"The task force was created in response to the recognition that the prevalence and complexity of student mental health issues has been growing both nationally and here at Stanford," Boardman said in an email to The Daily.

The task force is composed of two separate committees. The first is the Campus Climate Study Group, led by Acting Dean for Religious Life Patricia Karlin-Neumann and Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) Director Alejandro Martinez. The second is the Policy and Practice Review Committee, headed by Ira Friedman, director of the Vaden Health Center, and Dean of Students Maureen Powers.

While the groups are part of a single task force and study the same issues, they do so with different viewpoints.

"They're looking at it from the practical perspective," Powers said, "and we're looking at it from policy perspective."

A third, smaller working group charged with directly gathering information about campus climate is comprised of eight individuals who also sit on the Campus Climate Study Group.

The Campus Climate group meets in its entirety twice a quarter, but the small working group meets on a weekly basis to gather information on the mental health climate at the University and on what Pope called a national mental health crisis.

When students get into Stanford, she said, they immediately have to begin to deal with issues related to academic stress, and some students do not have the skills necessary to deal with the pressure.

"One of the things that the group has tried to do is to look both at underlying causes and manifestations of stress," said Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Community Resource Center (LGBT-CRC) Director Ben Davidson, who sits on the working group of the Campus Climate committee. "Sometimes they are indistinguishable."

AFTER THE RECENT DEATHS

The task force's progress was slowed earlier this quarter when it shifted focus from information gathering to making resources available to students, a transition following the student deaths that occurred this winter. The apparent suicide of Mengyao "May" Zhou in January increased student and community consciousness about mental health issues.

"There have been four deaths in a really small community," said Haas Center Director Nicole Taylor, who is also a Resident Fellow in Burbank. "We needed to make sure to reach out to the community and say, 'These resources are here.'"

"Mental health is an important issue for our whole community," she added. "Something needed to be said."

Members of the Campus Climate group emphasized that although the response to the recent deaths has been one of the group's most important functions thus far, the task force's role is to evaluate the campus climate as a whole, not to focus on the smaller number of students suffering from acute mental health disorders.

"It's not serving an ombuds kind of function," Karlin-Neumann said. "I don't see us being engaged in a suicide prevention effort. We're involved in a campus climate evaluation."

THE STANFORD DUCK SYNDROME

Many task force members said the most important campus climate issue discussed thus far is the so-called 'Stanford Duck Syndrome' - the idea that Stanford students are calm on the surface but frantically working to stay afloat underneath.

"The Stanford Duck Syndrome comes up in almost every situation," Karlin-Neumann said.

But others did not place as much emphasis on the analogy. Unlike her colleagues on the Campus Climate group, for example, Powers said that the Stanford Duck Syndrome "has not really been a part of our work."

Other people on the task force also agreed, saying that too much attention to the metaphor could oversimplify mental health issues on campus.

"Not everything about mental health revolves around the Stanford Duck Syndrome," said Alejandro De Los Angeles '07, a student representative on the Campus Climate Study Group. "The mental health of Stanford students cannot be reduced to one oversimplified metaphor. We're just not that simple."

Friedman, who is also one of five members of the task force's Steering Committee, said that what the task force ultimately recommends will depend on the work they will be doing in the upcoming months. While the Stanford Duck Syndrome figures to be a significant focus for the task force, it is too soon to tell what the results will be, he said.

"We do not know if we will be making specific recommendations for [the Stanford Duck Syndrome]," he said. "That is not the stage we are at right now."