From:　　　　USC Student Health, Office for Health Promotion Strategy, backbone for the USC Well-being Collective

Title:　　　　Executive Summary of Spring 2020 Focus Groups on First Year Messaging

Requested by: USC Well-being Collective First Year Prevention Education Working Group

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The First Year Prevention Education working group was formed in spring 2020 to review content from all prevention education and messaging that first year students receive at USC with the ultimate goal of creating a streamlined and aligned curriculum for incoming students. The Office for Health Promotion Strategy in USC Student Health was charged with conducting focus groups with first year students to determine which sources students hear health and wellbeing messaging from and what messages they retain. Focus groups were conducted with the goal of collecting feedback, suggestions and recommendations to be shared with the First Year Prevention Education Working Group.

METHODOLOGY

In order to gain a deeper understanding into USC's messaging on health and wellbeing for first year students, six focus groups were completed in spring 2020. Student participants were recruited through physical flyers in residence halls, cultural centers, and campus buildings that house large lectures for first year students. Students were also recruited through email announcements from Residential Education. The recruitment message offered a $20 gift card for participation upon completion of the focus group.

Focus groups were facilitated by student Community Health Organizers (CHOs). These students received intensive training on qualitative data collection and analysis by the Office for Health Promotion Strategy, USC Student Health. The Community Health Organizers used a moderator guide to facilitate the focus groups. Key questions included:

- Let's create a list of all the places you got official messages about health and wellbeing over your first year here at USC. What should we put on this list?
- For each of these sources, what were the major takeaways you remember?
- Were there any instances when you got conflicting messages from these sources?
- What do you think constitutes good wellbeing messaging strategies?

Reach:

Focus Group	# of Student Participants
First year students	5
First year students	9
First year students	8
First year students	7
First year students (conducted online via Zoom)	4
First year students (conducted online via Zoom)	5
Total	38

FOCUS GROUP EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT

Dates: 03/03/2020, 03/06/2020, 03/09/2020, 03/10/2020, 03/11/2020, 03/30/2020

Facilitators & Note Takers: Lana Bridi, Ken Murakami, Ayah Bany-Mohammed, Anoushka Chandra, Joanne Lee, Raveena Ghanshani, Yizhen Yang

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Number of Participants: 38

Participant Description: Undergraduate Fall Admit First Year Students

Demographic Breakdown:

		Count	Percent
Race/Ethnicity	American Indian/Alaska Native	0	0%
	Asian	17	44.74%
	Black or African American	6	15.79%
	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0	0%
	White	9	23.68%
	Other	1	2.63%
Sexual Orientation	Lesbian	0	0%

	Gay	2	5.26%
	Bisexual	2	5.26%
	Queer	0	0%
	Questioning	3	7.89%
	Pansexual	0	0%
	Asexual	0	0%
	Straight / Heterosexual	32	84.21%
	Self-identify or Other	0	0%
	Prefer not to answer	0	0%
Gender Identity	Cisgender Man	8	21.05%
	Cisgender Woman	29	76.32%
	Transgender Man	0	0%
	Transgender Woman	0	0%
	Genderqueer/gender non-conforming	0	0%
	Non-binary	0	0%
	Self-identify or Other	1	2.63%
	Prefer not to answer	0	0%
International/Domestic	International	6	15.79%
	Domestic	32	84.21%
First Generation	Yes	7	18.42%
	No	31	81.58%
Registered with DSP	Yes	1	2.63%
	No	37	97.37%

Research Questions:

1. What are the main sources where students hear messages about health and wellbeing?
2. What are the main messages they are receiving from each source?

ASSERTIONS AND EVIDENCE:

Assertion #1: First year students report peer leaders and affiliated organizations as the primary source of wellbeing information.

Across all focus groups, sources of messaging included Registered Student Organizations (RSOs), Undergraduate Student Government (USG), Cultural Centers, Resident Assistants (RAs) and Residential Education. Wellbeing messaging from student leaders will be covered in this section. Furthermore, each source will be presented alongside themes, data, and quotes collected through the focus groups.

The wellbeing messaging and support provided by RSOs, student leaders, and cultural centers are an integral part of promoting wellbeing on campus. Participants described these sources as providing applicable and actionable information, highlighting peer group interactions as an effective medium, especially as it pertains to mental health and fostering an inclusive community. Students described that applicable and actionable information was conveyed via emails, newsletters, and in-meeting communication. According to one student, they mark events from the newsletters in their planner and attend because RSOs "bring really cool speakers and do some really cool activities" (Hamster, 03/06/2020). Another student shared, "I just find them really useful to plan out my schedule because they [cultural centers] condense events into a single email every Monday" (Panda, 03/06/2020). This highlights the importance of connecting students to resources via RSOs. Moving on, peer group interactions were described as an effective strategy, especially regarding mental health and its relationship to alcohol use and healthy relationships. These strategies were mentioned in three of six focus groups. According to one student, "a group workshop [held by an RSO on the topic of alcohol use and consent] was easier to understand… and [provided] new perspectives" (Siberian Tiger, 03/11/2020). They mentioned that it was "easier to visualize when in group learning" (Siberian Tiger, 03/11/2020). Furthermore, another student shared that their pre-med club held a mental health meeting where they discussed "resources and tips on handling stress and balancing workload" (Otter, 03/10/2020). USG was also mentioned with regard to its "focus on mental health and wellbeing to support students" and that they incorporate student feedback to support wellbeing efforts (Pikachu, 3/30/2020). These findings offer examples of effective modes of communication and the efficacy of peer engagement provided by RSOs and student leaders. Next, wellbeing messaging as it relates to fostering an inclusive community was mentioned over 15 times across four of six focus groups. According to one student, the Black History Month event held by BSA

"made me feel really included in USC" (Panda, 03/09/2020). Another student noted it was "good to hear people speaking my native language [at La CASA] because I don't really get to hear that a lot here on campus" (Red Panda, 03/09/2020). These findings suggest that student leaders in RSOs and cultural centers play an important role in reaching marginalized students and creating a sense of belonging on campus, not only through emails but physical spaces and events. However, some students voiced a lack of community and connection to the student resources. This opinion was expressed over eight times across three of six focus groups. The effectiveness of information distribution was questioned with one student stating that they were "not sure that the wider student population always receives those messages and events" (Butterfly, 03/09/2020). As for the lack of community, another shared, "I was disappointed...I would have liked a space and a place where I could meet fellow Korean people and just like create a community inside of USC" (Otter, 03/09/2020). Overall, these insights reinforce the importance of peer networks in wellbeing information dissemination, and in particular the role of fostering community and a sense of belonging as a contributor to student wellbeing.

Likewise, Residential Education and Resident Assistants (RAs) also provide essential wellbeing messaging. All focus groups, aside from the March 6th, 2020 focus group, mentioned Residential Education and RAs as a source of first year wellbeing messaging. Positive comments were made about the bulletin board as a resource for self-improvement and opportunities for involvement. This was mentioned over 14 times in five of six focus groups. One student expressed that the bulletin board is actually the "main source" of resources (Owl, 03/30/20), and another mentioned that the bulletin board informed them of a scholarship opportunity. "I saw in the bulletin board that there was a scholarship opportunity and it was really cool because I applied to that scholarship and I got it" (Red Panda, 03/09/2020). Furthermore, bulletin boards also provide a source of uplifting content. According to one student, "sometimes there are memes [on the bulletin board] that make my day a little brighter before I go to class" (Shiba Inu, 03/09/2020). However, other participants expressed a lack of connection with their RA and the Residential Education office. This was observed more than 13 times across three of six focus groups. Regarding the events held by RAs, one student remarked, "Events with puppies [are good], but don't start conversations about mental health" (Zebra, 03/03/2020). Multiple students expressed a lack of relationship with their RA. "My RA doesn't really check in with me... I don't think it's super expected of him" (Tortoise, 03/10/2020). These results present an opportunity for discussion on the role of RAs and the services of the Residential Education office to continue to support students' wellbeing.

In summary, first year students receive a significant amount of wellbeing messaging through peer leaders, in particular via RSOs, as well as affiliated organizations/departments such as the cultural centers. These sources primarily provide messaging regarding actionable information, and utilize peer networks to foster a sense of belonging and share resources. RAs and Residential Education are also an

important source of wellbeing information, however, it is worth noting that some participants experience a lack of community and connection to their RAs.

Assertion #2: The second most common source of wellbeing messaging for first year students is the mandatory education.

The second most common source of wellbeing messaging for first year students is the mandatory educational modules offered by the university, including AlcoholEdu for College and the Trojans Respect Consent workshops. Focus group participants described the actionable information they learned during these workshops, while also providing areas for improvement. It should be noted that the focus group facilitators specifically prompted and asked participants about these two sources as they are both mandatory courses for first year students, and of particular interest to this research.

First year students reported that AlcoholEdu for College provides extensive actionable and applicable information. Particularly, students cited the value of learning about alcohol content in drinks (four responses), warning signs of alcohol overdose (one response), blood alcohol content (two responses), and bystander intervention (two responses). One student participant recalled performing an activity in the module involving "measuring your body weight and your gender, and everything to see how much would get you to your blood alcohol content being above whatever the number is" (Wolf, 3/9/20). Among these actionable items, students also mentioned that AlcoholEdu for College facilitated their transition from high school to college (two responses) and helped familiarize them with university policies and regulations (three responses), especially in the case of international students. One student remarked that AlcoholEdu for College assists "students who are … international students...coming to a different place and like having to be aware of the new laws...in terms of like drinking...And that was helpful to just make yourself aware that ... [there are] a different set of rules to follow" (Giraffe, 3/11/20). Students likewise complimented the scenario-based learning (six responses) in helping "participants to interact with the content" (Owl, 3/30/20) and aiding decision-making in tough situations (six responses). Despite recalling useful material presented in the workshop, students mentioned certain areas that may have reduced the effectiveness of the program.

Across five of six focus groups, 19 students mentioned the density and length of the course as a shortcoming and inhibitor of retaining information long-term. A participant of one focus group suggested that AlcoholEdu for College "would be more effective if it could be condensed into an hour and a half instead of three" (Cheetah, 3/6/20), while another student pointed out that "kids just skip through the Alcohol Edu" (Tortoise, 3/10/20). Five students appreciated the pertinent information they learned, but followed up with comments such as, "It was just really aggravating. It was so long" (Hamster, 3/6/20).

These remarks highlight the value that students place on informative but condensed online alcohol education.

Beyond the length as a deterrent, students in four out of six focus groups mentioned the repetitiveness or irrelevance of information in AlcoholEdu for College on six occasions. Specifically, two students mentioned receiving information they had already learned before, with one of these students admitting, "so I paid attention, but it did feel like information I already learned in high school" (Flying Squirrel, 3/10/20). However, this student followed up their comment by saying that the information may be repetitive for some, but new for others, stating "I know some people don't get [alcohol education] … in their health classes, so I think for them [AlcoholEdu for College] would've been helpful" (Flying Squirrel, 3/10/20). AlcoholEdu for College was not the only mandatory education cited as a source of health messaging for first year students.

The second mandatory university sponsored course that was cited as an integral source of health messaging was the Trojans Respect Consent workshop. Similar to the previous finding, students mentioned learning actionable information 36 times across four out of six focus groups. Focus group participants stated that they learned concepts such as the definition of consent (three responses), how to ask for or provide consent (five responses), importance of consent (two responses), and real-life decision making (four responses). One student brought up the content they learned during the Trojans Respect Consent workshop, stating, "Presenters actually showed us a really smooth way in asking those [consent] questions and making those [consent] confirmations. So that was really helpful and it [the workshop] gave me a whole new insight on how consent can be used and how it can be performed in our daily lives" (Owl, 3/30/20). Likewise, another student commented that the workshop offers "really valuable information about what to expect when receiving consent, and then what to do to give more explicit consent" (Butterfly, 3/9/20). One student mentioned that they took interest in the section of the course about not being able to provide consent when under the influence of alcohol and still being responsible for actions. This student remarked, "What really struck me was how people can assume that someone means 'yes' just because they don't actually say 'no.' And how when two parties are drunk, they're still responsible...most people feel as though when they're drunk, they're not responsible for their actions. And so it's like well, even if I do this while I'm drunk, I was incapacitated, so I don't have to take responsibility for that. And I just thought that it was pretty interesting that [the workshop facilitators] included that in the workshop" (Cheetah, 3/6/20). One student also mentioned the list of support resources they received at the end of the workshop, stating, "I remember at the very end of the workshop [the workshop facilitators] gave us two slides full of all the resources they have, like all the places you can go to, the people you can look for if you have problems or if there's something you want to talk about with a counselor" (Owl,

3/30/20). Although a new requirement for first year students, student responses suggest that this workshop is supportive of their understanding of consent and how to implement it "in real life."

On the other hand, six students disagreed, indicating that the course did not offer them enough actionable items. One student shared "[The workshop facilitators] don't really go into the hard stuff if that makes sense. There was nothing like if a sexual assault happens, what do you do and what campus resources are there, in a clear way besides DPS....There are no action items" (Leopard, 3/3/20). This comment provides insight into the information that is valuable to students—actionable information and resources that they can use to respond to difficult situations. In addition to the lack of actionable information, seven focus group responses also emphasized that the course alone would not be substantial enough to alter an individual's character or behavior, with one student acknowledging, "I guess at some point it's just, how do you teach people how to be better people? Because you can teach people what good actions look like, but you can't make them follow those actions" (Fish, 3/3/30). These responses illuminate the importance of reinforcing both prevention and response activities in the workshop. Another aspect mentioned as influencing the efficacy of the course was group dynamics.

Students described the Trojans Respect Consent workshop as both engaging and interactive; however, students also mentioned that variations in facilitation methods and group dynamics affected the quality of the discussion. Overall, students found the Trojans Respect Consent workshop to be engaging—mentioned seven times across three out of six focus groups. One student said "I think [the Trojans Respect Consent workshop] was actually really interesting. It was really interactive" (Giraffe, 3/11/20). The interactive, group learning method of the Trojans Respect Consent workshop—mentioned 17 times over five out of six focus groups—impacted the value and content of the workshop for some students. Seven student responses mentioned that variance in group dynamics and facilitators made it difficult to standardize the discussion. One focus group participant stated that, "I remember in the consent workshop, and I think it was probably just you're in random groups, so your group led where the discussion went. But I remember coming out of [the workshop] with the consensus that everyone there basically thought sex was bad, which in my opinion is a little bit strange" (Elephant, 3/6/20). Other students expressed a different experience. Students in three out of six focus groups stated that they felt the workshop was awkward and uncomfortable (five responses) and sometimes not taken seriously (seven responses). One student, however, appreciated the humorous nature of the workshop, commenting "I actually liked that [the workshop] was humorous because for some people, [consent is] just a really taboo topic, so you nervously laugh, like intentionally, even though you respect the topic and want to understand" (Lion, 3/9/20). Students also recognized the importance of the information in informing decision making (four responses) as well as aiding the transition from high school to college (two responses). One student stated, "[the workshop] was definitely uncomfortable but I think it was really

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necessary because... I'm sure there's so many students who aren't as informed as other students about what exactly to do and how to handle situations like that so I think coming into a completely different social setting, it's really important that the school sets the standard and talks to their students about the hard stuff" (Elephant, 3/30/20). However, similar to AlcoholEdu for College, one student mentioned the length as a drawback of the course, stating that the workshop "went on for too long and got really boring. So a lot got tuned out" and followed up by saying, "I don't remember much" (Flying Squirrel, 3/10/20). Similarly, four students mentioned an inability to remember content from the course. Despite these opportunities for improvement, students generally agreed that the Trojans Respect Consent workshops were a positive and effective learning opportunity.

Overall, for both AlcoholEdu for College and the Trojans Respect Consent workshop, students expressed a strong preference for mandatory education containing actionable and applicable information presented in engaging, interactive, and concise ways. Beyond mandatory, university-sponsored courses at the beginning of freshman year, students continue to receive health education in the classroom.

Assertion #3: The third source where students receive wellbeing messaging is in the classroom setting.

A third source where students receive wellbeing messaging is in the classroom setting, as this was brought up in all focus groups. This section will highlight the messaging received through syllabi and, in one particular class, OT 100. The resource list provided in class syllabi was a recurring discussion point throughout all focus groups. The primary finding was that the campus resources listed in syllabi were useful, but effectiveness depended on faculty engagement. The usefulness of resources in the syllabus was mentioned 12 times across two of six focus groups. One participant said, "[the resource list in the syllabus] opened up your mind... that there are resources out there...easily accessed on campus" (Siberian Tiger, 03/03/2020). However, it was cited that the effectiveness of messaging depended on each faculty member, where some professors would spend time going through the resource list whereas others would not. This was mentioned 16 times across two of six focus groups. One participant said, "It all depends on the professor. Because some professors don't even go over it. They just leave it out and carry on. And then there are some that really emphasize it a lot" (Fish, 03/03/2020). This highlights the need for a proactive measure to ensure that information is equally distributed across all professors. Next, the OT 100 class was frequently cited as a source of in class wellbeing messaging. OT 100 was mentioned nine times across two of six focus groups. More specifically, participants cited that OT 100 provided beneficial material and encouraged personal development and personal wellbeing practices. According to one participant, "I was like, this is beneficial. We talk about inclusion, we talk about stress, self care, connections, just connecting with people here at USC. We talk about the body, how stress

affects the body. We talked about this week what we can do to prioritize ourselves instead of prioritizing the needs and the expectations of our parents and our friends" (Cheetah, 03/06/2020). All in all, the campus resource list in syllabi as well as the OT 100 course were the primary sources cited in regards to wellbeing messaging in the classroom; the main criticism centered around the inconsistency in faculty handling of the resource list. With these critiques in mind, the focus groups discussed what constitutes "good" wellbeing messaging/practices as well as potential solutions and conflicting messages.

Assertion #4: Students report that proactive, transparent, consistent, and interactive messaging is most effective in conveying wellbeing messages.

Potential solutions and suggestions for wellbeing messaging were proposed in all six of the first year messaging focus groups. These centered on improving messaging content and methods to reach more students. Suggestions offered by students to improve messaging content were to make campus training more concise, proactive, and interactive.

In regards to improving messaging methods, students expressed the need for more personalized outreach and centralization of the list of campus resources. It was expressed that although official university memos and course introductory emails may provide information on available wellbeing resources, these can get lost and might not be inaccessible when a student finds themself in need. A suggestion of a central portal to pool together all available resources was made. One student expressed that "[emails] could get lost, like a bunch of your emails...but if you have it located in like a specific site, then you could just access that site whenever you want." (Sloth, 03/09/20). A section or tab on myUSC with all of the resources listed in class syllabi and official emails might be beneficial and more readily accessible to students.

Furthermore, the need to build a culture of wellbeing was another significant suggestion. This was mentioned more than eight times across four of six focus groups. Common themes included the lack of support from academic advisors, as well as the lack of proactive messaging by the university to the student body. In regards to academic advisors, one student expressed that they "go through so many people just to find someone who knows what they're talking about" (Elephant, 03/30/20) and another student pointed out that they ""didn't know about freshman forgiveness until too late after drop deadline" (Owl, 03/30/20). This presents an opportunity for academic advisors to be positioned and equipped as important channels for conveying campus resources beyond academic resources, as wellbeing is a critical component of academic success. The university's messaging was a concern that was mentioned in four of the six focus groups. There was a strong perception that the university primarily communicates with students in response to a crisis. "I don't even recall them sending out emails that are not in response

to specific bad events...after anything sad happens, they're like, 'We have your wellbeing as a priority.'...It sounds genuine and everything, but again, it's only after the fact, it's not proactive" (Fish, 03/03/20). A need to hear more from the university through consistent, proactive wellbeing messaging can contribute to building that culture of wellbeing.

In addition to the suggestions to improve wellbeing messaging, students in all six focus groups spoke about the conflicting messages they received during their first year at USC. Recurring themes included difficulty in accessing mental health services, misleading/unclear advertising of these resources, and difficulty obtaining academic accommodation. An example of the difficulty in accessing mental health resources was shared by one student: "I feel like sometimes the messages and the words don't totally match the actions. Because a few weeks ago I was in a situation where I needed [urgent] mental health stuff, but when I looked to find appointments, the closest one was two weeks away" (Leopard, 03/03/20). Although students may be aware of the mental health resources present on campus, utilizing them is not always as easy as students expect it to be. Another student expressed that she was happy to hear that counselors increased by 25%, but then realized this was not as large of an increase as she initially perceived. "It sounded like this big change, but in reality still the ratio was way off" (Elephant, 03/03/20). This student felt that this advertising was misleading, and although the increase in counseling staff was a positive change, there is room for continued growth and expansion of this resource to reach more students. Another theme discussed by students was the various wellbeing programs available at USC (e.g., Thrive classes, Wellbeing Wednesdays, and Mindful USC). These were described as an enjoyable and helpful resource; however, some students indicated that these are not accessible to all due to unit restrictions and schedule conflicts. Academic accommodation would be beneficial in allowing more students to access these wellbeing classes and gain the skills they have to offer.

Lastly, the lack of diversity and inclusion training and programs was brought up, in particular in the first focus group held on March 3rd. It was pointed out that there are trainings for mental health, consent and health relationships, and alcohol use, but no required training on diversity and inclusion. Students highlighted the critical role that clubs play in promoting a sense of community and belonging at USC. However it was noted that USC as a university should be doing more in promoting cultural awareness through an educational requirement or campus programming.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Resident Assistants (RAs)

1. Increase RA-resident interaction through monthly mental health check-ins to create a supportive environment within the residential halls. Furthermore, it could be beneficial if all RAs completed mental health first aid training.

Cultural Centers

2. Provide student space for marginalized communities such as Middle Eastern, North African, South Asian, Native American, and Pacific Islander students, USC to create a more supportive and inclusive campus environment.

Training

3. Implement a comprehensive and widespread campaign to raise student awareness of mental health resources at matriculation as well as throughout students' time at USC as an effective preventive measure. Develop recurrent and mandated online modules regarding mental health and other wellbeing topics (i.e. substance use, consent, etc.) to refresh and support personal skill development.

4. Implement a standardized training for both USC faculty and academic advisors: encourage outreach to students, offer strategies to support students, and familiarize staff with the appropriate resources that can be used to guide students in a variety of situations.

5. Implement mandatory leadership training for all RSO and student government leaders: include effective leadership skills, equity and inclusion practices, how to be an effective bystander, and strategies to support and guide peers to appropriate on-campus resources.

In the Classroom

6. Increase the number and availability of OT 100 classes, or make the course a mandatory first year elective to support personal development and promote students' wellbeing.

7. Standardize faculty handling of wellbeing messaging by training and requiring faculty to review the syllabus and associated resource list.

AlcoholEdu for College

8. Reinforce the AlcoholEdu for College program yearly to reinforce healthy behaviors and reflect evolving trends.
9. Reduce the length and density of the AlcoholEdu for College program.

Trojans Respect Consent Workshop

10. Integrate a consent workshop for male-identified students that focuses on scenario-based learning and interactive methods to teach students about what constitutes consent and effects of sexual assault/harassment on survivors.

11. Adjust training of facilitators to standardize discussion and reduce variance in group dynamics.

For mandatory education, focus on emphasizing actionable and applicable information in a consolidated, concise manner through standardized group learning and interactive modules.

General Recommendations

12. In addition to the resource list in syllabi, create an centralized online space (through myUSC or Blackboard) or other web page available to all students with links to relevant resources (i.e. mental health, sexual assault/harassment, etc.)
13. University emails and correspondence should maintain transparency in communication with students and should be proactive, not reactive responses to certain events.