

“The Truth Behind UVA Mental Health Initiatives” Transcript

Opening

[soft, dramatic piano and drums start]

Jessica Harris: “Sometimes I feel like UVA can do more. Um..sometimes they kind of do stuff with mental health just as a front.”

Shelby Brown: “I would say UVA needs to put more of an emphasis on mental health.”

Hannah Tuma: “People have to wait a really long time or their problem is deemed, like, not urgent enough.”

Ashley Ban: “I think they tried their best but it wasn’t very helpful in the long run. I think there should still be more options.”

Hannah Tuma: “People have to go looking themselves if they need resources.”

Rujula Upasani: “A lot of people have, kind of been, honestly, fallen through the cracks of whatever mental health system that does exist here.”

[Rujula’s voice echoes out]

[music quickly fades]

Natalie Stasik: “Well with CAPS, I went in my second semester of third year. I did the pre screening information and phone call they did to see if I actually, like, needed help. And then I went once and I met with a male grad student in psychology. He was just asking me basic information, just like preliminary interview type stuff, and I was like telling him, being honest. I was answering all of his questions in full depth and stuff like that. And towards the end of it, he was just responding or summing up my experiences and telling me oh you have an obsession with this, and not really thinking about my feelings or the situation as a whole, so it just rubbed me the wrong way.”

Introduction

[theme song, “Deep End” by Makaih Beats, begins]

Host: Welcome to “U OK UVA?”, a student-produced podcast investigating the mental health and wellness climate at UVA. I’m your host, Raneem. In this episode, we will be investigating the mental health resources available to students at UVA and how the burden of mental health resources and access has fallen to student-led organizations.

[music fades, followed by silence]

Background

Host: The University of Virginia is widely recognized as one of the foremost universities in the country for its academic prestige and rigor. Underneath this, there lies a serious issue concerning the access to mental health and wellness services for the students.

[brief faint voice of Natalie fleeting in the background]

Host: The voice you heard earlier was that of Natalie Stasik. She is one of many students who has had a negative experience with Counseling and Psychological services, aka CAPS. CAPS is the main mental health service provided by the University to students. The dissatisfaction about CAPS stems from whispers about long wait times for appointments and an 8 session limit. Student organizations, such as Young Democratic Socialists at UVA, have been pushing for the university to improve their mental services due to this high level of concern from students.

[soft sounds of drills and movement]

Host: The University has made some steps to quell student concerns by expanding mental health resources. In October of 2021, the University opened the doors to its new Student Health and Wellness building. This building houses CAPS, the service Natalie sought out, as well as other initiatives to expand their ability to care for students.

[soft construction sounds fade out]

Host: They are also giving students free access to an online platform for mental health services called TimelyCare. This app gives students access to a limited number of counseling sessions with a licensed professional. But, the University is still under fire from the student body despite the expansion of resources. And in the wake of this lack of action the burden of the mental health crisis has fallen into the hands of the student body.

University Programs Council Perspective

[sudden upbeat drums and cheering start]

Host: If you've ever attended a lively event on UVA's Grounds, something to get you to have fun or relax, odds are high that it was put on by UPC.

Host: UPC is a student-run UVA initiative dedicated to organizing entertainment for students. Think movies, puppies, pizza, and Jack Harlow. In this way, UPC serves almost as a mental-health adjacent university service, encouraging students to take a break from studies and just have some fun. The organization has 8 committees that come up with pretty much any type of entertainment you could ask for. One is fully dedicated to bringing in big names for concerts. Another can provide you with some good old arts and crafts. And the comedy committee, also known as shits and giggles, or "s" and "g", can hopefully bring you just that.

[drums fade out]

[faint voice of Shelby Brown enters background]

Host (overlapping): That's Shelby Brown, Executive Chair of UPC.

UPC Shelby Brown: "School in general is stressful and I think that UPC events regardless of what they are themed, I suppose, they provide students the opportunity to, you know, take a step back, take a break from studying, like go paint a canvas, for example. I think that that's really powerful."

[soft, somber piano begins]

Host: These sorts of events that Shelby is describing are fully the product of student members. They come up with the ideas themselves and logistically manage everything to bring activities to reality. According to student leaders, the main use for the full-time university staff is really just to help their ideas get pushed along. Sometimes having an adult send an email asking to rent a space gets more of a response than the same request from a student. But at the end of the day, the students seem to do mostly everything, though Programming Councils at other schools have more fleshed out roles for full-time staff.

Host: UPC often extends its funding to events for other student organizations that are not administratively tied to UVA, organizations that can't easily secure funding on their own. This makes UPC take on another role as a source of funding for other student organizations and ideas, students turning to other students when UVA doesn't meet their needs.

Host [voiced in a parenthetical tone]: On the note of funding, that is one major role UVA seems to have in UPC. The organization gets all of its funding from the university, a small part of student tuition actually going to their budget. But UVA does not usually interfere with how the money is spent, leaving it up to the students to make decisions on how funds should be best allocated for the enjoyment of the student body.

Host: However, while UPC puts on enjoyable events for hundreds if not thousands of students it's obvious that they're not meant to address deeper issues. And being pretty much only supported monetarily, the student leadership also does not appear equipped to do it.

[music abruptly fades into silence]

[muttered sounds of Shelby Brown's voice enter background]

Host: According to Shelby, UVA has communicated to UPC student leaders that they would like the organization to take on a more active role in student mental health. However, the university has offered no guidance on how they might achieve this.

[Shelby Brown's background voice fades]

Shelby Brown: “It’s kind of like an abstract oh do these things to help with mental health but that’s very abstract. You can’t just like decide to do that one day.”

Host: The issue isn’t that there isn’t potential for this. UPC has committees with very specific missions and over 100 members, according to their website. The structure is there. What’s needed is non-monetary support. Despite UPC having hundreds of student members, that’s all they are, students. And while there’s value in students chiming in on the best events for their peers, when it comes to mental health action, there seems to be a need for professional guidance. Camille Kielbasa, a UPC director, points out administrative actions UVA could take to involve UPC with mental health. That is, beyond relying on student creativity and effort.

Camille Kielbasa: “There’s a lot of space where UVA could have advisors, adults, people who are paid, people who are paid to work there, not student laborers, to create spaces and maybe even require you have to spend this much money on events that are mental health focused, or you have to have this many events a year that are mental health focused. There are things that they could tell us, we don’t have really the power to say no. I also don’t know why we would say no to that.”

Host: Today, UPC still has no mental health committee or any mental health budget allocation requirement. But this is just one formal and fruitless situation in which the university has relied on students to improve the mental health environment. Other student-led initiatives have been informally depended on by attempting to address the mental health problems on Grounds through their own volition.

NAMI/Next Steps Fund Perspective

[brief pause]

Justin Wheelock: “Um, so my name is Justin. I use he/him pronouns. I’m a fourth-year in the College right now studying neuroscience. I am pre-med and a lot of my like principle involvements at UVA have centered around mental health advocacy.”

[soft melodic tune begins]

Host: A chapter of National Alliance on Mental Illness, NAMI, came to UVA in 2015. Today, the chapter is led by Justin Wheelock. The principle goal, unlike UPC, is to directly provide advocacy, education, and support in relation to mental health. They put on events, panels, workshops, and a lot more. NAMI also serves as a platform to create discussions among students and CAPS administrators. Between working with NAMI, other mental health groups on Grounds, and his own experience with CAPs, Justin has had a lot of exposure to the state of mental health initiatives at UVA.

Justin Wheelock: “All of these independent groups...”

Host: Referring to UVA mental health organizations.

Justin Wheelock: “..I think have really great ideas and really have the passion to try to provide the needs to students and try to be there and fill those needs. But there’s not always funding and initiative from the university to support them in those goals.”

Host [interrupting]: The same seems to go for student mental health organizations. In fact, NAMI had to rely on UPC student leaders deciding to help fund one of their panel events discussing mental health.

Justin Wheelock: “So I think that’s where certain programs at UVA get a bad rap. People have this idea that CAPS is inadequate or bad. I don’t think it’s necessarily the individual people within it, because there are some really great individual counselors and people who are running that, but it’s that they might not always have the resources to provide everything that students need.”

Host: One way students have compensated for lack of direct university support is through another student-driven initiative called the Next Steps Fund. As a NAMI director, Justin also serves on the Student Committee for the Fund. Its goal is to finance students’ mental health care expenses for services beyond CAPS. Specifically, it aims to cover the copay of the first six sessions of an outsider provider. The Next Steps Fund was actually also founded by a UVA student, Devin Underhill, who spent time personally raising money to fund the initiative. The only involvement of the administration is a Care Manager at CAPS who helps ensure the funds reach the student’s bills.

Justin Wheelock: “And that’s where I see students addressing the gaps in the system that may be, just like thinking creatively about this, find ways around the issues.”

Host: But this pattern of student leadership in the sphere of more formal mental health initiatives has also raised concerns.

Justin Wheelock: “I think we...they use this idea of student self-governance as a way of saying well that means the students can just do it themselves, rather than we’re gonna give students the ability to do things that they want and then support them through it. I think that might be a little bit different.”

Host: Students feel as though they have had to rise up and create healthy spaces for themselves, even if they don’t think they should have to. But what does the other side of the aisle look like? Why have the provided services translated to students feeling the way that they do?

[melodic tune fades out]

CAPS Perspective

Natalie Stasik: “It felt like he was kind of doing things on the fly and not really like paying attention to what I was telling him. So that kind of deterred me from ever going back to CAPS and I still have not gone back to this day.”

Host: Natalie is not the only student who has a bad impression of CAPS. Among students who both have *and haven't* used the service, unpleasant experiences are seen as the norm. Like we talked about earlier, one big general critique is that it takes forever to see a counselor. Another is that limited sessions force students to pick and choose when they can go get help.

Nicole Ruzek: “There’s been increases every year. And the big question is when is it going to stop. And, you know, I have heard various statistics that it’s not just in universities but just generally that more and more people are coming forward, disclosing mental health concerns and there’s just a demand generally within the community for services. And unfortunately the services haven’t in the community really grown at the pace that the demand has so there has been this disconnect.”

Host: This is Nicole Ruzek, the Director of CAPS, speaking on the growing demands for mental health services. Like Natalie, many students seek out these services and have felt let down. Despite the widely negative tone that many students have about CAPS, they offer a wide variety of services that continue to expand each year in order to meet the growing demand and combat the misconceptions swirling around the student body.

Nicole Ruzek: “Since we’ve contracted and have added more people, the wait for a phone screening has not gone over two days and the wait for an intake has not exceeded about two, maybe two and a half weeks. We also actually don’t have a session limit. Some students think that and there’s kind of narrative about that. Actually we see many students for long periods of time.”

Host: CAPS has worked to improve significantly over the past year to expand their services to students and their ability to have a wider outreach throughout the University community.

Nicole Ruzek: “We’ve come to recognize that there are a lot of faculty who are meeting with students on a regular basis and work with them everyday, who are helping these students with mental health issues. So we’re going around to these different faculty meetings or the chairs and just sharing what CAPS is, what we do and then also offering to provide them with a workshop on how to best help students and how to talk with a student who is struggling with a mental health concern, how to make a referral in a way that feels supportive and helpful.”

Host: Bringing faculty into the conversation allows there to be a greater understanding and awareness of how to care for students' mental health and wellbeing. Despite embedding more resources in the academic community, a lack of information about the resources available is one of the largest barriers to students finding the help that they need. To counter this lack of awareness, CAPS has partnered with schools around grounds to embed counselors within each one. These counselors offer support to those specific schools they're in and create a more

accessible model for mental health services. With resources expanding across the University, CAPS has opened many doors for students to access mental health and wellness resources.

Nicole Ruzek: “There are lots of doorways and no one is right or wrong. So just use the doorway that’s available to you, or TimelyCare.”

Host: But, there still seems to be this pressure on students to create their own initiatives to bridge the gap between the administration and the student body. A potentially toxic self-governance seems to prevail because of the lack of working together, regardless of new sources of support.

Bringing Perspectives Together

[upbeat lofi beats begin]

Host: So how might this lack of guidance and awareness materialize into the experiences of everyday UVA students seeking help? If you were a student like Natalie, someone looking to get help, the first place you would go to would probably be the CAPS website

[brief typing sounds]

Host: But what you don’t find is a tab titled “history” or “other options”. There is essentially nothing allowing you to explore the role of students in making the services what they are today. If you visit the tab on the Next Steps Fund, there is no mention of the student committee helping to run the fund, and there are only three sentences dedicated to Devin’s story in creating the program, along with a link to his website. The link doesn’t work.

[beats fade to silence]

Host: UVA’s failure to recognize the value in how students have picked up their slack makes it harder for students to find more casual resources that might be right in front of them. Though the change is there, students may not see it and may remain feeling like mental health is something that they need to address. The role of student-self governance in UVA’s mental health sphere is now somewhat shown to be rampant, invisible, and misunderstanding all at once. Student leaders like Shelby and Justin remain hardworking, but unsupported, unacknowledged, and possibly even unaware of what’s out there.

[hopeful acoustic strums begin]

Host: Like we talked about before, UVA is characterized by rigor and a driven student body. Students are high-achievers and often strive for leadership to make impactful change. But this shouldn’t have to mean students are expected to solve something so colossal that even professionals struggle to fully tackle it. This also doesn’t mean that individuals running formal UVA programs, like CAPS, necessarily want students to take on this role. It’s more so that the

embedded culture of student self-governance creates an environment in which the administration may be allowing students to take on too large of a role.

Host: But it's not hard to see that there is another environment here. An environment of both students and staff recognizing a problem and working hard to solve it. If more communication could be opened up between these groups, if UPC marketing and resources had CAPS knowledge, so much more could be done. Earlier, Dr. Ruzek talked about doorways. Maybe this is one we should be stepping into.

[strums fade]

Outro

[period of silence]

Host: Before coming to a close, we would like to draw attention to the violence on UVA's grounds earlier this semester and the deep impact it's had on our community. Being a podcast discussing mental health, we would be remiss to not acknowledge the tragedy that's happened here. As we mourn the loss of our fellow students, mental health initiatives and focus have become even more essential and needed in these times.

Host: We would also like to highlight the student leaders who, even amid recent events, have stepped up to help organize ceremonies and advocate for academic relief, to help ensure that there's a space for students to rest and remember.

[pause]

Host: Rest in peace Devin, Lavel, and D'Sean. UVA Strong.

[theme song begins]

Host: This podcast was produced by Raneem Khan, Philine Lor, Maggie Young, and Madeleine Waller as part of a collaborative project for Professor Steph Ceraso's "Writing with Sound" class at UVA. Special thanks go out to UPC leaders Shelby Brown, Nathan Her, and Camille Kielbasa, NAMI President Justin Wheelock, CAPS Director Nicole Ruzek, and Queer Student Union President Abid Hussain. Thanks for listening.

[music slowly fades]

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