In light of all daunting statistics, Glendale, Ariz., junior Namitha Palnati and McKinney junior Daphne Simo, the directors of health of Baylor student government, took initiative to make a change on Baylor’s campus by adding a mental health provision to course syllabuses. As many as 73% of college students report having a mental health crisis while in college, according to a survey conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Students report that these crises are often triggered by feelings of anxiety, panic or depression surrounding school and life, difficulty adjusting to college life, and feelings of loneliness or isolation that are often propagated by overwhelming course work and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic. As many as 35% of students reported that their college was not aware of their mental health crisis and only 13% rated their college’s response to their crisis as “excellent.”

“Hearing several of my close friends speak about their struggles with anxiety, suicidal thoughts and grief after loss, I knew I had to do something,” Palnati said. “As the director of health, I witnessed the stigma surrounding mental health disorders and sought to gain a deeper understanding for the climate of health and wellness on our campus, which led me to spearhead initiatives focused on mental health.”

Battling mental health disorders can have an impact on academic success and affect the ability of students to concentrate and perform well in school. Also, the new social distancing guidelines imposed by the pandemic have stripped many students of their social support systems, which adds more pressure. Simo says many students are not aware of all the mental health resources available on campus and hopes the mental health provision will bring awareness to the options available to students.

“Recent studies have indicated that the coronavirus pandemic has posed numerous social and health consequences to the mental well-being of college students across the nation,” Simo said. “We need to make sure that students receive accurate and up-to-date information regarding on-campus counseling and healthcare services, which will encourage students to make educated decisions on how to successfully cope with the unintended mental health effects the COVID-19 pandemic has presented.”

Stigma surrounding mental health is unfortunately still prevalent in today’s social landscape, which leads many students to hesitate reaching out for help when they need it. Palnati and Simo have directed many events throughout the year to create a safe space for conversations about mental health, in hopes of dispelling the barriers between students and the resources available to them.

“We hosted several events and directed projects including Mental Health Awareness Week, food drives, health promotions, Random Acts of Kindness Day and social media support during finals week,” Palnati said. “It is important to enable opportunities for mental health discussions and open the floor up to discussion of such topics free of judgment. This will encourage students to seek guidance and support in a positive manner.”

Simo said students want to speak about their struggles but often hold back because they are afraid of being judged.

“Based on feedback from the students who attended and engaged in our events during Mental Health Week this year, students are actively seeking ways to address their individual mental health concerns, especially in light of the unintended effects of COVID-19, such as loneliness, depression, anxiety, and increased sadness from being bereaved due to loss of family members,” Simo said.

Including the mental health provision in course syllabuses demonstrates support from faculty and staff and emphasizes their commitment to students’ health.

“It is crucial that all students are aware of what Baylor has to offer to help each student have an enriching experience at Baylor,” Palnati said. “The provision consists of detailed, yet concise information on campus resources for mental health, recovery and wellness. With students having direct access to contact information and location details, they will not have to search and spend time finding this as they can readily access necessary information at their fingertips all in one place.”

Palnati and Simo oversee the Health Policy Committee of student government, which actively works to address the health and well-being of students on campus and aided in the implementation of several mental health provisions in the syllabuses.

“Namitha and Daphne deserve a huge round of applause for taking on this initiative,” Dallas senior Humbal Omar, a member of the Health Policy Committee, said. “This was a semester-long process and it’s great to see how their hard work and dedication to Baylor and the student body has paid off.”

Story by Andreea Loghin
Source: National Alliance on Mental Illness