Chapter 1
The Making of the University Life Café: Harnessing Interactive Technologies and Virtual Community for an Anti-Suicide Website for College Students

Shalin Hai-Jew
Kansas State University, USA

With an Appendix by Brent A. Anders
Kansas State University, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The building of an interactive, user-driven website for college students to promote mental health and wellness (and to combat suicide) has revealed important strategies in the construction of such a socio-technical virtual learning environment. This project used a number of strategies to create allure to the site and to provide learning opportunities—through educational modules, virtual community mores of care for others, user interactivity, the support for student voices, and the use of artificial intelligence to enhance the security measures. Virtual learning environments that involve life-critical issues require an understanding of the domain field, potential site users, and thought-out strategies.

BACKGROUND: THE PROJECT

Suicide is the second highest leading cause of death for college students (“Suicide Statistics,” 2009). K-State currently has around 18,500 undergraduate students, with about 300 non-resident aliens (overseas students who are in the US on student visas). There were also approximately 4,800 graduate students in 2007, and about 800 of these are international students. For a campus the size of K-State, this often means several suicides annually on average (Newton, 2009).

The campus Counseling Services support students who may be feeling emotionally frail, but there are many who don’t use these services for many reasons. In that spirit, K-State endeavored to use the Web to support their students in building up...
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protective factors against suicide through a federal grant from the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

Research suggests that many students are entering colleges with serious psychological issues. Given the increasing number of students entering college with serious psychological problems, campus suicide may currently be more prevalent. In a 2007 survey by the American College Health Association, which included more than 70,000 students at 107 institutions, 9.8% reported seriously considering suicide at least once during the past school year and 1.5% reported making at least one suicide attempt (Haas, et al., 2008, p. 15).

Suicidal thoughts among college students are prevalent, with more than half of 26,000 students across 70 colleges and universities repeating such thoughts in a recent American Psychological Association (APA) study (Willenz, 2008).

The implications of suicide may be far-reaching on a campus, which suggests the importance of a coordinated university effort: “Because student suicide completion can significantly affect a campus and student-body climate, there must be a coordination of campus services designed to attend to the diverse needs of suicide survivors” (Paladino & Minton, 2008, p. 645).

SETTING THE STAGE

The University Life Café is a new website that promotes mental wellness among university students, faculty, and staff, with a particular focus on suicide prevention. This publicly available site uses the power of social networking at its core to provide a sense of virtual community to members of the K-State community in particular. It delivers information on resiliency and protective issues against suicide through podcasts, audio files, images, text, and other types of contents. Users of the site who are K-State members may also access professionally created heuristics dealing with various aspects of mental health.

This site also strives to de-stigmatize communications about suicide, depression, and substance abuse and to encourage help-seeking behaviors. This site was co-developed with contributions from students, faculty, and staff; it involved partnerships from across campus. This site is one part of a comprehensive, campus-wide plan, which engages “students and faculty/staff, while respecting the race, ethnicity, cultural background, sexual orientation, and belief system of every member of our campus community,” according to the grant. The site is not intended to be used in isolation.

For a university, reaching out to students to create awareness of suicide risk factors and the need to build protective factors is not just about risk management, it also involves promoting mental wellness for improved learning quality, learning retention, and the creation of a virtual community to promote socialization. Campuses are often seen broadly as protected environments, and this particular university (for example) has a firearms ban.

There are challenges with stress, student isolation, depression, and other life issues that may be partially mitigated through a website as a social connective tissue and that speaks through media contents that students enjoy (and that they may create and share) such as music, artworks, poetry, short stories, essays, and an evolving blog. This site may also serve as a bridge to professional counseling services by de-stigmatizing access to counseling services.

The Stakeholders

The primary stakeholders to this site are mostly K-State students, faculty, and staff. Secondary stakeholders are the larger public that may need the information and interactivity. Within K-State students, there are a range of diverse learners, such as international and military veterans. Nationwide, there are about 10 million full-time students in four-year colleges and universities, and for this