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Original Article

Mental Health and Well-Being in the Eyes of Students: A Photovoice Study

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Abstract

Introduction: Suicide rates continue to rise, with mental health conditions notably affecting adolescents. This study employed photovoice methodology to explore how adolescents perceive and experience mental health and well-being.

Methods: This participatory action research was conducted using photovoice. Participants provided data by generating photographs in response to five prompts. A total of 16 college students, including officers and non-officers, participated in this study. More than 100 photographs were collected, which served as triggers for photo-elicited individual interviews and group discussions. Data analysis followed an interpretive framework, focusing on symbolic expressions, images, and language used by participants. The analysis was participatory and collaborative, integrating insights from individual interviews and group discussions, facilitated through ATLAS.ti version 9.

Results: Data analysis revealed that students' perceptions of mental health pertain to their internal and external dynamics, particularly struggles to manage academic and life challenges. These experiences are contextualized with constant reflections on values and goal attainment. Moreover, mental health and well-being play a significant role in students' growth and development within a state university. Based on these insights, the *Project Gabay Action Plan* was developed to promote healthy communication mechanisms and innovative strategies that foster mentally healthy teaching and learning environments.

Conclusion: Guided by students' perspectives of a mentally healthy university, this study proposed a supportive, promotive, preventive, and emancipatory framework named the *Project Gabay* to maintain and enhance students' mental health in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Mental health, College students, Well-being, Photovoice, Adolescent health

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Introduction

Suicide is often viewed as an inevitable consequence of poor mental health. Globally, suicide accounts for more than 700,000 deaths each year (1). The highest rates of suicide are reported in three regions, including Southeast Asia. In 2019, it was estimated that over 77% of suicides occurred in low- and middle-income countries. Besides, suicide ranked as the fourth leading cause of death among both men and women aged 15 to 29 years in 2019 (1). The increasing number of suicide attempts has garnered significant attention. Many individuals affected by mental health conditions are adolescents (2,3), prompting concerns to understand the mental health of college students. A study by Becker et al. (4), involving 1,704 participants, found that 41.4% of college undergraduates reported never disclosing their potential suicidal thoughts to anyone. About 24% of the participants were classified as at risk of suicide based on an empirically established cutoff score.

The college experience represents a critical transition that can challenge an individual's mental health and well-being. This transition marks a major milestone in academic life, often accompanied by threats to well-being and mental health, primarily attributed to stress (5,6,7,8). It is also associated with several mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, mood disorders, and behavioral problems (9,10).

Among college students, stress is strongly associated with suicide. A nationwide large-sample study involving 67,308 undergraduate students by Liu et al. (11) found a 24% prevalence of suicidal ideation and a 9% rate of suicide attempts. The same sample population reported a high degree of stress, and even those exposed to low levels of stress had a significantly higher likelihood of

having suicidal ideations, nearly twofold higher. The increasing concern about rising suicide rates in recent years, particularly among adolescents and young adults, has prompted health institutions and organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) to develop plans to improve mental health outcomes.

Mental health is a picture viewed from either a positive or a negative perspective. In some situations, mental health is interpreted as the absence of mental illness (12). Thus, mental health interventions are sometimes focused on addressing mental health issues (13). A positive perspective of mental health, on the other hand, considers mental health as a dynamic state where every individual is 'potentially at risk' of developing mental health problems at a particular point in time. From this standpoint, positive mental health emphasizes promotive and preventive strategies that enhance an individual's ability to maintain and sustain mental health. This study aims to support and promote the maintenance of positive mental health among college students.

In the Philippines, approximately 3.3 million people suffer from depression, and the suicide rate is as high as 2.5 per 100,000 population. Notably, recent statistics show that the suicide rate increased by 57.3% in 2020 compared to the previous year, recording 4,420 deaths in 2020 versus 2,810 in 2019. This rise resulted in suicide becoming the 25th leading cause of death in 2020, up from rank 31 in 2019 (14). However, there is limited data on how many of these cases involve college students.

Reports also indicate that mental health concerns among college students arise from academic, personal, and other issues, yet these remain inadequately documented and warrant further exploration (15). The lack of local data complicates efforts to address mental health challenges effectively. Cultural considerations are crucial, as mental health is embedded within cultural contexts. Literature from outside the Philippines may provide some insights about how mental health is becoming a global health concern, but addressing mental health in the Filipino context requires culturally adaptive and timely approaches.

The mental health of students, especially those in state universities, is a critical area worth investigating. With the implementation of Republic Act 10931, which offers free tuition at state universities and colleges, there has been an influx of students from various secondary schools and diverse communities. State universities have thus become melting pots of a highly diverse adolescent population. As future contributors to society's workforce, preserving and promoting positive mental health among this demographic is vital. However, there is a notable lack of research focused on the mental health and well-being of Filipino college students, underscoring the need for studies to address these gaps and develop responsive interventions.

This study is particularly significant due to the rising prevalence of mental health concerns among college students, a critical demographic for future societal development. Despite numerous quantitative studies, there is a noticeable deficiency in qualitative research exploring students' lived experiences. By utilizing photovoice, this study provides students with a platform to visually and narratively express their mental health journeys, fostering a deeper understanding of their unique challenges and resilience. This qualitative approach is essential for developing targeted and empathetic mental health programs that resonate with students' real-life experiences.

This study aims to explore students' perspectives on mental health and well-being and to initiate participatory planning for improving or sustaining mental health and well-being among students. Specifically, this photovoice study was conducted to answer the following questions: (1) How do students view and experience mental health and well-being? (2) What experiences highlight challenges or issues affecting the mental health and well-being of students? and (3) What action plans can be formulated to sustain or improve mental health and well-being among students?

Methods

Design

This study employed a participatory action research (PAR) framework utilizing the photovoice methodology. Through photovoice, students were given the opportunity to voice their perspectives and identify themselves as active members and representatives of the university community. Participants expressed their experiences related to mental health through photographs.

The concept of "giving the lens to participants" is central to photovoice, drawing from empowerment education, feminist theory, constructivism, and non-traditional approaches to documentary photography. This approach aims to: (1) enable individuals to record and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns, (2) promote critical dialogue and deepen understanding of important issues through large and small group discussions of photographs, and (3) reach broader audiences, including the public and policymakers (16).

The steps followed were:

1. Selection and recruitment of participants
2. Orientation and Education of participants
    a. Consensus on research topic/focus
    b. Training on photography and ethical considerations
    c. Walking photo session
3. Generation of photographs
4. Photo-elicited interviews
    a. Selection of photographs
    b. Giving voice to the photographs
5. Group discussion of the photographs
6. Presentation of findings

The study followed a step-by-step procedure, recognizing the inherent flexibility of photovoice research, which is characterized by its malleability (17). Some steps were conducted simultaneously, as is common

in qualitative research. For example, participant selection and recruitment continued alongside photo-elicited interviews with other initially selected participants. Throughout all phases, efforts were made to ensure the rigor of the data.

Participants

Selection and Recruitment of Participants

The study included data from both officers and non-officer students. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. Officers were required to be elected leaders of any student organization. Non-officer students included those who: (1) had a history of psychological or emotional disturbances, (2) admitted to experiencing mental health challenges, or (3) did not explicitly admit to having mental health issues but were willing to participate. All students had to be enrolled in the university in any program and be at least 18 years old.

Participant recruitment was coordinated with the Student Affairs Office, ensuring adherence to ethical standards, particularly regarding students' self-determination. Recruitment strategies included the distribution of flyers and posters. Flyers were provided to key personnel in the Student Affairs Office, while posters were placed in high-traffic areas. Flyers were also distributed in university areas where there were many students, such as the canteen and study benches. Besides, initial respondents helped disseminate information to peers. Those who agreed to participate responded either through text messaging or by visiting the Student Affairs Office.

Orientation and Education of Participants

Following recruitment, orientation and educational sessions were held to prepare participants for their engagement in the project. These included (1) reaching consensus on the research focus, (2) training on photography techniques and ethical considerations, and (3) conducting a walking photo session. Orientation was delivered in two formats: a group session for officers, following the outlined procedures, and individual sessions for those who preferred confidentiality. Each participant received an orientation kit containing a booklet on the study's objectives and ethical considerations, a manual on basic photography skills, writing materials, and copies of information sheets and informed consent forms.

The research focus was emphasized during orientation, alongside explanations of participants' responsibilities and ethical considerations in data gathering. Concerns raised by participants in responding to the prompts were also addressed during the orientation. Some of their concerns were: (1) the number of photos to be taken for each prompt, (2) taking photos that could answer more than one prompt, and (3) using photos taken previously that represented their views and experiences. Participants were informed that there was no fixed limit on the number of photos, provided they submitted a maximum of 12. They were also allowed to use photos taken previously to respond to the prompts, and a single photo could respond to more than one prompt. Subsequently, a brief training session on photography was conducted to prepare the participants and equip them with fundamental photography techniques.

After the training and discussions, a walking photo session was held where participants responded to the prompt, "Show me a typical day in school for you," and took photos accordingly. Participants were instructed to take any photo they wanted and were given 20 minutes for this activity. Afterward, they described their photos and shared their experiences when responding to the prompt. All concerns, such as challenges encountered and negative feelings, were discussed.

Data Collection

The data generation process included two phases: (1) generation of photographs and (2) photo-elicited interviews. These phases aimed to produce data that were symbolic expressions of the participants' experiences. Ultimately, the two phases synergized communication of experience and information by combining visual data with verbal narratives, with each phase enriching the understanding of participants' experiences.

Generation of Photographs

The first phase of data collection involved participants capturing photographs. Following the orientation session, participants utilized their mobile phones or digital cameras to take images in response to the prompts outlined in Table 1. They were given two weeks to complete this task. The prompts were carefully designed to encourage deep reflection on personal experiences and perceptions of mental health. Each participant was asked to submit a maximum of 12 photos, although more photos were accepted if participants expressed willingness. Some participants asked if they could submit additional photos. However, the limit of 12 photos was set to ensure representativeness while maintaining manageable data volume, preventing unmanageable data sets (18).

Photo-Elicited Interviews/Group Discussions

After the two-week photo-capturing period, participants were invited to engage in interviews or group discussions. Printed copies of their photographs were distributed to facilitate reflection and discussion. To gain trust and enhance participation, participants' concerns were addressed throughout the data collection process. Questions were responded to accordingly, and informal conversations were held to check how participants were doing during the generation of photographs and before each interview. Some participants submitted one photo at a time via email or Facebook Messenger. They were asked to select photos that they felt best reflected the prompts given. After selecting their photographs, participants shared their stories by explaining their experiences and the meanings they wanted to convey through each photo

Table 1. Prompts and questions used in data collection

Data Collection Phase	Prompts/Questions
Generation of photographs	1. What is mental health and well-being to you? 2. What makes you mentally healthy? 3. What instances in your university life make you mentally healthy? 4. What instances in your university life challenge your mental health? 5. What illustrates an ideal university that promotes mental health among students?
Photo-elicited interviews	1. What do you See here? 2. What is really Happening here? 3. How does this relate to Our lives? 4. Why does this concern, situation, or strength exist? 5. How can we become Empowered through our new understanding? 6. What can we Do?

they had taken.

The photo-elicited interview sessions were scheduled at convenient times and in private settings within the university to ensure confidentiality. All interviews were audio-recorded and conducted following the SHOWED framework (Table 1), as introduced by Wang and Burris (16,17). The group discussions aimed to develop a collective interpretation of the data and strengthen the voices of the participants.

Achieving data saturation was a critical step in ensuring the comprehensiveness and credibility of the findings. Saturation is reached when no new information or themes emerge from the data, indicating that sufficient data has been collected to support thorough analysis. In this study, data saturation was achieved through iterative cycles of photo elicitation, group discussions, and thematic analysis (18, 19).

Given the participatory nature of photovoice, saturation was not solely dependent on the number of participants but also on the depth and diversity of visual and narrative data provided (20). Multiple photo sessions and reflective discussions facilitated the identification of recurring themes, ensuring that the data accurately captured the breadth of students' mental health experiences. This approach aligns with Saunders et al. (21), who emphasize that saturation is a dynamic process reflecting the richness and variability of the data.

By ensuring data saturation, this study enhances the reliability and validity of its findings, providing a well-rounded understanding of the mental health challenges and coping strategies among college students.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the photographs was participatory. This study adopted a three-stage approach to photo analysis as described by Wang and Burris (17), including (1) selecting, (2) contextualizing, and (3) codifying.

In the first stage, participants directly selected the photographs to be included in the study. This participatory process ensured that participants identified photographs that most accurately reflected their experiences. The selected photographs were tagged and organized according to the prompts given during the photography sessions.

The second stage involved storytelling, where participants articulated the meanings behind their photographs. Guided by the VOICE (Voicing Our Individual and Collective Experience) framework (17), this stage included contextualizing through group discussions, caption writing, and storytelling.

The final stage involved codifying the data. In this stage, the group collectively identified three main dimensions: issues, themes, or theories. Issues referred to the concerns related to mental health that warranted immediate action.

Audio-recorded interviews and discussions were transcribed verbatim, then uploaded and managed using ATLAS.ti version 9. Data analysis involved interpretive examination of the symbolic expressions, images, and language employed by participants.

The findings were ultimately presented through a virtual exhibit. The conceptualization of this research project was developed before the COVID-19 pandemic. While the initial plan was to hold a conventional face-to-face photo exhibit, health restrictions necessitated that the presentation of the findings, including the action plans derived from the data, be conducted online.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of this study, the framework proposed by Lincoln and Guba (22) was followed, emphasizing four key criteria: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through multiple strategies, including pre-briefing and debriefing sessions with participants to clarify study objectives and their roles, as well as fostering full engagement and commitment. Informal conversations before data collection helped establish rapport and minimized misinterpretation, allowing for a more committed engagement in interviews and photography sessions. The triangulation of visual and verbal data further enhanced the confirmability of the findings. Moreover, participants were allowed to express themselves in their preferred languages - English, Filipino, or Ilocano - facilitating authentic and spontaneous responses. Non-verbal cues were also recorded to deepen the interpretation of participants' emotional states.

Dependability was demonstrated through careful participant selection, which included marginalized groups, to ensure the data accurately represented diverse experiences. All research materials, including analytic notes and memos, were meticulously documented to

maintain a clear record of the study process.

Transferability was addressed through the provision of rich, thick descriptions of the data and context, enabling future researchers to evaluate the applicability of the findings to other contexts. This approach ensured that the findings were not only trustworthy but also applicable and adaptable to different settings. These strategies collectively upheld the integrity of the study, ensuring that the findings reflected the lived experiences of the participants.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the SLU Research Ethics Committee. Ethical considerations were addressed accordingly. Guided by key ethical issues outlined by Evans-Agnew and Rosemberg (23), concerns such as privacy, safety, photo selection, presentation, publication, researcher influence over the subject matter, photo ownership, and advocacy were carefully managed throughout the study.

Results

Mental health was conceptualized as a multilayered construct (Figure 1). From the innermost to the outermost layers, the ideas that comprised mental health became increasingly concrete and observable. The first layer encompassed three elements of mental health. The second layer involved categories that further characterized each element. The third layer included subcategories that specified particular characteristics of mental health.

The first and innermost layer of mental health, consisting of three core elements, provided the fundamental understanding of mental health as perceived and experienced by students.

Element 1: Mental Health as a Dynamic Disposition

Mental health as a state of mind was only one aspect of a broader, dynamic disposition. It was characterized by internal and external factors related to academics and life circumstances that constantly drove the dynamics in their dispositions.

Triggers

Dispositions emanated from various triggers considered significant by students. These triggers included resources, relationships, and roles and responsibilities, which were encountered regularly and repeatedly.

Responses

Students' responses were constantly at work. One prevalent response was *deliberate isolation*, a behavioral pattern where students consciously and intentionally sought solitude when feeling uncomfortable with their environment. This response involved physically distancing themselves from others—be it peers—or finding a private space where they could be alone with their thoughts.

In her photo, Stef shared:

"It is a perfect spot to view the world without being a part of it. I think there's a need for students to have a time to be alone with their thoughts like that. That's why in this photo, every morning when I arrive early at school, I walk around. Especially when there are no people around. Just like this one, when there are no people in the oval. It gives me time to think about the things I do".

The concept of dynamic disposition was illustrated as internal forces within a person that oppose one another, with the aim of achieving stability. This illustration of mental health as a dynamic disposition emphasized its dual nature, viewing mental health as having two aspects: the "good" side and the "bad" side. This is consistent with existing literature on positive and negative mental health (24). Furthermore, the notion that mental health is dynamic is supported by the mental health continuum model, which highlights that mental status is not static, and individuals may move along the continuum (25). These dynamics also posit that social space is an

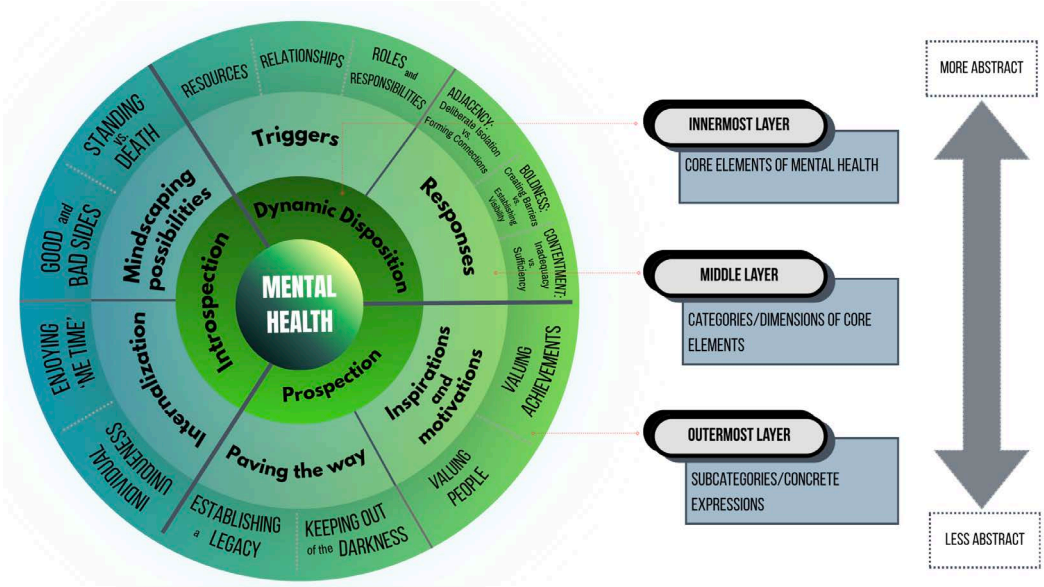

Figure 1. Multilayered conceptual model of mental health: from abstract core elements to concrete expressions

important component in an individual's mental health. This has been supported by several studies. For example, poor social support was found to be a predictor of mental distress among health science undergraduate students (26). Besides, additional challenges exist when students seek someone to talk to, as many tend to be reluctant to pursue mental healthcare. Trust and confidentiality are important considerations (12).

The Mental Health Foundation with YouGov (27) highlighted that 20% of adults felt shame, 34% felt down or low, and 19% felt disgusted with their body image. Among teenagers, 37% reported feeling upset, and 31% felt ashamed of their body image. In addition, 34% of adults expressed anxiety about their body, and 35% felt depressed about it. Alarmingly, 13% of women had suicidal thoughts because of their body image concerns. It was also found that 21% of adults attributed negative body image to exposure to unrealistic beauty or physical appearance standards on social media.

These statistics signify the prevalent problem revolving around the mental health of persons engaged in social media. While social media can serve as a constructive outlet or diversion from stress, it can also contribute to mental health issues. Stress, for instance, exhibits a dynamic nature, varying depending on the stage of the curriculum where students are (28). For college students, resorting to social media as a stress outlet may not be effective and warrants further exploration.

Element 2: Mental Health Involving Introspection

Introspection refers to students' capacity to examine their conscious thoughts and emotions. It embodies their self-reflective process of answering questions such as, "Who am I?", "Am I okay?", "Am I doing well?", and "Where am I standing?" The findings showed that this element of mental health is inherently rooted in and responsive to internal processes, comprising two subcategories: *internalization* and *mindscaping*.

Internalization

Internalization involved situations in which students verbalized their appreciation for solitude. Unlike deliberate isolation in response to triggers, enjoying the 'me time' can be a routine part of daily life, contributing positively to mental health. It represents a conscious choice to reconnect with oneself and engage in activities that bring personal joy. This photo illustrates 'me time' by Zhailer when he shared, "This is the time when I was on my way home and just enjoyed walking while holding this corn on a stick".

Resilience, an essential component of mental health, was often portrayed by students as the cultivation of inner strength. Many students emphasized the importance of independence, or at least their efforts to become as independent as possible. They acknowledged the necessity of inner strength, understanding that challenges are natural parts of life, and that true resilience stems from deep within.

Mindscaping

Students frequently experienced uncertainty about their current state, leading to mindscaping, a process of introspection where they assessed and interpreted their situations. According to participants, mental health is dual in nature, encompassing both positive and negative aspects. Roro shared an edited photo that visually represented this duality and commented, "I intentionally edited the photo to portray that mental health has both good and bad sides". He further added, "When you look at the photo, what you can see is a tree. But if you look closer, it stands on two contrasting backgrounds which illustrate the good and the bad". Students recognized that mental health is not static; it can include bad days, bad moments, and bad situations. The key is being aware of these fluctuations and learning to live with them, thriving amidst ups and downs. They also emphasized that one cannot be entirely "all good" or "all bad."

A related subcategory, *standing vs. death*, encapsulated whether students felt they were currently functioning well internally and externally. This reflected the idea that mental health extends beyond external appearances; one's outward demeanor does not necessarily represent internal well-being. Linmo shared a photo of a seemingly dead tree and explained, "Mental health is [sometimes] like you are there. You are standing, even though deep inside you are dead". She further added, "Sometimes, you don't know you are no longer okay".

Element 3: Mental Health involving Prospection

The third element underscored that mental health involves prospection, the process of laying the foundations for and working towards personal goals.

This photo, captured by Ayi, exemplified this concept, illustrating the importance of dreams and purpose: "Everything starts with a dream," she repeated the words photographed, stressing that students' dreams should not be wasted.

Participants highlighted that a sense of self-worth, value, purpose, and contribution to others significantly bolster their mental health. When students perceive that their actions benefit others, they experience a heightened sense of value, which enhances their overall well-being.

The findings suggest that the mental health and well-being of students emerge from an integrated process involving interplay both within and between individuals. These elements – dynamic disposition, introspection, and prospection – interconnect to form a unified understanding of mental health among college students. The process appears to be constantly evolving, emphasizing that well-being is an ongoing goal within the broader context of mental health.

This conceptualization is consistent with previous studies. Jithoo (12) noted that mental health is a combination of positive and negative emotions and behaviors, along with the capacity to take risks and independently cope with challenges. Similarly, Ahorsu et al. (29) described mental health as a balance between

good and bad moods. Consequently, mental health promotion is an important component in developing effective strategies to approach mental health. In addition, increasing awareness about mental health is essential, as inadequate knowledge has distressing effects on the well-being of younger populations (26). Targeted, multifaceted interventions, particularly the innovative ones integrating technology, such as mobile applications, have emerged as promising tools for health promotion.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the mental health and well-being of students constitute an integrated process characterized by dynamic interplay between individuals and within each individual. These insights demonstrate how three interconnected elements collectively form a unified understanding of mental health among college students. As depicted in the Figure 1 of the elements of mental health, this construct is an ever-changing process that constantly struggles to attain well-being. Well-being is, therefore, regarded as a goal embedded within the broader concept of mental health in students. Despite the challenges they always face, students at the state university are goal-oriented and purpose-driven. The goals and purposes they seek to fulfill – whether academic or life-related – are considered significant, exerting a profound impact on their mental health. Academic goals include routine concerns, such as meeting deadlines, submitting requirements on time, or even passing examinations or quizzes. However, these academic goals are driven by mature thinking purposes that extend beyond immediate academic concerns.

A Mentally Healthy University and Project 'Gabay' Action Plan

Participants envisioned a university that actively promotes mental health and well-being, employing strategies aligned with their perceptions of what constitutes a mentally healthy environment. This study intended to voice not only students' aspirations, but, more importantly, their needs for meaningful learning and development in their college life experiences. The students acknowledged that achieving this ideal is a collective effort and cannot be solely their responsibility. Promoting and sustaining mental health and well-being in the university context is a perennial concern that requires careful consideration.

In light of this, a proposed initiative to sustain this advocacy is "Gabay" – a project aimed at fostering collective and sustainable efforts involving students (Figure 2). According to Ciaren (30), effective mental health programs are guided by six principles: (1) Addressing stigma; (2) Fostering relationships among stakeholders for mental health; (3) Facilitating processes of sharing, validation, and problem solving; (4) Involving families in mental health programs; (5) Harnessing community resilience; and (6) Capitalizing on opportunities arising from crises and disasters. Project Gabay embarks on meeting the peculiar concerns of the state university students with careful consideration of these six principles.

Integrating peer-led interventions and increasing student participation are vital strategies. Tailoring interventions to suit students' needs and preferences significantly improves their effectiveness (29,31,32,33). Project Gabay aims to maximize student involvement in innovative mental health strategies that can be offered to

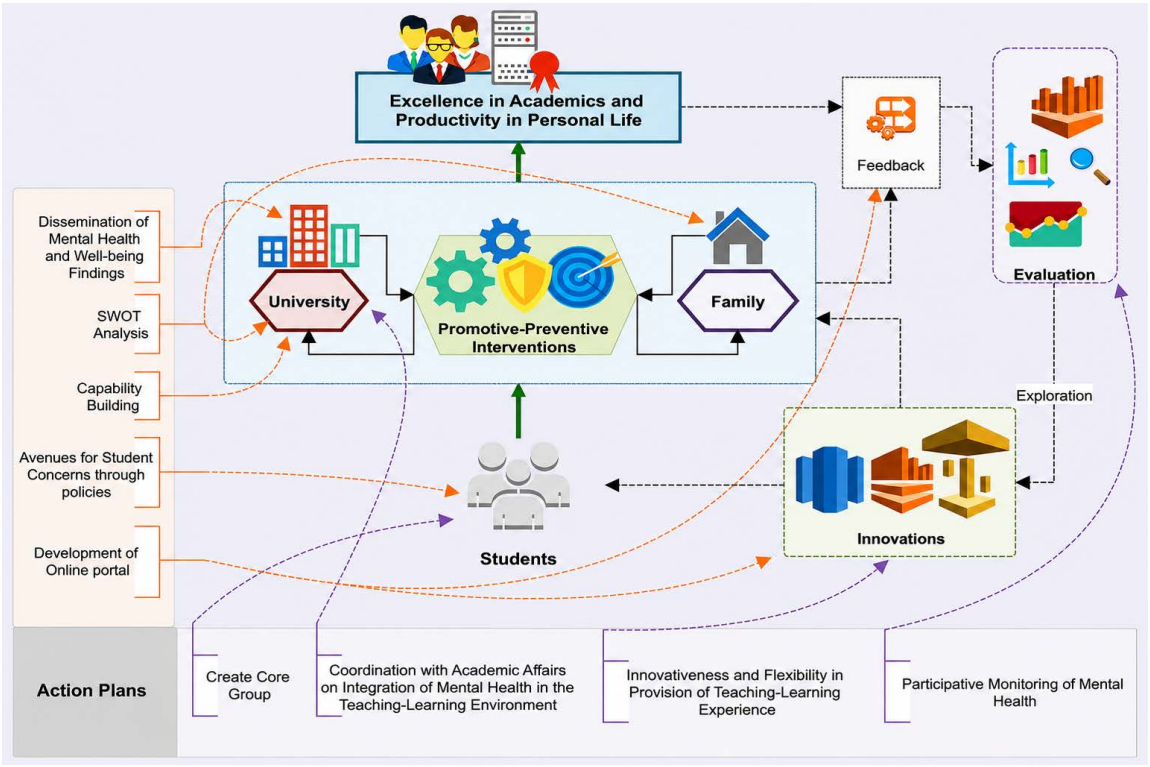

Figure 2. Project Gabay: Fostering collective and sustainable efforts to safeguard mental health and well-being of students

individuals at the state university.

'Gabay' is an acronym for the project's mission: Guiding students Amidst challenges through being and becoming Better at achieving Academic excellence and Yielding productivity. The word 'Gabay', meaning guidance in Filipino, inspired by participants' input, was chosen to resonate a concept distinct from the conventional term 'guidance' traditionally used in educational settings.

Conclusion

The findings of this photovoice study highlight the dynamic and multifaceted nature of mental health and well-being among students in state universities. Mental health plays a fundamental role in students' personal growth, academic success, and overall development; however, it often remains insufficiently recognized within higher education settings. The study revealed that students encounter a wide range of academic and non-academic challenges originating from both university and home environments. These challenges are closely linked to the multiple roles students are expected to fulfill as learners and as family members, often creating tensions that can lead to periods of psychological distress. In this context, social relationships, particularly support from family and friends, emerged as essential factors influencing students' experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies. At the same time, academic demands require students to continuously seek motivation and develop adaptive approaches to learning and personal resilience.

The study further demonstrates the value of the photovoice methodology in capturing authentic student perspectives on mental health and well-being. By providing participants with a platform to share their experiences visually and narratively, photovoice offers a meaningful and participatory approach for exploring sensitive topics and amplifying the voices of groups that are often underrepresented. Future research should continue to explore and expand the use of this method in educational and mental health contexts.

Based on the study findings, the Project Gabay Action Plan offers a promising framework for promoting student mental health and well-being while supporting academic achievement and personal development. Effective implementation of the proposed strategies will require sustained institutional commitment, adequate resources, and dedicated personnel. Continuous evaluation and feedback from implementation efforts can inform future interventions and contribute to a more comprehensive and responsive approach to student mental health.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The study was conducted in a single state university, which may limit the transferability of the results to other educational contexts. Data collection occurred prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent changes in higher education may affect the contemporary relevance of some findings. Time constraints during data collection may also have limited the depth of participants' accounts. In addition, the study involved students who did not report experiencing mental health breakdowns, potentially excluding perspectives from individuals facing more severe psychological difficulties. Finally, the focus on college students alone does not capture the experiences of other educational stakeholders, including faculty members and staff, whose mental health and well-being are likewise important for fostering a supportive educational environment. Future studies should therefore include more diverse populations, educational levels, and institutional contexts to develop a broader understanding of mental health and well-being across the educational system.

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Visualization: Joel C. Estacio
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Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical Approval

This study was approved by Saint Louis University Research Ethics Committee (Protocol Number: SLU-REC 2019-082).

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