Then and Now: Health and Wellness Survey results from 2020 to 2023

BACKGROUND
Healthcare students’ wellness, health, and resilience is central to their success. Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences (RBHS) is a training ground for future healthcare workers and our mission is to graduate students who are clinically excellent and able to maintain their health and wellness under challenging conditions.

Mental health challenges are increasing at a faster pace due in part to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a June 2020 CDC report, 31% of respondents endorsed symptoms of anxiety or depression, 13% started or increased substance use, 26% reported stress-related symptoms, and 11% reported having serious thoughts of suicide in the past 30 days. In 2022, the healthy minds survey found that 44% of students reported symptoms of depression, 37% reported anxiety disorders and 15% reported having seriously considered suicide in the past year—the highest recorded rates in the history of the 15-year-old survey.

The COVID-19 pandemic magnified students’ mental health challenges in many ways including the adjustment to virtual learning, increased isolation and other behavioral changes, and dealing with new socioeconomic uncertainties.

In 2020 and 2023, Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences administered the Health Minds Study (HMS) to students in eight professional health sciences schools as part of our Jed Campus mental health initiative. The initial results showed depression, anxiety, and social climate concerns. The study was re-administered 3 years later to examine changes in student mental health since the onset of the pandemic.

DISCUSSION
Rates of moderate and severe anxiety increased from 21% to 27% from 2020 to 2023. These results demonstrate an increase in anxiety since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Benchmark HMS national data will be released in the summer 2023.

In January 2020 and 2023, we disseminated HMS to the RBHS student body via email after receiving Rutgers Institutional Review Board approval. We included medical, dental, graduate, health professions, public health, and nursing students.

Students completed surveys anonymously and self-identified their school affiliation and demographics. The first 500 students who completed the survey were offered a $10 Amazon gift card, for which they voluntarily submitted their email addresses. Survey responses were not linked to email addresses.

HMS includes the GAD-7, which is a screening test for anxiety widely used in clinical practice.

We compared the GAD-7 results using openepi.com to run chi-square analyses with uncorrected 2-sided t-tests. We categorized anxiety as minimal (0-4), mild (5-9), moderate (10-14), and severe (15). The data were analyzed across subpopulations related to race/ethnicity, gender identity/sexual orientation, and RBHS school. Participants self-reported gender identity and sexual orientation, which we pooled into 2 categories: cis-gendered/heterosexual and LGBTQ+. due to the small sample size in the individual subpopulations.

DISCUSSION (continued)
We have learned a significant amount from the 2020 survey, both in terms of the student population and working with the data itself. Teams have been meeting regularly throughout the pandemic to engage stakeholders, identify funds, and raise awareness of mental health issues. The initial survey experience and all the work done since have readied RBHS to act quickly on the data from 2023.

HMS 2023 survey confirmed increasing rate of students with anxiety and the need for interventions at RBHS. The 2020 and 2023 surveys show disparities exist across sub-populations. The data highlights the need for targeted interventions tailored to high-risk populations and ongoing monitoring. Additionally, RBHS will assess if there are additional metrics that can further inform these findings.

NEXT STEPS
Expand service delivery and wellness initiatives
- Open RBHS Office for the Promotion of Well-being
- Expand integrated Mental Health Services:
  - Roll-out mobile, on-demand counseling services
  - Pursue equitable services and sharing of resources across all student population
Increase focus on prevention and community building
- Enhance commitment to being a Health Promoting University
- Use population-based approach to well-being
  - Recognize and respond to voices missing from survey sample
Monitor service utilization:
- Improve tracking of mental health service utilization and wellness program participation, specifically identifying utilization in populations with higher rates of anxiety and depression.
Dynamic survey strategy with real-time response:
- Coordinated, consistent survey strategy across schools
  - Shared-data; shared-activity
- Mixed-methods, as needed