

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

COUNSELOR

CONFERENCE

Opening up about mental health in the UC application

Disclaimer

We are not mental health professionals. The point of this presentation is to share mental health trends we have seen in the UC application and to share tips on how you as a counselor can help guide students to share their experiences in the UC application.



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
COUNSELOR
CONFERENCE

We are not here to diagnosis students, nor here to replace a licensed mental health professional. Students are not required to disclose any information regarding this matter. Our goal here is to support both you, the counselor, and the student if they decide discuss in their application. If a student is going through crisis or in need of mental health support, please seek professional help immediately.

Ice breaker

How confident do you feel about helping a student disclose mental health challenges in the UC application?



POLL QUESTION:

How confident do you feel about helping a student disclose mental health challenges in the UC application?

1. Not confident at all
2. Slightly confident
3. Somewhat confident
4. Quite confident
5. Extremely confident
6. Not sure

What is mental health?

“Mental health is the foundation for emotions, thinking, communication, learning, resilience, hope, and self-esteem. Mental health is also key to relationships, personal and emotional well-being, and contributing to community or society. Mental health is a component of overall well-being. It can influence and be influenced by physical health.”

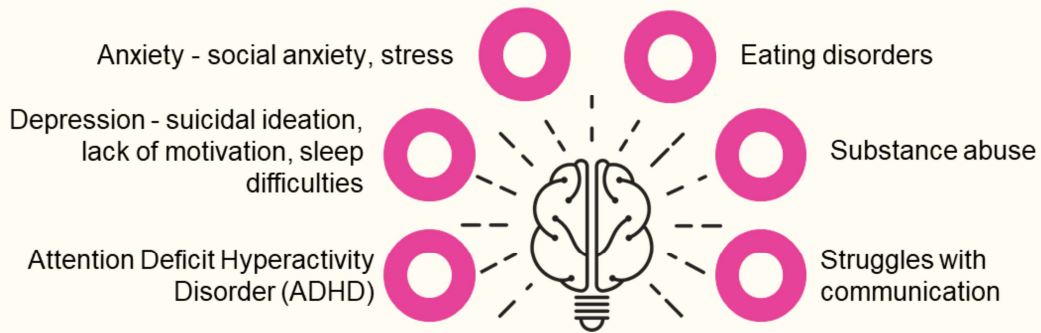
- American Psychiatric Association



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
COUNSELOR
CONFERENCE

Mental health problems can affect a student’s energy level, concentration, dependability, mental ability, and optimism, hindering performance.” -[Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#)

Mental health topics



Not an extensive list

Mental health problems take many forms. Teens can be impacted by one or multiple mental health struggles listed on the slide.

The most common mental health topics mentioned in students' UC applications include:

student's academic performance, involvement in the community, school activities, and awards/achievements. This can affect students in a number of ways including- their focus in the classroom, their grades, their involvement in extracurricular activities, etc. Mental health is a unique experience for each individual. Understanding and being able to articulate a student's mental health journey can help the student better advocate for themselves within the application process.

Comprehensive review

GPA
Academic, A-G courses
- additional points for UC-approved honors


Honors
Number of & performance in UC-approved honors

Opportunities
Relative to high school opportunities available

Talents & awards
Special talents & achievements in a particular field

Accomplishments
In light of special circumstances & challenges

List of all review factors:



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
COUNSELOR
CONFERENCE

“Using a process called comprehensive review, evaluators look at multiple factors beyond courses and grades to evaluate applicants' academic achievements in light of the opportunities available to them and the capacity each student demonstrates to contribute to the intellectual life of the campus. To guide the campuses in their comprehensive review of applicants, UC faculty developed the factors listed above. All campuses place the highest importance on academic achievement in evaluating applications. However, the evaluation process and specific weight (if any) given to each factor can differ from campus to campus and year to year” -The University of California website

As application readers, must consider EVERYTHING a student puts on their application! This includes sensitive topics like mental health. We understand that being a student is only a part of their identity and everyone has different experiences. During our holistic review, we take into consideration applicants' experiences, which may include mental health issues.

<https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/how-to-apply/applying-as-a-freshman/how-applications-are-reviewed.html>

Conversations on mental health

According to a Pew Research Center survey:

61% of teens feel a lot of pressure to get good grades

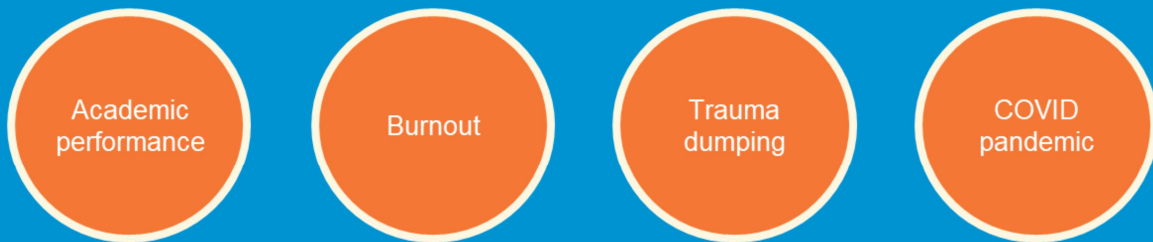
- Academics was by far the biggest pressure point found in the survey, with about half as many teens saying they felt a lot of pressure to look good (29%) and to fit in socially (28%)



There is national data regarding a majority in teens feeling pressure in their education, college search, and application process. The following article highlights data on the topic, click to read more:

<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-03-07/youth-mental-health-crisis-college-admissions-process-stresses-out-young-people>

Mental health trends in the UC application



As admissions professionals, we see certain areas in the application where students share their situation in regards to mental health.

-Academic performance: we see upward and downward trends, as well as discrepancies with course registration and completion.

-Burnout: a student's portfolio of courses and activities can have inconsistencies or gaps, due to over commitment and lack of downtime.

-Trauma dumping: this colloquialism refers to the oversharing of difficult emotions and thoughts with others, often done to seek validation, attention, or sympathy. While students might find some initial relief from sharing their trauma with someone else, the habit actually does more harm than good. In the context of the UC application, trauma dumping can look like sharing a traumatic experience for the sake of it. Without adding context to the application, the reader is left with questions like- what did the student gain or learn from the experience?

-COVID pandemic: as admissions professionals, we do not make assumptions on the effects, both during and lingering, of the COVID-19 pandemic on a student's experience. There is also no formal, designated COVID-19 question on the UC application.

Mental health in the activities and awards section

Activity and awards

- Titles
- Descriptions - which need to set context to the reader

Best practice:

- A lack of opportunity to be in a structured group or activity
- Support group/counseling
- Honors or awards earned for success in overcoming or working through mental health triggers

Let us now take a deep dive into how and where students can advocate for themselves and explain the impact of their mental health within the UC application. Context is always important, and for the activities and awards section students should make no assumptions that we as evaluators know anything about the offerings at their school. When it comes to titles of activities, they do not paint the full picture. For example, the student may be part of a health and wellness organization, noted in the title we don't make the assumption this is a counseling group working on strategies for their individual mental health, nor do we know they were potentially a peer leader. Students must explain thoroughly what their involvement is, any involvement is good involvement.

As you work individually with students, questions should be asked that lead into inquisitive reflection. Note the three "best practice" bullet points on the slide, these are leading thoughts that could help steer student in providing helpful context in this section of the UC application.

Was the "lack of opportunity" because of lack of opportunities or because of

Case study – Activities and awards

| Title | Description | Grade Level | School Year Hrs/Wk | Weeks per Year | Summer Hrs |
|---------------------------------|---|-------------|--------------------|----------------|------------|
| Group Member, The SAFE Alliance | Met weekly with mentor and fellow peers to increase emotion regulation and communication skills, identify qualities of healthy relationships, challenge unhealthy gender norms, learn skills for supportive relationships, and experience a sense of belonging and connection | 12 | 2 | 8 | 0 |

What can we infer from this slide?

An application reader needs to know if ‘SAFE’ is an acronym or not. The description shows the mission statement of the club, but fails to tell the application reader the student’s role in the group and what the student gained from their involvement. It also would help if the student shares what made them join the group and why they chose to join this group at that point in time (12th grade). While the student is disclosing involvement in a mental health organization, we cannot assume that any other parts of their application would be impacted by this information.

Mental health in the PIQs

Personal Insight Questions

- Any response can highlight mental health struggles
- All answers need to remain in the scope of the question asked

Best practice:

- Disclosure with context and/or outcome
- Disclosure with context and how they are working through it
- Going in depth about an activity or award listed prior in application

PIQs are the student's written interview portion of the UC application, and they are able to frame context around their personality, academics, and extracurriculars. As evaluators, we look toward the PIQs to add a third dimension to a student's application. Any of the four questions that a student chooses to answer, can address a student's mental health and any effects it has had on their experience. We need these details to understand a student's accomplishments and barriers.

As you work individually with students, encourage them to be their authentic self as the evaluator is not looking for reasons to judge a student. Note the three "best practice" bullet points on the slide, these are leading thoughts that could help steer student in providing helpful context in this section of the UC application. Keep in mind, evaluators are not looking for each student to have a groundbreaking struggle or event, this is a guide to help students feel comfortable enough to give us the context we need if it is there.

Case study – Personal insight questions (PIQ)

Example #1 – Academic subject that inspires

- Student writes about being in hospitals frequently due to mother's illness
- Mentions that they were inspired to take AP Biology and a health course at local community college
- Driven to learn about healthcare advancements and to help future patients of their own

Example #2 – Greatest talent or skill

- The applicant has been able to balance a full course load and part-time employment to supplement family expenses
- At work, they were only trained to help in preparation of food items but they took initiative to learn all aspects of business operation
- Their greatest skill is the ability to learn and master new skills

Example #1- shows a student responding to the academic PIQ question. Their response provides context into the student's passion for the healthcare field. Can we assume that with the information given, the student was struggling with the frequent visits to the hospital with their mother? No, the student has not disclosed any personal mental health concerns or stress.

Example #2- shows a student responding to the greatest talent and skill PIQ question. Their response eludes to the fact that they may have to work, but we cannot assume this means funding a personal clothing allowance versus the family electricity bill. While we can give credit for the balance of full course load and work schedule, it is still unclear what their mental health is looking like based on their response and how it effects all areas of their life.

Case study – Personal insight questions (PIQ)

Example #3 – Most significant challenge

- The applicant discloses struggle with a mental health diagnosis due to strict upbringing
- Grades and activities in 10th grade felt like they were slipping due to the depressed state the student was in
- School counselor became a mentor to student, encouraging them to get the help they needed and grades improved in 11th

Example #4 – Make your community a better place

- Applicant was a recent immigrant and was afraid to talk to people until they were welcomed by a church youth group
- The group offered friendships and community that helped them make adjustments to life in America
- They are now able to invite other recent immigrants into the same environment as they adjust in their new community

Example #3- shows a student responding to the most significant challenge question. This response shows the context both for their academic history downward trend and the mental health struggles they faced surrounding their upbringing. As evaluators we now have the full context into the student's situation and can award credit based on their resilience, accomplishments, and vulnerability.

Example #4- shows a student responding to the making your community a better place question. The student's disclosure about their immigrant status does not infer mental health struggles. They would need to share with us if the lack of ability to connect and share with their peers impacted their mental health.

Mental health in the additional comments

Additional comments (optional)

- There are 2 spots for additional comments: Within the Academic history section and the Personal Insight Questions

Best practice:

- Students can utilize these sections as a way to add any additional information to the application that they didn't get a chance to add before
- For the 'Academic history' section, sharing things like how the transition to remote learning has affected the student
- For the PIQ section, reflect on the application as a whole. What was not asked of the student, that could provide helpful context?

The additional comment boxes of the UC application is not required to be filled out, but it can be a helpful place for students to provide additional context. There are two boxes for additional comments, one under Academic history and the other is after the PIQ section. These are both NOT meant to be additional PIQs, and should be used only if absolutely necessary.

As you work individually with students, encourage them to weigh the option of using the additional comments. Note the three “best practice” bullet points on the slide, these are leading thoughts that could help steer student in providing helpful context in this section of the UC application.

Case study- Additional comments in Academic history section

Academic history details

- 16 year long courses completed
 - 12 A's
 - 2 B's – All in grade 10
 - 2 C's – All in grade 10
- GPA is 4.0
- Honors level courses: 3 taken

Admissions will ask:

- What was available to the student?
- Did something happen in 10th grade?
- Why were there B's and C's earned?
 - Will look at 'Academic history' additional comments for answers

What can we infer from this slide?

As an evaluator, we see a downward trend in 10th grade, but other than that we can make no further assumptions about any causes or reasons behind it. If students want us know why, they must tell us.

Some framing questions are available on the right side of the slide, that are a great starting point for the Academic history additional comment box.

Case study- Additional comments in Academic history section

Academic history additional comments

- Student explains how their sophomore grades were negatively impacted by the loss of a loved one and their struggle with the loss over a six-month period of anxiety. They mention being able to make up most of those grades with a strong junior year, after a successful round of mental health counseling

Now the evaluator can look to the student's additional comment in academic history and infer that this downward trend in 10th grade was due to a mental health struggle. Student can now be understood for what they went through and also given credit for their resiliency in 11th grade as they brought their grades back up.

As counselors prepare their students for this section, please guide students to fill out this helpful context if they faced a mental health barrier that impeded their learning or performance. We recognize as admissions offices that all schools are different, so context regarding curriculum can also be helpful in our evaluation process.

Case study – Additional comments in the PIQ section

Additional comments

- Student mentions their desire to be more involved in extracurricular activities during school but COVID-19 negatively impacted opportunities
- They shifted focus towards academics to make sure grades were not also negatively impacted by COVID-19

When students are filling out the general additional comments box in the PIQs section, this is 550 words of space to provide even further context. Many students have been utilizing this space as a way to share lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example. However, as counselors, please encourage your students to use this area after exhausting all other spaces on the application. This is not meant to be an additional PIQ or personal statement, and it does not penalize the student not to use it.

Tips for working with your students

- Recognizing the systems students are operating in
- Students are their biggest critics – recognize the culture and share a different way of thinking
- Make sure that the particular topic the student is talking about answers the personal insight question or explained why this is shared within the additional comment section



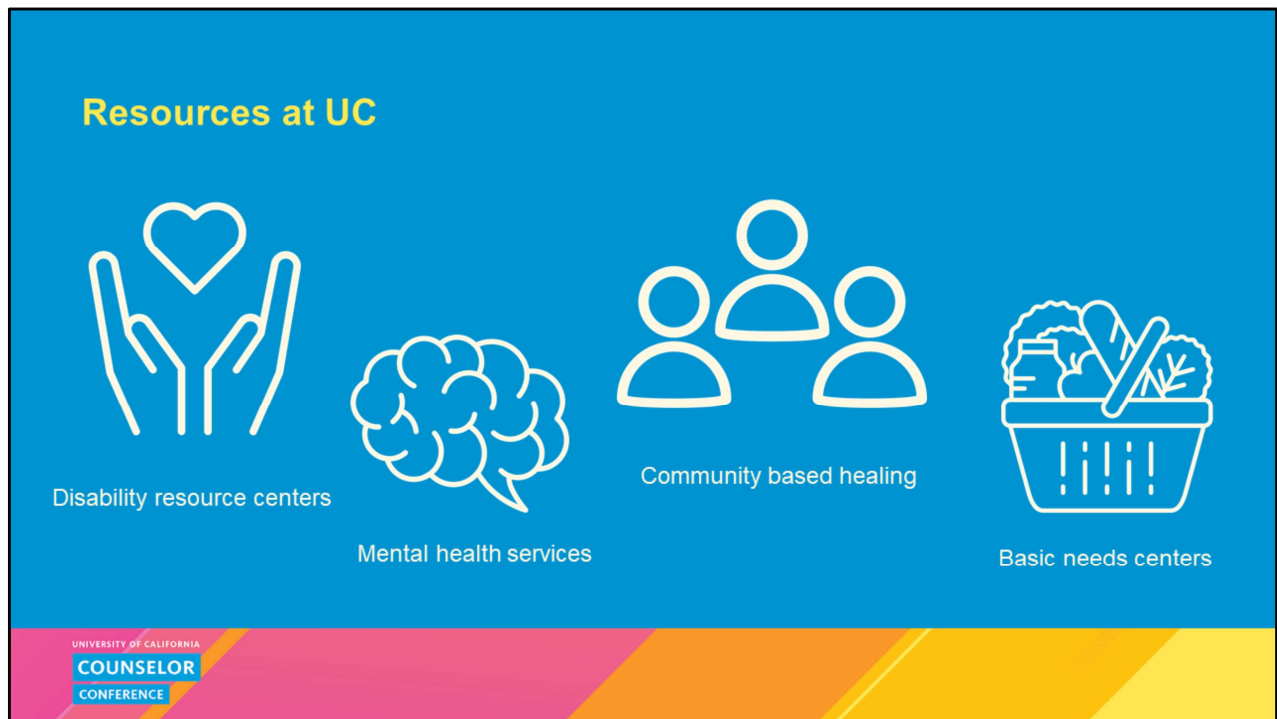
These tips are meant to help you as counselors, help your students. As much as we are asking for context from the students within the UC application, it is important when you are advising your caseload that you know their full context too. Students may be talking about much of the content on the application for the first time, so treat the situation with empathetic curiosity and work hard on avoiding assumptions in your conversations. Please note, UC evaluators are not mandated reporters. We recognize this process might bring up a variety of topics in a student's present and past. Counselors are encouraged to proofread applications and bring any situations needing immediate attention of your appropriate school leadership or reporting line.

Tips for working with your students

- Wording matters
- As readers we cannot infer or draw conclusions. It is important that a student clearly makes the connections themselves
- Be as concise as possible



These tips are meant to help you as counselors, help your students fine tune their application materials. Word choice is vital within the UC application, as space is limited. Using clever and concise language is important when a student is getting their point across to the application evaluator. As admissions professionals, we are trained to not make assumptions during an application evaluation. If students want us to know something, they must clearly tell us in their application. Real estate is limited in the UC application, therefore being direct and concise is not only appreciated, but respected within application evaluation.



Mental health support does not stop at a student’s previous school, it is so important to maintain mental health at the higher education level. Here at **University of California we have a first-year retention rate of 92%**. California Budget Act of 2021- committed ongoing allocation of \$15 million for mental health and wellness resources for the UC campuses, include the following initiatives regarding student mental health and wellness:

Disability Resource Centers

- Each UC offers disabled students (permanent or temporary) support with accessibility equipment, testing arrangements, and note-taking support.

Mental Health Services (double check for unlimited)

- Prop 63: allocating funding for prevention methods rather than crisis-management
- Each UC has their own process, but most offer identity affirming & trauma-informed care

Community based and embodied forms of healing

- Affinity groups (cultural, LGBTQ+, shared interest) and spaces to engage in movement are incredibly powerful healing tools that every UC offers in abundance

Basic Needs centers

- Basic needs insecurity (food, housing, etc.) is a leading cause of mental and physical health issues; UC campuses offer a variety of emergency financial support via basic needs centers

Additional resources from UCOP:

<https://www.ucop.edu/student-equity-affairs/programs-and-initiatives/student-mental-health.html>

**“Promise me you’ll always remember: You’re
braver than you believe, and stronger than you
seem, and smarter than you think.”**
— Christopher Robin

————— **Thank you!** —————