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# Mental disorders of students at the University of Chile



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## Abstract

This paper introduces the work model used by the Psychology Department in the Medicine Faculty of the University of Chile and the characteristics of its patients. It delivers a description of the services provided by the Department, its history, and some of the statistics that characterize the consulting students, regarding the problems that make them get help, as well as the diagnoses obtained from a database that has been under construction for five years.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the University is a context of life in which its community spends most of the day and their lives, it becomes the appropriate environment to promote health measures for its students, staff, and scholars, and therefore reach the rest of the population. Thus, these higher education establishments face the new challenge of providing a context of opportunities for health and life quality promoting activities for their workers and students.

The World Health Organization through its Healthy Cities project has proposed a model of “Healthy University” or “Health Promoter” to incorporate health promotion into the educational and occupational project at the universities, in order to foster human development and improve the life quality of those who study or work there, and, at the same time, educate them to act as models or promoters of healthy behavior in their families, future working environments and in society in general (Lange & Vio, 2006).

The University of Chile, through statements by its former Rector Riveros during the conference “Building Healthy Universities”, jointly organized in 2003 by the Pontifical Catholic University and the University of Alberta Canada, exposed its concern and commitment to promote health and well-being activities for its students (Universidad de Chile, 2003). The Healthy University project encourages primarily the Faculties and Departments of the health area to lead

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the educating process in healthy lifestyles for the university community (Lange & Vio, 2006).

The Medicine Faculty of the University of Chile, through its Student Affairs Department (DAE, by its Spanish abbreviation) has worked intensely to achieve integral development of the students and increase university life quality. The Psychology Department was created for the purpose of meeting the particular reality of our university population and its needs in the area of mental health, in order to offer activities and services relevant to the aforementioned requirements.

The Psychology Department depends on the Student Affairs Department, and it is in charge of promoting mental health and university life quality for the Faculty students, as well as offering orientation and treatment for those most vulnerable or at risk. This paper provides a description of the services offered by the Psychology Department and its working model, as well as the data compiled during six years that allow us to know the characteristics of the consulting students.

There are three interesting situations: the progressive increase of students that seek for psychological help, the reasons for consultation that drive them to seek for help, and the psychopathological characteristics of these patients. The increasing number of patients has forced our Department to generate more efficient and standardized procedures.

## 2. History and Evolution of the Psychology Department of the Medicine Faculty, University of Chile

In 2005, the former Headmistress of Student Affairs for the Medicine Faculty of University of Chile, Dr. Ximena González Ortloff, introduced the mental health services for undergraduate students. These services included providing free psychological support through intern psychologists from University of Chile, who offered 4 counseling sessions that could be eventually extended, depending on the demand and the problems of the patients. During the first year only one intern psychologist was received, and during the following years the number of intern students has increased progressively; these students, in addition to providing psychological care, developed self-esteem and personal development workshops, aimed at the student population.

In 2010, Dr. Marisol Prado, the new Headmistress of Student Affairs for the Medicine Faculty, decides to strengthen the psychological care service by providing space for its functioning, thus supporting the formation project of a Psychology Department that carries out new activities besides psychological care, such as research and continuous teaching. Nowadays, the Department receives students from this and other universities and also voluntary psychologists, forming a rotating Department staff of approximately 16 part-time psychologists.

The Psychology Department works with three lines of action: psychological care for undergraduate and postgraduate students from the Medicine Faculty; research; and continuous teaching. This translates into systematic psychodiagnosis, counseling, brief psychotherapy and emergency care; mental health, university life quality, psychodiagnosis,

psychotherapy, personality profiles, and student functioning research; and various courses of general formation and other activities aimed at psychoeducation and preventing mental disorders.

## 3. Psychology Department's integrative model

In our Psychology Department we use an integrative model to approach psychodiagnosis and psychotherapy for our consulting students. This model has been developed taking into account the context and reality of our growing population of patients. This model contains elements related to bonds, conducts, cognition, affections, psychodynamics, existence and spiritualism. It tries to understand the history, context and problems of human beings from different angles in order to search for the best strategies to boost people's abilities and help them take the best decisions to change.

Once a patient seeks for help in our Department, he or she must fill in a self-report form that includes a series of instruments that allow us to meet our patients' realities. This form is reviewed and studied by the staff of the Department, and an interview with the student is prepared. This interview has the purpose of collecting information, meeting the problems of the patient from the different dimensions of the model, and discussing with the patient the results of the self-administered instruments. Upon closing the interview, a diagnostic hypothesis and the treatment plan are co-built with the patient.

In the Psychology Department, psychotherapy is carried out according to the integrative model. Patients receive treatment during an average of 8 sessions and are afterwards monitored until they are discharged. The emphasis in the dimensions worked on and the chosen strategies depend on the problems treated, always keeping a 360 degree perception on the patient's situation.

The patient has a very active role in our model, since our interest is that the patients understand very well their problems, the causes and treatments, their possibilities of change and how to carry out these changes. From our perspective, it is the patient who, in full understanding of his/her problem, must decide how to change, and the psychotherapist must provide all the information and tools the patient requires. For this, the psychotherapist must help the patient to know him/herself through his/her history and the analysis of the current situation from the different dimensions of the model.

## 4. Characteristics of the students consulting in the Psychology Department of the Medicine Faculty, University of Chile

The Psychology Department has endeavored to know its patient population in detail, in order to recognize its needs and build effective strategies for the prevention and treatment of mental disorders. For this purpose, a protocol has been created for the reception of patients, the psychodiagnostic process, and the statistics. This information is also useful for the creation of mental health promotion policies in the Medicine Faculty.

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