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**THESIS TITLE:**

Descriptive Analysis of Mental Health Needs of Nontraditional Black and White Students

**STUDENT'S NAME:**

Jordan Brown, B.A.

**THESIS CHAIR:**

Eric R. Wright, Ph.D.

**ABSTRACT**

**Introduction:** Mental health seeking behaviors among nontraditional students, particularly Black students, is an area that should be examined closely with care and strategy. There are a plethora of factors that pose risks to nontraditional students completing their education. There is something to take note of when 38% of nontraditional students leave their first year compared to 16% of traditional students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

**Objective:** This study assessed the risk factors and demographic variables associated with mental health seeking behaviors in Black nontraditional students vs. White nontraditional students at Georgia State University.

**Methods:** Descriptive demographic data were used to find a statistical difference and likelihood of occurrences of the variables: sex, race, age, reduction of alcohol or drug use, financial stress, and suicide consideration.

**Results:** Black students reported experiencing higher levels of stress due to finances. When looking at counseling utilization for nontraditional pupils, more White students sought prior therapy before their arrival to Georgia State University (25.3%) compared to Black students (13.4%). Black students were more likely than Whites to attempt suicide 1-5 times, but overall, there were minimal differences between races in the overall percentage. Examining if Black male

veterans wished to reduce drinking and drug use more than White males, a two-sample hypothesis test was used (P-value=.21 using alpha .05). I failed to reject the null hypothesis, meaning the proportions are the same and there is no statistical difference between races. Blacks vs. Whites who sought counseling before or after college had a P-value of .00308. This test is significant at the alpha level .05 therefore we reject the null hypothesis that the proportions are the same. We conclude that there is a significant difference in the proportion of blacks who sought counseling before or after college from whites who sought counseling before or after college. I also looked at Blacks vs. Whites who never sought counseling. The P value is 0.00. This test is significant at the alpha .05 level thus we reject the null hypothesis. There is a significant difference between the proportions of Blacks vs Whites that have never sought counseling.

**Conclusions:** Although there are mental health disparities that exist across the population of nontraditional students, a focus should be on nontraditional Black students. Universities should increase the budget for counseling services to expand supporting staff to accommodate individuals with needs. Nontraditional students have higher risks of possibly not graduating and ensuring the appropriate resources are in place is critical as a part of success.

**Key Words:** mental health, nontraditional students, education, veterans, alcohol, women, suicide, African-American/Black

Descriptive Analysis of Mental Health Needs of Nontraditional Black Students by Race

By

Jordan Brown

Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, Georgia State University

A Thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty

Of Georgia State University in Partial Fulfillment

Of the

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## APPROVAL PAGE

Descriptive Analysis of Mental Health Needs of Nontraditional Black Students by Race

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Signature of Author

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background

There are growing concerns for the mental health status of college students across the university and college campuses. In an economy where rent continues to rise, food is becoming increasingly expensive, and tuition is not affordable, retaining college students should be a priority among universities, faculty, and staff in higher education positions, and mental health clinics provided on campus. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 40% of college students do not seek mental help, 50% have suffered from anxiety in and out of the classroom, and 80% feel overwhelmed with responsibilities (National Association of Mental Illness, 2017). These statistics address undergraduate students. However, risks of mental illness could be higher when addressing nontraditional students, particularly ones who identify as African-American, compared to their nontraditional White counterparts. In this report, nontraditional students are defined a group of students that may be older (22+), active or inactive veterans, having a spouse or being in a committed relationship, or working part-time or full-time at Georgia State University while seeking their undergraduate or graduate degree. In this context, mental illness may manifest itself as a confounding factor that could prevent African-American nontraditional students from graduating at higher rates. With the pressures of academic requirements, work or family demands, this could be the onset or heightened sensitivity of experiencing mental illness whether it looks like drug or alcohol abuse, suicidal attempts, or increased feelings of stress.

In the early 1840's, Dorothea Dix, a leading pioneer for improved treatment of people with mental health illnesses, lobbied for 32 states to open psychiatric hospitals (Parry, 2005). She observed that mentally ill individuals were being incarcerated with criminals, suffered from malnutrition, freezing or in extremely hot temperatures, unclothed, and did not have appropriate bathrooms to use. Needless to say, ill brained people were treated inhumanely. Because we are referencing the early 1840's, this was a time when the United-Mexican War had begun, and slavery was still in full motion. There was advocacy on behalf of White people with mental illnesses but not slaves, as they were not acknowledged as human beings, only property. There was an expectation that if hospitals treated mentally ill people humanely, it would relieve them of some of their symptoms. That theory was quickly disproven. In the late 1800's, state hospitals became over-crowded and conditions worsened. In 1946, President Harry Truman signed the National Mental Health Act which was significant for a multitude of reasons. Robert Felix was appointed to be the director of the Public Health Services Division of Mental Hygiene in 1944 and helped shift the narrative of mental illness to mental health to advocate for federal policies to primarily aid veterans (English, 2001). The passing of this act consequently allowed for enhanced treatment and diagnosis compared to institutionalizing ill patients and redirected the funds from states to a national level. This shift held the government accountable for supporting further research. However, the focus was still on White people who suffered from mental illness with a failure of considering Black veterans who fought in the war also.

For Black people, mental health issues in the United States is principally rooted from the effects of slavery. There is a disproportionate burden of mental health matters in African-American communities, exclusively those individuals who have a lower socioeconomic status.

People of lower socioeconomic status is likely to be diagnosed and treated for their poor state of mind, have less access to and availability of mental health services, receive less care, and experience a poorer quality of care (Adler and Newman, 2002). Additionally, even if there is a form of access, many low-income people lack health insurance and mental health treatment will not be covered (Broman, 2012). To better treat mental health in African-Americans, one must approach treatment from a cultural perspective and understand that trust, demonstrating confidentiality, listening to understand instead of pretending, and recognizing religious beliefs are all critical to a successful attempt at creating improved mental health. According to US HHS Office of Minority Health (2016), Adult Black/African Americans are 20 percent more likely to report grave psychological distress than adult Whites and those living below poverty are three times more likely to report serious psychological distress than those who are living above the poverty line.

Considering the mental health issues that historically have plagued the Black community, it is problematic for some students to maintain a healthy mind while pursuing their undergraduate or graduate degree. McGhee and Stovall (2015) argue that it is challenging for Black students to bear the additional burdens of proving their intellectual worth in an institution that is overtly or covertly racist. They describe “grit” as mental toughness and perseverance to achieve at high levels of access in a predominantly White academic institution. This idea of “grit” is a unique challenge black college student’s face. Vanderbilt documented, “increases of anxiety, depression, thoughts of suicide,” among other ailments among Black students (2015). Being a nontraditional Black student may increase the susceptibility to mental health issues which could prevent this particular demographic from completing their degree. The imposter phenomenon acts as a predictor of psychological distress experienced by multiethnic students

demonstrated in the undergraduate student population (Cokley et al., 2013). A large part of this analysis is to understand potential situations that affect mental health in Black nontraditional students, what the utilization of counseling services is at Georgia State University, and what improvements can be made. Race plays a vital role in mental health in college students.

## **Purpose**

The primary determination of this study is to examine the comparison of health seeking behaviors of nontraditional Black students compared to nontraditional White students, nontraditional defined as students who are in a committed, union, or married relationship, at least 22 years old, working part or full-time, or a veteran. The comparison will be examined using the Standardized Data Set (SDS) to extract data about differences in mental health seeking utilization from Whites and Blacks at Georgia State University (GSU). The literature review will inspect aspects affecting mental health among nontraditional students in academic settings, the effects of physical activity and its relation to mental health, existing outreach programs, and retention strategies for nontraditional students. The scope of the study will examine previous and current literature relating to a topic that is not necessarily trending in research. Finally, recommendations for public health initiatives related to improving retention rates of nontraditional Black students will be proposed to direct communication and future goals for those Black men and women who need mental health assistance to aid them in completing their degree.

The key research question is to determine if non-traditional Black students and White nontraditional students differ in their health seeking behavior for mental health services? I hypothesize that non-traditional Black students will utilize health services less often than tradition students but may need more help. I will be looking at the variables: race, sex,

relationship status, GPA, hours worked, if they have had prior counseling, if they have felt the need to reduce alcohol or drug use, attempted suicide, and how they would describe their financial situation. The study aims to determine if there are any mental health differences that may affect nontraditional Black and White students at Georgia State University. If my hypothesis is correct, recommendations will be made to make the argument of increasing funding for counseling services in university settings.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Factors that can Potentially Affect Mental Health among Nontraditional Students in Academic Settings**

When it comes to determining what helps a successful student whether they are traditional or nontraditional, study skills should be taken into consideration. Students who enter college can have trouble getting adjusted to someone not regularly sending them reminders about assignments. Problems are heightened when entering students are not suitably prepared for time management and tools such as proper studying habits due to being first-generation or non-traditional students (Green, 2006). It is not common knowledge that although some of these skills may not be developed, they can potentially be learned at their desired college of choice in hopes the student has not yet given up. Study skills training include critical reading, critical thinking, and general study skills.

An investigation led by Brown and Holtzman (1966) compared study habits and its correlation to GPA. They found significance, albeit no gender differences, which appropriate training techniques lead to an increase of scores for the SAT and ACT. This study is noteworthy because there has been an increase in enrollment of students who work or have familial obligations. For nontraditional students, some barriers to education are making sure someone can watch their children or having an ill family member, all of which causes anxiety, stress, and potentially depression. According to Donaldson and Graham (1999), nontraditional students often have different goals and a varied focus in the classroom compared to traditional students. Colleges should make the effort of ensuring they are equipped with the necessary guidance to be



successful. For the sake of this argument, this includes making sure students have study skills that suit their lifestyle.

Volokhov (2014) decided to look at various test taking strategies such as time management, test-taking strategies, active versus passive learning, class participation, and study habits based on the individual. Volokhov hypothesized that students who completed study skills courses would have a high self-esteem, a higher GPA, and greater study skills compared to students who had very little familiarity with the course (2014). Students were recruited from a regional campus in a rural, community based area. 57 students agreed to participate in the study, including those students who already enrolled in the course. For measures, researchers used five surveys with 45 minutes to complete it. In particular, the study skills survey has 120 items divided into subsections on a Likert scale asking questions like reading rate, vocabulary skills, and comprehension skills. The self-esteem test had 50 item questionnaires which consisted of true/false questions such as, "I am very critical of myself and others."

Results revealed for the first hypothesis, completion of study skills class did not improve self-esteem and academic performance among students. This result could largely be due to students having to do a placement exam before they took the class. For the second hypothesis, there was no association between age and GPA for nontraditional students. However, they did place higher on the study skills survey. According to Eppler and his team (1997), this result could stem from adult learners learning the content compared to getting grades. Lastly, although individuals have various approaches to learning styles, the more they engage in study skill techniques, the likelier they are, both nontraditional and traditional students, going to be successful. An improvement in study skills can potentially lead to mental health improvement in

students. When students are confident in their ability to improve their grades, it is a confidence booster and makes an individual feel better about their potential to completing their degree.

### **Existing Outreach Programs for Coping with Mental Health among Nontraditional Students**

Suicide was the 16th leading cause of death for Blacks of all ages and the 3rd leading cause of death for young Black males ages 15–24 (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2013). Although suicide is not a primary cause of death in African-Americans, there have been gradual increases in this population. Suicide prevention programs on commuter campuses can be difficult, specifically when trying to engage nontraditional scholars. Georgia State is a commuter site and plays a vital role in decreasing stigma associated with seeking mental help. Nontraditional students (who are categorized as above 25, having responsibilities around work, school, and family) have a tougher time having school spirit and getting involved with students who stay on campus to have a better sense of unity (SPRC, 2004).

Wozney and his team (2008) were responsible for implementing a suicide prevention program. They took a sample of 762 students of a major public university that has 16,238 where the student population is primarily White Americans (67%) and 29% African Americans where the majority of the students are 25-49 years of age which accounts for 63.3% of the population. They brainstormed methods of how to engage students and their families using suicide outreach programs. Some of the following methods used to engage students were: scheduling monthly clinical screenings, provide drawing competitions as incentives, organize health promotion events, and send monthly campus-wide suicide prevention newsletters. The target populations were students, faculty, staff, as well as “gatekeepers” such as professors and advisors. Developing programs requires strategy and evaluation. The suicide prevention program is new

and currently under evaluation as far as progress. Wozney and his team will evaluate using surveys of how many completed clinical screenings as well as if they were productive. Additionally, they are going to track the percentage of faculty, staff, and students who have abided by their engagement methods. From there, they will determine if their program was in fact influential. Including race as a variable in his study could strengthen his argument. A program that can benefit people across the spectrum of ethnicity/race be an operative model.

With consideration to suicide prevention, one program that is slowly beginning to be accepted is computer and web-based interventions to improve depression, anxiety, and psychological well-being among university students. A few benefits of using online directed therapy is students can be in a comfortable environment, their needs could be tailored, or people who are limited with time but still need some form of support to achieve their degree are still able to get some level of counseling (Davies, 2014). In a society where technology is constantly evolving, having the option to develop web-based self-help tools can help alleviate daily stresses. Davies (2014) and his team decided to systematically review and analyze web-based interviews in a randomized controlled trial that used students who were in secondary or tertiary education. Nine electronic databases, including Psych Info and Pub Med, were examined from March-April 2012 and were looked at again in June 2013. Search terms were developed through the examination of looking at literature reviews that had mutual terminology related to internet interventions. Note, the searches were conducted by hand and were physically typed in, nothing system generated, meaning searches were not automated by the computer. The intervention they created had to improve psychological well-being via online. The trial hoped to learn more about mental health service utilization, help-seeking behavior, and overall engagement. 6,494 titles were retrieved and screened, and overall a total of 17 trials were identified. 14 were, fortunately,

sufficient information for meta-analysis. 1795 participants were randomized, and 1480 were analyzed. Sensitivity meta-analyses supported intervention in improving anxiety, stress, and depression in inactive controls. However, the results did not yield positive for active controls.

Conclusively, internet-based intervention can be operative to improving the mental health status of students when looking at inactive controls. Future studies should focus on having set variables in a more controlled setting to measure consistency. Some data are in fact skewed and researchers should take heed that depression, stress, and anxiety did not illustrate a noticeably confident result in active controls. As a recommendation, it would be beneficial for universities to examine this method, as it could be cost-effective and still have a way to engage students of different backgrounds, with respect to race, if schedules are full at counseling centers or students is limited with time due to other responsibilities.

Among Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, Black veterans are less likely than Whites to be diagnosed with mental disorders (Koo et.al, 2015). Honing in on a concentrated demographic of students in a university setting, although some veterans may be of “traditional” age, their exposure to combat, the amount of deployments, or the timing of disposition is what separates them from your average pupil. The transition of thinking as a team to now thinking on an individual level can present some issues of adjustment. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (2011), roughly 923,838 veterans began to go back to school. Depression, anxiety, alcohol or drug abuse, suicide, and PTSD are common mental health concerns that researchers often see in veterans. In a national study that surveyed 628 student veterans, 45.6% meet the minimum cutoff for PTSD and 46% reported thoughts of suicide (Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011). To combat mental health issues, a couple of creative frameworks were developed for veterans. Deshpande (2010) proposed the idea of poetry therapy to help with emotional trauma

and encourage expression with their words whether they feel pain, loss, joy, or happiness. There is also the glass-pouring workshop Florida State University Student Veterans Center (2014,) in partnership with their Master Craftsman's Studio, in which participants were given wooden frames, plaster, paint, and the option to incorporate their photographs. This exclusive tactic to therapy allowed students to have a hands-on experience to bond with their university community and symbolize their new identity in their novel environment.

### **Physical Activity and Mental Health**

There have been many studies that show a lack of physical activity and proper nutrition can lead to increased problems of mental health. For nontraditional students, obtaining a decent amount of healthy physical activity behaviors can be a challenge. Most health promotion outreach initiatives on campus do not explicitly target nontraditional students. Sa and fellow researchers looked at overweight and obesity prevalence at a historically black college and university (HBCU) and noticed there should be strategies toward health promotion on campus (2016).

Compared to universities, two-year schools typically have a higher population of nontraditional students. The study conducted by Quintiliani (2012) took place in a large, urban, 4-Year University at the University of Massachusetts Boston where the average age is 25 years old, and 31% of the population is enrolled part-time. To recruit participants, researchers put out promotional flyers, set up tables on campus, and made postings on the web. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be at least 18-24 years of age, working part-time, and an English speaking undergraduate student. Of the 69 students that agreed to the study, 17 were eligible, but only 14 participated. Quintiliani did a demographic questionnaire and distributed a semi-structured open-ended survey. The questions focused on nutrition and physical behaviors while

considering their social-ecological environment. To analyze results, two investigators coded the participant's transcripts, and the notes were converted into emergent codes. Findings revealed that various living situations, financial constraints, and academic responsibilities contributed to nutrition and activity levels being limited for nontraditional students. Vending machines and cheaper food options are appealing to students who are tight on funds. With the help of an intervention designer, they would be able to better assess the needs of nontraditional students. Overall, this revealed that taking the time to consider outreach programs for nontraditional students to target exercise and nutrition will be helpful in to maintain their overall health which can, in turn, be supportive to the completion of their academic success.

The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) recommends one moderately intense cardiovascular exercise for about 30 minutes a day, five days a week (2007). To get a better grasp of physical activity for degree-seeking adults, Kulavic (2010) and her team did a comparison between nontraditional vs. traditional college students examining motivational factors and barriers hindering physical activity. Methodically, participants were recruited from a large southern university for the fall semester 2010. While participation was voluntary, students had to complete three questionnaires that were completely anonymous. Additionally, if participants were not able to finish the survey in person, they had an option of completing it online. The Lifelong Learning Center, a place that helps to transition students on their return to college, recruited nontraditional students. Participants were required to fill out demographic information, body mass index, and height. Researchers gathered 746 students. 641 were eligible for the study and there was an overall response rate of 89%. Of those that were eligible, 118 were nontraditional. Stepwise regression was the analysis of choice on a Likert and EMI-2 (Exercise Motivations Inventory) scale. Using MANOVA, there was a statistical difference in traditional

vs. nontraditional students for the variables of competition, ill-health avoidance, and health pressure. Overall, results showed that traditional students were motivated by social recognition, appearance, and affiliation. In comparison, nontraditional students were inspired by health pressures, for example from peers, as well as ill-health avoidance that could hinder their overall health status. Both nontraditional and traditional students said their top barriers to fitness and eating well is a lack of energy, willpower, and most importantly, time.

### **Retention Strategies for Nontraditional Students**

Nontraditional students have graduation rates that are lower than traditional students (Signature Report 6, 2016). Due to graduation amongst this population being lower, the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance created an initiative called, “Pathways to Success.” This initiative encouraged secondary institutions to increase retention and graduation rates of nontraditional students (2012). Markle (2015) decided to examine persistence in nontraditional students due to prior studies being inconsistent showing the correlation between persistence and graduation rates. Nontraditional students who are women tend to have an inter-role conflict due to them wearing multiple hats of being a mother or wife, working, taking care of home, and school. Widoff’s study of nontraditional students that are men described that less than 10% reported childcare or parenting duties as an issue that interferes with their daily lives (1999).

Markle (2015) conducted a mixed-methods design where he collected qualitative and quantitative data via an online survey at a public university in the southeastern region of the United States of undergraduate enrollment of roughly 22,000 students. His definition of a nontraditional student was one that was 25 years or older, had a 5-year gap since enrollment from high school, part-time or full-time enrollment, a spouse or domestic partner, or a caretaker in some form. 494 nontraditional students completed the survey, in which 2/3 were women. 81%

of students in this demographic had children younger than 18 living with them. The average GPA score was a 3.18, and it was a combination of African Americans, Whites, Hispanics, and Asian Americans. Students who “persisted” were those who graduated or were still enrolled and were examined over the span of three years. Logistic regression was used to look at the factors that affected men and women’s persistence. His results yielded there was no significant difference in men and women when looking at persistence. Contrarily, inter-role conflict showed a significant difference, the definite conflict being work-school and school-family conflict coming in as a close second. As for predictors of persistence, GPA, full/part-time enrollment, and confidence in graduating were important for women and were more likely to carry through to graduation. Reportedly, nontraditional men claimed finances as being their primary barrier to completing their education whereas women were concerned about insufficient time. It is also important to note some nontraditional students felt “out of place” and “different” primarily due to their age and feeling excluded from traditional students. Institutional support to help nontraditional students can result in expanded funding for counseling services, increase faculty access, perhaps improving the affordability for child-care and extended night class courses. His studies found that nontraditional students would prefer some flexibility regarding attendance policies.



## **Introduction of Research**

Mental health seeking behaviors among Black, nontraditional students is an area that should be examined thoroughly with consideration and strategy. There is a plethora of issues that pose a risk to nontraditional Black students completing their education such as alcohol, the roles of women, being a veteran but little attention has been given to persons of this community. There is something to take note of when 38% of nontraditional students leave their first year compared to 16% of traditional students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Of the 38% nontraditional students who had to leave, there is no racial breakdown.

Like many campuses nationwide, alcohol typically maneuvers its way into the hands of undergraduates. Alcohol is classically the most accessible substance and can pose a major risk to the success of students completing their degree. Trenz (2015) decided to look at mental health among traditional and nontraditional students. Her study looked at life stress, anxiety, depression, and alcohol consumption. 53% of participants were nontraditional students who scored significantly higher on life stress. Life stress was examined through 11 domains that consisted of 63 itemized questions. Some of the questions asked were, “Did you get admitted into the hospital? Did you go deeply into debt?” Anxiety and depression proved to be higher for nontraditional students as well. Given the nature of what some nontraditional students experience, the results of this study did not come as a surprise. What stuck out in this study are results showed no significant difference in certain ethnicities having higher proportions of consuming alcohol.

A quickly growing demographic is nontraditional women on college campuses. Backels (1997) looked at the relationship between mental health and students and this time, through the lens of nontraditional women, diversifying the sample. This study gave insight that not only

should mental health seeking behaviors be examined more closely for nontraditional students, but the subset of women is a valuable area of focus. Backels discovered that high-achieving nontraditional female students sought higher rates of counseling for depression, anxiety, and personal problems. Investigators used a counseling model to offer symptom relief of underlying issues because they discovered that even though the women sought help for issues, there was more to the story being told. The counseling model is deemed appropriate to measure effectiveness to achieving a better mental health status for nontraditional female students. This approach gave women a better feeling of higher self-esteem, improvement of satisfaction with home and family life, and felt better about their depression and anxiety. Women have societal pressures such as being a dedicated wife, a single parent, and/or having the burden of financial responsibility rest solely on their shoulders. Juggling responsibilities to this caliber can be a skirmish all the while trying to preserve their overall mental health. Black people who have unique circumstances, but who still have hopes of completing their degree, may have increased feelings of depression, thus affecting their mental health (Jones et al, 2007).

Moving forward, the topic of military veterans and mental health in an institutional setting is a concern. Many veterans who are enrolled in college/universities utilize the GI Bill or some military benefit. There is still a lot to know about how veterans go about seeking mental health services, particularly for those who were active and have fought overseas. There are studies that have looked at mental health utilization of veterans, mainly those who have returned from Iraq. Studies have been very limited in their findings as it relates to mental health diagnostic rates between Black, Hispanic, White, and “other” veterans (Seal KH, et al., 2007). Seemingly, numerous veterans often do not seek the necessary mental health professionals who could potentially hurt their chances of achieving academic success. One-third of veterans

pursuing higher education have a “probable chance” for needing additional mental health treatment for depression, PTSD, and other disorders (Seal KH, etc. 2007). Veterans largely depend on religious practices such as prayer and frequent visitation to churches and thus, may likely feel comfortable discussing personal issues with their religious leader (Currier, 2016). Consequently, there is a gap in the literature that truly examines mental health seeking behavior for veterans which hinders intervention strategies to target this population to get them the help they need.

The purpose of the current study is specifically intended to address the gap in the literature by describing racial differences in financial stress, suicide attempts, and alcohol use between nontraditional Black students in comparison to nontraditional White students to hone in on the mental health and college retention interventions targeted toward this precise population. Here, I am defining nontraditional students as those that are in a committed, union, or married relationship, at least 22 years old, working part or full-time, or a veteran. The topic of nontraditional Black students has not been extensively studied in-depth and literature is limited. The majority of the literature has more so taken a general approach comparing nontraditional students vs. traditional in an undergraduate setting. For the sake of this study, there will be no exclusion of graduate students. Less often, the mental health barriers preventing nontraditional Black students from completing their degrees is a research area that should be examined more meticulously. Systemically, racism is a barricade to education.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Study Population**

This is a descriptive study of Black and White students from Georgia State University who sought out counseling services for the year 2014-2015 (N=1406). The eligible sample that met the nontraditional criteria were 531 (52.2%) individuals who identified as Black and 487 (47.9%) who identified as White (N=1018). Participants were between the ages of 22-65.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The sample for this thesis consisted of a total of 1406 individuals who visited the counseling center. Based on the research examined, students who identified as Asian-Americans, Multiracial, Native Hawaiian, or Hispanic/Latino were excluded. The only races studied were Blacks and Whites. Also, anyone who is not at least 22 years of age was not included in the data set unless they were married or working at least part-time.

### **Data Source**

The data for this study come from the 2015 Standardized Data Set (SDS). The Standardized Data Set is an approved data set that represents the student population who utilize clinical services at Georgia State University. Georgia State University obtains these data by having students fill out a demographic survey before they are seen for their mental health services. The data provided include details regarding race, veteran status, marital status, GPA, felt the need to reduce alcohol or drug intake, suicide attempts, age, work hours, prior counseling, financial stress, and classification. Data were provided in an Excel spreadsheet for analysis, and the data were approved by the Georgia State University Institutional Review Board in 2015 for use in this research.

## **Analysis**

As briefly mentioned earlier, the purpose of the study is to compare Black and White nontraditional students and their mental health status at Georgia State University. The raw data set was downloaded from the Student Demographic Survey from the year 2015. I included the class standing information to get a better idea of what class may frequent the counseling center. For those individuals that met my criteria of nontraditional students, I created a pivot table and divided the variables accordingly to four questions I was interested in.

First, I wanted to know if nontraditional Black females experience higher levels of financial stress compared to nontraditional White females. Comparing financial stress between races gives an idea of what targeted population may need additional resources geared towards them. I will be looking at percentage differences between White and Black women. Issues of finance are a determining factor if a student completes their degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Secondly, I was interested in the comparison between nontraditional Black students who sought prior counseling before arriving to Georgia State University. I also wanted to see the differences in nontraditional Black students who attempted suicide compared to White nontraditional students. For both of these comparisons, I will observe the percentages to determine if there are any patterns.

For the last research question, do black male veterans wish to reduce drinking or drug use more than white veteran males, a two-sample hypothesis test was used to test for difference in proportions (Table 5). Total sample size is the number of Black males (17) and the number of White males (10). The hypothesis allowed me to compare the two of alpha.05 and calculate the test statistic which came out to be .8. From that, I got the p-value, the area above the .8, which is greater than .05.

## Results

Table 1 illustrates demographic information of students that I identified as nontraditional by race, Black and White. Gender, by male or female, was accounted for and made up a total population of 1018 people. As seen, there is a total of 531 people who identify as Black and 487 people who are White with the average age of Blacks being 24 and Whites, 25. For this sample, Black nontraditional students utilize the counseling services more. The average GPA is 2.88 for Black students and 3.1 for White students who have visited the counseling center. Additionally, the number of students is broken down by class standing with the inclusion of graduate students. For Black students, being a junior or senior seem to be popular times for seeking therapy. However, for White students, getting aid for mental health use appear to be higher in the senior and graduate population. Also, collectively, there was a total of 27 veterans, Black veterans accounting for almost double the counseling aid compared to White veterans.

Table 1: Demographic Information

	Black		White		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	157	29.6	125	25.7	282	28.0
Female	374	70.4	362	74.3	736	72.0
<b>Total</b>	531	100.0	487	100.0	1018	100.0
<b>Class Standing</b>						
Freshman	77	14.5	89	18.3	166	16.3
Sophomore	111	21.0	69	14.2	189	17.7
Junior	134	25.2	90	18.5	224	22.0
Senior	159	30.0	120	24.6	279	27.4
Graduate	50	9.4	119	24.4	169	16.6
<b>Total</b>	531	100.0	487	100.0	1010	100.0
<b>Military</b>	17	63	10	37	27	100.0
<b>Age (Avg.)</b>	24		25			
<b>GPA (Avg.)</b>						
Male	2.94		3.1		3.02	
Female	2.86		3.12		2.99	
<b>Avg</b>	2.88		3.1		2.99	

As seen in Table 2, in comparison to White female students, Black female students reported experiencing higher levels of stress due to finances. There are patterns to observe in the data. More Black females had higher reports of always feeling stressed about finances, 21.1%, compared to 14.4% of White females who were asked the same question. There were also 29.1% of Black women who often felt stressed about finances compared to 24.3% of White women. The remaining categories for levels of financial stress are sometimes, rarely, and never. There is a pattern in the data that reveals there are more White female students who are not worried about finances which is a very opposite feeling for Black female students. White nontraditional females doubled Black nontraditional females when reported never feeling stressed about money.

Table 2: Levels of Financial Stress in Nontraditional Women

	Black		White		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Financial Stress</b>						
Always Stressful	79	21.1	52	14.4	131	17.8
Often Stressful	109	29.1	88	24.3	197	26.8
Sometimes Stressful	129	34.5	145	40.1	274	37.2
Rarely Stressful	48	12.8	59	16.3	107	14.5
Never Stressful	9	2.4	18	5.0	27	3.7
<b>Total</b>	374	100.0	362	100.0	736	100.0



In addition to looking at financial stress, there was a higher number of White students who sought prior counseling before their arrival to GSU (25.3%) compared to Black students (13.4%). Black students were roughly twice as likely as White students to have never sought prior counseling, as demonstrated in Table 3. After starting college, fortunately, there was a slightly higher number of Black students who did seek counseling, but just counseling with GSU. What I found to be interesting is for students who fall under the “both” category, White students almost triple those of Black students. “Both” indicates students who have received counseling prior to and after Georgia State, but shows that White students may be getting more of the help they need to satisfy their mental health needs. Last, there are 59% of Black students who never sought counseling before arriving to Georgia State compared to 33.3% of White students which may imply Black nontraditional students would like to seek counseling but may not have had the opportunity to do so until they began college. I did a two sample z-test for difference in proportion for Blacks vs. Whites who sought counseling before or after college. Z test statistic: -2.9633 and P-value: .00308. This test is significant at the alpha level .05 therefore we reject the null hypothesis that the proportions are the same. We conclude that there is a significant difference in the proportion of blacks who sought counseling before or after college from whites who sought counseling before or after college. Additionally, I wanted to look at Blacks vs. Whites who never sought counseling. The Z test statistic is 8.2043 and the P value: 0.00. This test is significant at the alpha .05 level thus we reject the null hypothesis. There is a significant difference between the proportion of Blacks vs whites that have never sought counseling.

Table 3: Nontraditional Students Sought Prior Counseling to GSU

	Black		White		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Prior Counseling</b>						
Prior to College	71	13.4	123	25.3	194	19.1
After Starting College	111	21.0	88	18.1	199	19.5
Both	36	6.8	114	23.4	150	14.7
Never	313	59.0	162	33.3	475	46.7
<b>Total</b>	531	100.0	487	100.0	1018	100.0

Moving forward, Black students were more likely than Whites to attempt suicide 1-5 times (Table 4). However, White students were about 5% more likely than Blacks to attempt suicide more than five times. In these data, White students have a slightly higher risk of attempting suicide (1-More than 5 times: 37.4vs. 36.5). However, the data reveal suicide attempts are seen as an issue in Black and White nontraditional students almost equally.

Table 4: Suicide Attempts in Nontraditional Students

	Black		White		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Suicide Attempts</b>						
1 time	76	14.3	50	10.3	126	12.4
2-5 times	86	16.2	80	16.4	166	16.3
More than 5 times	32	6.0	52	10.7	84	8.3
Never	337	63.5	305	62.6	642	63.1
<b>Total</b>	531	100.0	487	100.0	1018	100.0

Finally, I wanted to answer the question, do Black male veterans feel the need to reduce alcohol or drug usage is greater than that of White males? Note, there were no female veterans that were reported in the data set. I did a t-test which came out to be .8 using alpha .05. The p-value is .21. Consequently, I failed to reject the null hypothesis. The null proportions are the same. I concluded that the proportions are the same and there is no statistical difference in alcohol or drug use between races. However, comparing alcohol or drug use between races, White students reported experiencing higher feelings of needing to reduce their substance use.

Table 5: Military and Alcohol or Drug Use

	Black		White		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Military</b>	17	62.96	10	37.04	27	100
<b>Reduce Alcohol or Drug Use</b>						
1 time	35	6.6	40	8.2	75	7.4
2-3 times	69	13.0	65	13.3	134	13.2
3-5 times	7	1.3	12	2.5	19	1.9
More than 5 times	23	4.33	42	8.6	65	6.4
Never	397	74.8	328	67.4	725	71.2
<b>Total</b>	531	100.0	487	100.0	1018	100.0

## **Discussion**

The number of nontraditional students on college campuses is expected to increase and few institutions have the capacity to support the mental health needs of this group of students. As evident in the current study, nontraditional Black students have unique mental health needs that must be addressed to encourage the completion of their degrees. There are implications for the mental health utilization that vary between White and Black nontraditional students. Black nontraditional students begin having negative mental health experiences earlier in their collegiate career.

Although a higher percentage of White students sought prior counseling before arriving to Georgia State, half of nontraditional Black students were unable to have visit a therapist, albeit for reasons unknown. This suggests that Georgia State University Counseling Center serves as a point of entry to receive counseling. Reasons could be due to historically not trusting the field of medicine, lack of time and insurance, or the stigma attached to seeing a therapist that often lingers in the Black community. Mental health centers on campus should have an amplified budget to assist nontraditional students in reducing their stress levels that may contribute to depression and anxiety. Having sessions that are tailored to the individual while providing outside resources of peer mentoring and financial planning can be helpful to the overall mental health development of nontraditional Black students.

Attempting suicide 1-5 times is slightly higher in Black nontraditional students than it is in White nontraditional students, However, if I consider the category of “more than 5 times,” I notice there is not a proportional difference in the races and both almost equally struggle in their suicide attempts. The outcomes of these efforts can be detrimental to not just the individual, but their family and college community as well. Thoughts of suicide are common in African-

American students who place academic pressures on themselves (Vanderbilt, 2015). These findings imply suicide is a topic that may need to be thoroughly evaluated when Black nontraditional students are seeking help.

Last, I wanted to get a closer look at Black veterans and their relationship with alcohol or drug use. With a sample size of 27, I understood there would be some issues of generalizability. Even though I failed to reject the null, the number of veterans that seek counseling for alcohol or drug use is very low. Veterans are a population that desperately needs therapy, yet are not seeking it. The program at Florida State University, which offered a twist to treatment, possess approaches that should be considered at Georgia State University if we want to see the mental health of veterans improve. It may be a challenge to make a case for veterans due to their numbers being low in the data presented, and without data, it is tough to fund a program with limited research.

### **Limitations**

These findings are interpreted in the context of identified methodological limitations. For the purpose of this study, there was the only observance of mental health seeking behaviors among Black and White students at Georgia State University. Future studies should explore mental health seeking behaviors for nontraditional students of Asian, Hispanic, and mixed descent. Although there was mention of mental health strategies for treating veterans, the data showed very few veterans receiving counseling. This could result in many veterans opting to not seek treatment due to stigma and believe they can save themselves with how they feel they should be able to cope with their mental health. Veterans at Georgia State constitute for 4 % part of the population (Georgia State University Veterans, 2013). Although not representative of all

college campuses, even though this number is small, this population of students matters tremendously and more efforts should be made to target this population.

An additional limitation is no data were collected that asked if people had children. This information would have been valuable to the research to determine if there is a connection between being a parent and stress, GPA, or suicide attempts. Like most efforts, many issues have the potential to be resolved and have a successful implementation if afforded the appropriate resources to serve this group of students. Although a student may have been under 22 years of age, some students can be parents who can present some challenges not fitting the “traditional” track.

Last but not least, a limitation is the sample size is not generalizable to the population of nontraditional students at Georgia State University or nontraditional students at other campuses.

### **Recommendations**

Engaging nontraditional students that keep them engaged with the campus is a strategy for retention. It would behoove universities to strategize how to meet nontraditional Black students where they are in life and make them feel a part of the campus which can include doing small events outside of the classroom, on the way to the parking lot, or doing fun things such as popping up in class and giving a school trivia so they can win school paraphernalia. Ensuring nontraditional students have a traditional student experience can mean a lot to a person. Despite having to face some challenges, many nontraditional students are older and may still desire of what it feels like to be in college without age and experience being a determining factor to make lifelong memories.

Additionally, mental health centers on campus should have an increased budget to assist students in reducing their stress levels that may contribute to depression and anxiety. Having

sessions that are tailored to the individual while providing aspects of peer mentoring and financial planning can be helpful to the overall mental health development of nontraditional Black students. Future research should hone in on the mental health disparities illustrated here to further development of intervention services targeted to this unique population.

Furthermore, the purpose of this thesis was not only to look at mental health seeking behaviors for nontraditional students but to specifically look at this on a deeper level broken down by race. Minority students tend to have different struggles and are not allotted privileges such as their White counterparts. Research suggests that in the African-American community, seeking help from a counselor of any sort is stigmatized (Thompson et al, 2004).

There should be targeted interventions and strategies for nontraditional Black students but also with nontraditional students as a whole. Systematically, there are barriers in place that prevent this population from being fruitful, and campuses should go the extra mile to pinpoint that population and conduct focus groups to determine what it is what would be best to ensure their mental health is in order. There should also be a shift in budget for the university as it relates to allocating funds. The counseling center at Georgia State University will need an increase in budget to ensure the proper staff support to further engagement with Black nontraditional students. Future research should hone in on the mental health disparities illustrated here to further development of intervention services targeted to this unique population.

## **Conclusion**

Nontraditional Black students are a group that has received little attention by colleges or universities. There are few programs that try to target and engage students, but strategies must try to meet them halfway. There are barriers that affect their academic progress, consequently delaying graduation rates making retention low. Race, stressing about funds, being a veteran,



alcohol or drug problems, or suicide attempts are all indicators of a student not being able to perform their best. Many times, counseling is observed through the context of setting an appointment and speaking with a student, but many students are not going to go that extra mile to make that happen. Issues of time and family obligations make seeking therapy or engaging in stress relieving activities tough. Overall, more funds should be allocated towards the counseling center at Georgia State University, a school that has a high nontraditional population. This will give them the opportunity to increase staff that can focus on initiatives structured for nontraditional, Black students (and nontraditional students in its entirety).

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