



Why Students in a High Achieving Suburban High School Do Not Seek Mental Health Support



Samantha Liu¹ and Melanie Tory²
¹Henry M. Gunn High School, ²Tableau Software

INTRODUCTION

Often, students have poor mental health, but they refrain from speaking up, causing a large range of consequences. One of the most dire consequences of hiding mental health issues is suicide. In the spring of 2009, a total of six students who were either entering, currently attending, or who had recently graduated from Gunn High School, in Palo Alto, California, committed suicide, making them what is defined as a suicide cluster. In 2014, another cluster occurred, which led to the formation of several mental health programs at Gunn such as the Wellness Center, ROCK, Sources of Strength, and Challenge Success. Despite these programs, according to Genavae Dixon, the coordinator of the Wellness Center, many students still refrain from discussing mental health issues, such as anxiety, stress, or depression, with counselors or other professionals. But why?

DATA AND FINDINGS

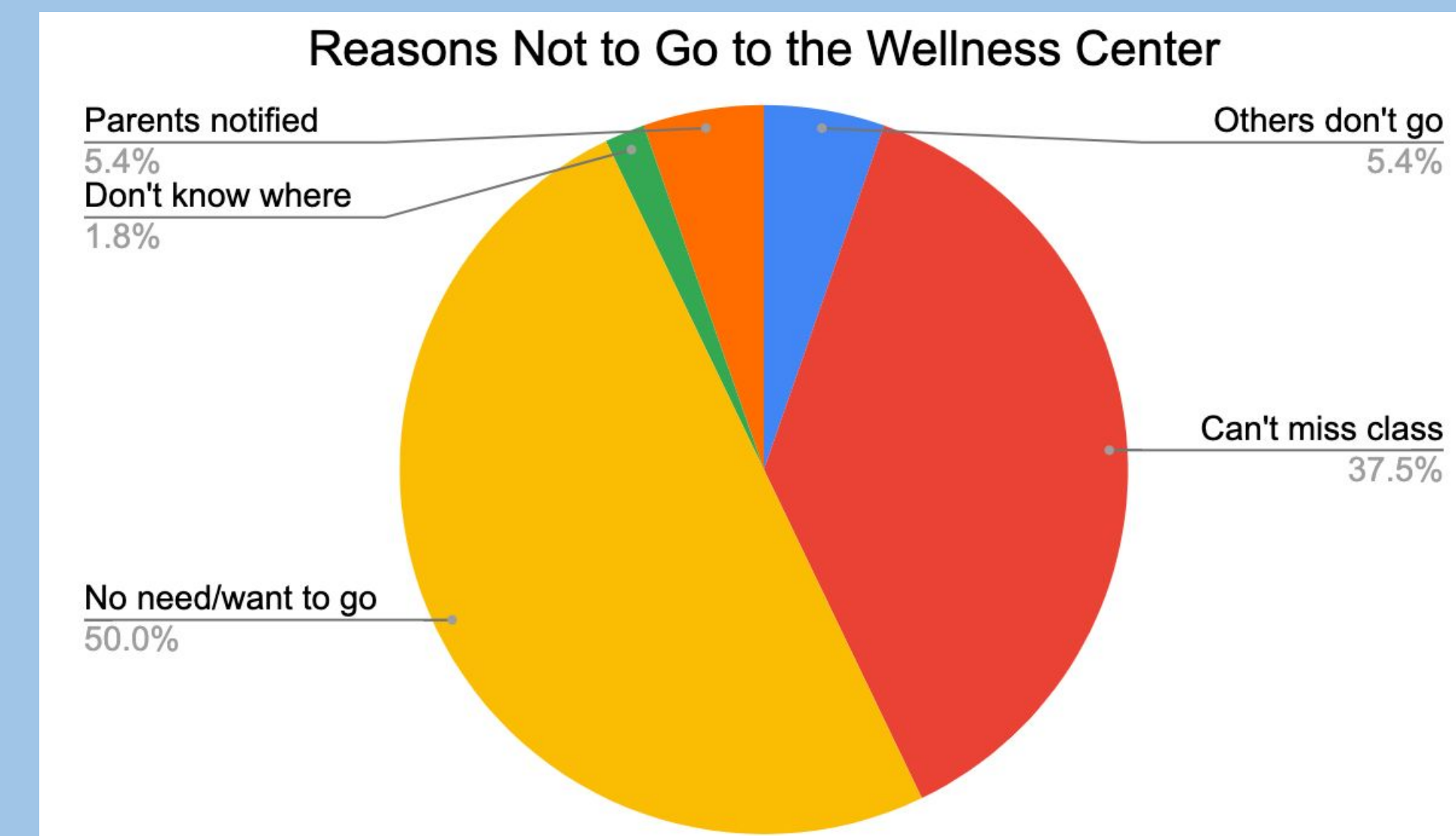


Figure 1

Figure 1 shows reasons students gave for why they have never been to the Wellness Center.

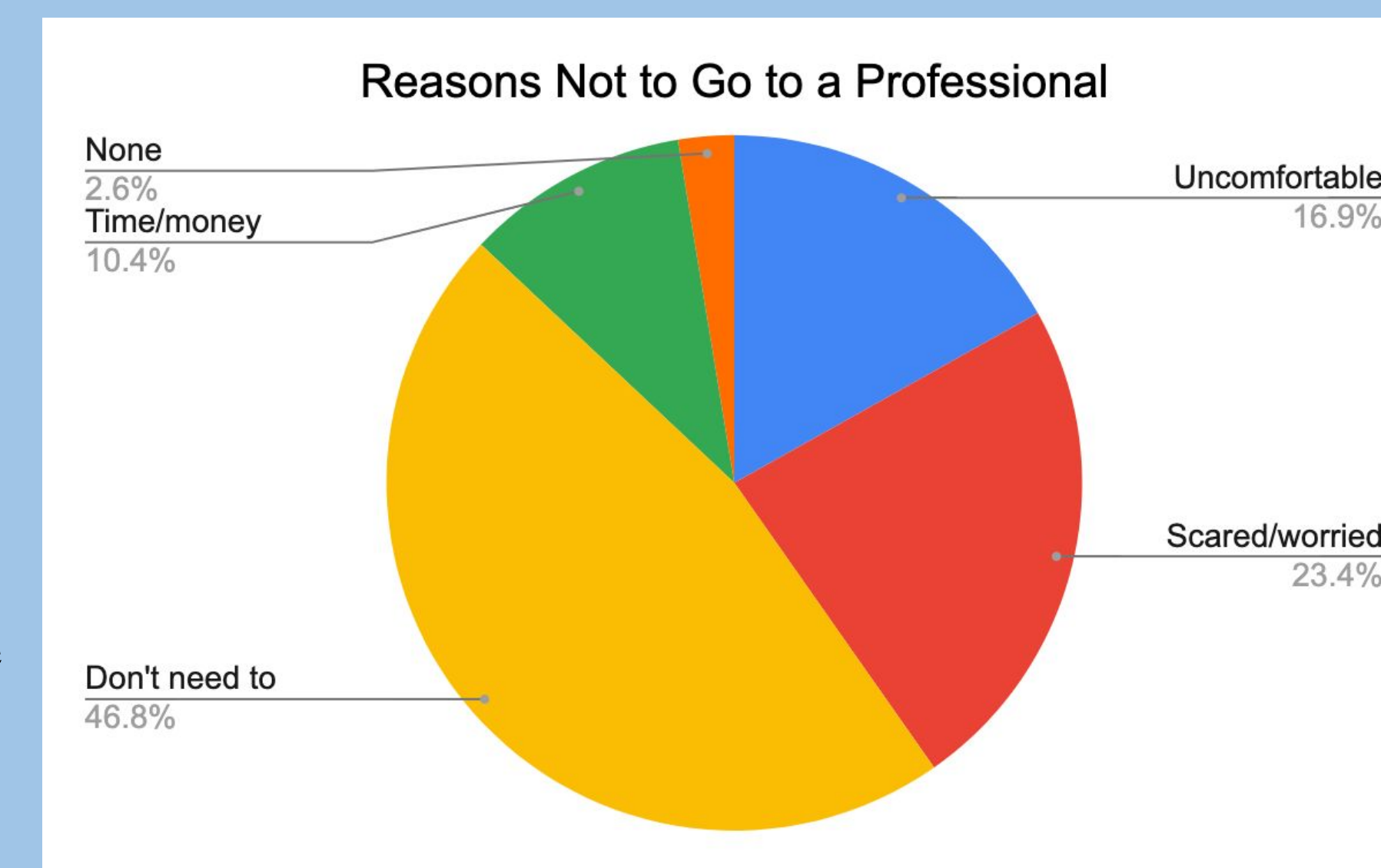


Figure 2

Figure 2 shows reasons students gave for why they have not been to a professional.

Student Quotes

- Stigma, 'attention seeking' label, judgement (unconscious or conscious) from others, I can handle it fine on my own, fear of getting found out should I decide to keep it private to others."
- "My parents wouldn't be supportive, I don't think the issues I face are serious enough/I can deal with them on my own technically, I would be scared of what would happen."

CONCLUSIONS AND ANALYSIS

I determined 3 overarching themes for why students do not seek help, which remained constant throughout the survey responses.

1. **Misconceptions** - Some people do not know where the Wellness Center is or why students go there. Many students are also afraid of counselors misinterpreting what they say. Additionally, many students do not think their mental health problems are important enough to warrant counseling.
2. **Trust and Confidentiality** - Some students do not trust counselors to keep their information confidential, and many are concerned about their parents being notified. Many students are also scared of the judgment they might receive from peers.
3. **Discomfort** - Many feel uncomfortable opening up to a friend or family member, let alone a stranger, even if it is a counselor.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

1. Get background information

- Obtained rough estimates of how often the Wellness Center is used and its impact (from Wellness Center Coordinator)

2. Conduct study

- Created an anonymous survey for Gunn High School students to take
- Some questions:
 - If you haven't gone to the Wellness Center, why not? (check all that apply, comment under for other reasons)
 - a. I do not know anyone else that goes
 - b. I do not want to miss class
 - c. I do not see a reason for me to go
 - d. Other
 - What are some reasons you would choose not to talk to a professional about your mental health?

3. Recruit participants

- Asked a Gunn staff member to post it schoolwide on our school learning management system, Schoology
- Posted it on personal Instagram account, asking only Gunn students to respond
- Specifically asked a class to take it

IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

I asked students what they thought could encourage more people to talk to counselors and came up with 4 methods.

1. **Utilize SELF to promote the Wellness Center.** SELF classes could take tours of the Wellness Center and Wellness Center staff could come to SELF classes.
2. **Educate parents on how to support their child.** Provide a seminar for parents to educate them about mental health and the benefits of counseling.
3. **Educate students on when to go a counselor.** Counselors should talk about the symptoms of a mental health disorder because some people may not realize they have one. Professionals should encourage students to schedule a meeting no matter how insignificant they think their mental health problems are.
4. **Emphasize that counselors are trustworthy.** Counselors should emphasize confidentiality more so that students feel they have a safe space.
5. **Anonymous Texting Service.** I asked students what they thought of a service where they could contact counselors in the Wellness Center anonymously, and 75% of students supported it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS / REFERENCES

Special thanks to my mentor, Melanie Tory, the Wellness Center Coordinator, Genavae Dixon, and my teacher, Ms. Wilson, for guiding me through my research and helping make this project possible.

Works Cited:

- Dixon, G. (2019, October 4). [Personal interview by the author].
- Rosin, H. (2015, December). The Silicon Valley Suicides. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/12/the-silicon-valley-suicides/413140/>