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# Wellbeing @ Work: The Holistic Development of On-Campus Student Employees

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**Wellbeing @ Work: The Holistic Development of On-Campus Student Employees**

Matthew McIver

Action Research Project Prepared for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in Higher Education Leadership

University of San Diego

May 2022

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**Abstract**

In this action research project, I sought to learn how on-campus student employment affects students' academic success, their leadership development, and their mental health. This project worked with current student employees in the Campus Recreation department at the University of San Diego (USD) to learn both how day-to-day responsibilities and commitments affect a students' ability to succeed academically, and how it relates to their mental health. The project also sought to help depict whether the department's student development system successfully or unsuccessfully develops students' transferable and leadership skills. Participants completed a survey and participated in a one-on-one interview to share their experiences related to their employment. The findings from this study can help USD's Campus Recreation department, as well as other departments at this institution and others, analyze their holistic student development programs and help to elevate the experience and support that on-campus student employees receive throughout their time of employment at their institution.

*Keywords:* student employment, leadership, mental health, academic success, skills

## Introduction

I have had the privilege of attending the University of San Diego for both my undergraduate and graduate experience. I studied Chemistry and Psychology and worked in Campus Recreation as a student employee and student leader for three years. My plan as a student was to apply for and attend medical school because I had a passion for helping and caring for others. My position in Campus Recreation allowed me to help build community on campus, emphasize the importance of physical, mental, and emotional well-being, all while continuing with my passion for sports. All the connections I made myself, and helped others make in this area during my undergraduate experience, are a large part of why I continue to work in Campus Recreation as an administrator. In my experience working on a college campus alongside both a large group of student employees and a large number of program participants, I continuously recognize how my social location can impact the interactions I have with the many I come in contact with. I hold privilege in many different areas, and I believe the most important aspects of my social location that come into play within my work are my race, age, gender, and socioeconomic status. Each of these, in addition to others, plays an important role in how I build connections with and create and lead spaces for the potentially hundreds of students, staff, and community members that I interact with.

This project involved my own department and is specific to the role that I am currently serving as Recreation Programs, Student Development and Facilities Supervisor. However, this project is relevant and applicable to any department at an institution that offers similar employment opportunities for students. It is a common theme within Campus Recreation departments to focus on helping their student employees develop leadership and transferable skills, preparing them for their post-graduate careers, all while fostering an engaging space focused on students' physical, mental, and emotional well-being. The current student development system is built to help student employees learn skills that will benefit them in their future positions and offers students leadership opportunities to allow them to practice leading a

team of their peers. As an administrator who helps to create, adjust, and oversee this system, I aimed to learn from current students how our system benefits them professionally and personally, or if changes need to be made to provide a more successful experience. In addition to this, I sought to learn how a position on campus, and specifically in Campus Recreation, can help students through crises. Relationship theory is a very applicable theory in this system, as I aimed to both connect with students personally and foster their growth both personally and professionally. My project will help me, my colleagues, and other Campus Recreation professionals understand how we as leaders affect our student employees' development and how we can better implement a student development system that successfully serves students and readies them to be leaders themselves in their post-graduate careers, all while incorporating an overarching focus on their well-being.

### **Literature Review**

Throughout my literature review, I focused on factors that affect student employee success, both academically and professionally, stressors that student employees undergo throughout a normal academic year, and the link between student employment and leadership development. While some literature is linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affects students' ability to find employment, it was difficult to find literature that directly correlated student employment status to students' mental health. On the other hand, there is an abundance of literature connecting student employment to leadership development and other factors that promote a successful employment experience. Literature was found using the Google Scholar tool, in addition to the EBSCOhost database. Searches within these databases included keywords that would connect student employment to each of the three themes of academic success, leadership development, and mental health. Boolean phrases using the *and* conjunction were helpful in limiting search results to only the themes that were being searched. Lastly, to clarify, student employees can include students who are eligible for Federal Work

Study funding through their Financial Aid funding, or students who secure casual worker positions.

One common theme in literature focusing on student employment is the importance of engagement by senior leadership in the workplace. Reed (2018) states that “the development and success of students in college often relies on student-centered professionals...to structure student employment programs in ways that positively affects the learning and development outcomes of students,” (p. 85). Student engagement and success in the workplace are therefore heavily influenced by the roles that professionals play in supervising, training, and developing the students within their department. This connection between supervisor and student employee is a unique opportunity to learn the goals and areas of growth for students to help guide them in a direction that will allow them to succeed in their workplace, during their time as a student on campus, and in their post-graduate work. In addition, a report published by NASPA written by Burnside, Wesley, Wesaw, and Parnell (2019) identifies several ways that the institution can have a high impact on student employment, including “a focus on leadership engagement, equitable hiring processes, growth, and professional development opportunities, articulated student learning outcomes, and assessment and evaluation,” (p. 46). Each of these aspects is directly related to an institution’s ability to implement a student employment program that will focus on the growth and success of its students by meeting their needs. While this literature provides significant data on how student employment benefits students in areas such as performance, time to employment, graduation and retention rates, and GPA, it lacks the acknowledgment of the importance of providing specific leadership development for creating student leaders both on and off-campus. Also, these studies do not take into account the influence that balancing work and academia have on a student’s mental health and how that outcome can affect work performance.

Leadership development of student employees is also a common focus in literature in this field. Leadership is defined by Marshall (2011) as “the ability to guide others, whether they



are colleagues, peers, clients, or patients, toward desired outcomes,” (p. 2). However, some studies focus on how student employment can have a negative impact on engagement and leadership opportunities, given that student employees then have less time to engage in other areas and events on campus that would promote leadership. To combat this, as stated by Gott (2019), “to prepare students well for life as a professional post-graduation, higher education practitioners must catalyze learning and development by incorporating leadership development tools in employment,” (p. 16). Incorporating a leadership program into student employment makes development accessible to students who are overwhelmed by both academia and work and lack the time to participate in extracurricular activities. Some ideas by Gott (2019) were to provide feedback and allow reflection time for student employees, two crucial parts of becoming a leader. And in addition to that, they propose means of promoting and valuing diversity in ways of knowledge and self. In addition to this work, Peck and Callahan (2019) studied how employed students compared to unemployed students in specific areas, including leadership, intercultural fluency, and some professional skills. They found that students who were employed on campus led the data in skills gained and proposed that it “speaks to the potential to more conscientiously develop leadership skills through student employment in college,” (Peck & Callahan, p. 16). Both of these studies overlap in the importance of having a leadership development program within employment and how it provides additional opportunities for students who are too busy to engage elsewhere on campus. And, similar to studies previously mentioned on the importance of senior leadership involvement, both studies continue to stress this aspect.

Lastly, one area that seems to be overlooked in literature that I would like to improve upon is the impact of student employment, their workplace, and professional relationships on students and their mental health, especially during times of crises. Mental health has been defined as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes [their] own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to [their] community,” (Saxena, Herrman, and Moodie, 2005, p. 12). In an effort to

better understand student employee mental health, a study done by Jogaratnam and Buchanan (2004), albeit less recent than other literature, identified seven factors that contribute to student employee stress, including “time pressure, general social mistreatment, friendship problems, developmental challenges, academic alienation, romantic problems, and assorted annoyances,” (p. 242). And in addition to this, Vaughn, Drake, Jr., and Haydock (2015) noted that “workplace relationships are important for the mental health and well-being of working college students,” (p. 24). Although this study makes a slight comparison to how this affects students mentally, physically, and academically, it seems that these studies that focused on stress and mental health isolate either academics or employment as factors.

My area of focus was narrowed down to more concrete themes of academic success, leadership development, and mental health. The intersection of these themes, while I initially thought would overwhelm my project’s focus, is a gap that I found across literature. Thus, my project embraced the multiple themes and found how they overlapped to summarize students’ experiences. My project investigated current student employees in the Campus Recreation department at the University of San Diego and connected students’ on-campus employment to their overall success, how leadership development impacted both their on and off-campus experiences, and how their employment contributed to their mental health in a time of busyness and crises. It included both surveys and one-on-one interviews of current and former student employees to collect qualitative data in order to learn how each of these factors intersect to create an overall experience for students who are employed on a college campus. In addition, my project’s findings will be shared with other areas and campuses so that senior leadership can improve on the programs they have incorporated in their student employment programs.

### **Context**

I conducted my project at USD in collaboration with Campus Recreation, where I currently work as the Recreation Programs, Student Development and Facilities Supervisor. My project was completed with a group of on-campus student employees who serve as operations

assistants and student leaders within the department. The department has one of the largest Federal Work Study student staff on campus and focuses on helping students build transferable skills that can help them prepare for future employment opportunities. The staff consists of approximately 50 students who help manage the Campus Recreation facilities, but also work on team projects focused on business, marketing, staff development, competitive sports, and more.

Campus Recreation's student development system is set up such that students can be promoted into several levels of student leadership positions to increase their responsibilities and work on different projects and skills, including communication, delegation, reliability, organization, ownership, and more. It also involves a system where students check in with one another to have more crucial conversations about identity, productivity, achievement, relationships, and hardships. In these ways, students have the opportunity to grow in their leadership skills while also providing one another with a space to feel and show their support for one another.

Thus, in this project, I examined how student employees' experiences in working within Campus Recreation impacted their holistic development. First and most importantly, academically as students and their ability to succeed in the classroom and the workplace. Secondly, as leaders, and their ability to develop skills that will benefit them in future positions. And lastly, how their student employee impacts their mental health, especially in times of crises.

### **Project Rationale**

The main purpose of student employment in Campus Recreation is helping students successfully develop transferable skills, helping them prepare for a variety of careers following graduation, and providing compensation for their work to aid their financial stability and wellness. A large part of this development includes leadership development and helping students gain the skills necessary to be leaders not only in their work but in their communities as well. The purpose of this study is to learn more about how student employees develop during their undergraduate careers, taking new skills they have learned in the workplace and applying

them to their postgraduate careers. Examples of these developed skills can include self-reflection and discovery, conflict resolution, time management, mindfulness, career assessment, and more. Another purpose is to learn how this employment might be affecting their academic performance, as well as their mental health. The need for these findings stems from asking the question of whether our student development and leadership plan is successful in preparing students for post-graduate careers, or if the student development system needs to be redesigned. In addition to this, it is important to know whether student employment has a positive or negative impact on students' ability to perform academically. From this learning, supervisors and departments can help to support their student employees in their identities as students first. Lastly, during times of crises, it is crucial to understand the role that student employment plays on students' mental health and how it positively or negatively contributes to it. A final step in this project is to collaborate with colleagues from the Campus Recreation area and our student employees to redesign our student development system, if necessary, and address ways we can better support student employees' academic success and mental health.

### **Research Design**

My project reflects a transactional epistemological stance. My findings reflect how participants approach a situation and what their thoughts are on that situation. Rather than searching for objective truth, my study examined lived experiences of participants in multiple situations and how they navigate those situations, interpret them, and understand their effects. The goal of taking this transactional epistemological stance is to encourage participants to reflect deeper about who they are and how they understand how their student employee status affects, or affected, their college experience. In addition to this, because my participants are or have been a part of my team, there is a link between myself as the Principal Investigator and the participants.

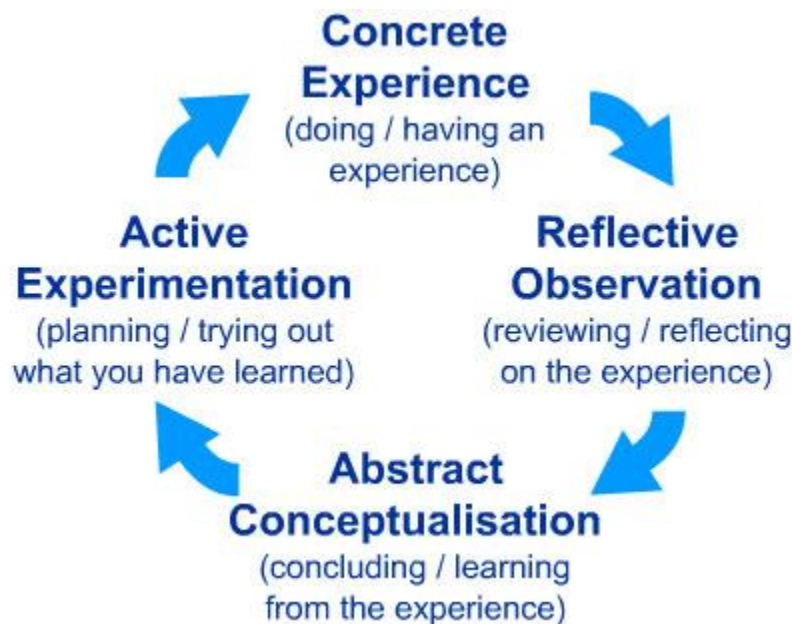
## Data Collection and Interventions

### Overarching Design

The overarching design of my project is a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative results based on participant responses. The initial quantitative data collected was translated into qualitative data using a coding method to better grasp the common themes shared by participants. Following Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (see Figure 1), I conducted two cycles to capture participants' experiences before working towards an action step of implementing change based on my results.

### Figure 1

*Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle*



*Note.* Four-stage learning cycle composed by Kolb. Reprinted from *Kolb's Learning Styles and Experiential Learning Cycle* (McLeod, n.d.)

Reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation, where learners form or modify ideas (Kolbs, 1984), occurred twice with the survey and one-on-one interviews, and was followed by the active experimentation step. To be more specific, I collected data and heard directly from students about how their work in their department throughout their undergraduate

experience affected them academically, as leaders, and how it contributed to their mental health. The first cycle of my study included an initial survey (see full survey in Appendix A), and was then followed by the second cycle of one-on-one unstructured interviews to collect further data based on initial responses. These methods were chosen to collect a variety of responses from a variety of participants, but also to add the personal touch of being invested in the participants and their experiences and trying to gain additional knowledge through that connection. The survey creation and distribution took place using Qualtrics, and the total time of completion for participants would not exceed ten minutes. In addition to this, Zoom was used to engage in more meaningful conversations during 1-on-1 virtual interviews with students, each of which lasted approximately forty-five minutes.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study included 53 current student employees from the University of San Diego's Campus Recreation department. These students were contacted via email with an explanation of the purpose of the study and a request to participate in the initial survey. The initial survey had structured questions asking students to share their experiences based on given scales. Following the survey, students were contacted to do a follow-up one-on-one interview that consisted of unstructured questions based on the student's survey responses. After collecting data from both the survey and the interviews, the data was compiled and analyzed to find appropriate means of action within the department.

### **Study, Sampling, and Ethical Considerations**

Participants for this study were gathered using convenience sampling. Their emails were collected from a department master list of current student employees with permission from the department Director (see Appendix B). While the department keeps employee records on file for reference for up to seven years, only students who were employed by our department between 2018 and 2021 were included. Students were sent an email explaining the purpose of the study, a consent form (see Appendix C), and an initial survey link. Names were connected to

responses in order to determine which students will participate in one-on-one interviews, and Zoom interviews were recorded for transcription and data coding purposes only. Following the study and analysis of data, all recordings and identifiers in transcriptions were destroyed to keep anonymity. In addition to this, students were ensured that the experiences and feedback that they potentially share would not affect their current employment. As the current supervisor for our department's student employees, my project involved asking questions and collecting responses relevant to their current work experience, and participants were informed this would not affect their employment status. I worked to break the power dynamic barrier by emphasizing transparency and engagement. Lastly, participants had my contact information should they have any questions throughout the process and had the freedom to pass on questions or leave the study at any time without giving a reason.

## **Methodology**

### **Cycle I**

The first cycle of my research included a survey (Appendix A) that asked students to reflect on how their student employment impacts their academic performance, the leadership skills they have learned and been able to apply, and their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing racial injustice. Out of the 53 student employees who were contacted, 12 students elected to complete the survey. The students who completed the survey included second-year, third-year, fourth-year, and graduate students majoring in a variety of different fields. Students take anywhere between nine and eighteen units and work between six and twenty hours per week. A summary of participant standing can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1*****Participant Information Summary***

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Academic Standing</b>	<b>Units Taking</b>	<b>Work Hours/Week</b>
Participant 1	Second-year	9-12	6-10
Participant 2	Second-year	13-15	6-10
Participant 3	Second-year	16-18	6-10
Participant 4	Third-year	9-12	11-15
Participant 5	Third-year	13-15	6-10
Participant 6	Third-year	13-15	6-10
Participant 7	Third-year	13-15	16-20
Participant 8	Fourth-year	9-12	11-15
Participant 9	Fourth-year	13-15	6-10
Participant 10	Fourth-year	13-15	11-15
Participant 11	Fourth-year	16-18	16-20
Participant 12	Graduate	16-18	11-15

***Academic Findings***

The academic-focused portion of the survey aimed to understand how student employment impacts academic performance, including time allotted for studying and homework, how work shifts impact that allotted time, and whether student employees feel as though they need the time at work to stay caught up with their material. A summary of these findings can be seen in Table 2.



**Table 2*****Academic Impact Summary***

Prompt	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Agree
You are able to match your academic/career goals with your part-time work	0	0	3	3	6
You have learned and practiced transferable skills that will help you succeed in your future career	0	0	0	4	8
Your employment allows you sufficient time to complete your coursework	0	0	0	3	9
You find yourself needing to complete your coursework while at work in order to stay caught up	2	3	0	4	3
You have had to miss work in order to prepare for course-related materials	7	1	1	0	3
You have met your personal expectation of academic performance at the end of the semester	0	1	0	5	6
Your employment has impacted your academic results at the end of the semester	6	1	2	2	1

From the table above, several different patterns can be identified. First, a majority of the students who completed the survey are able to match their academic goals with their part-time work. An important part of on-campus student employment is ensuring that students can tie their work to their overall academic and career goals. These survey results illustrate that students are in fact making that connection in their work, having an environment that fosters a successful experience in helping students learn and practice transferable skills. In addition to being able to make a connection between their coursework and employment, students also feel as though despite working throughout the week, their employment still allows them enough time to complete their material. While student employees work a range of hours during a typical work week, anywhere from six to twenty hours, all students are still able to spend sufficient time on their coursework. Another important note shown in the results is that students do not feel as though they need to miss work to complete their coursework- they can successfully commit to both identities that they hold. This can be an important aspect of creating student schedules and

ensuring they are able to balance work and academics. Cycle II of this study will touch on this piece in more detail. Lastly, the survey results highlight that almost all students feel as though they are able to meet their personal expectations for academic success during a semester in which they are also working. Students' identity as scholars should always be at the forefront of their college experience, and students who also hold an employment identity are still able to focus on and succeed in their academic pursuits.

As part of the survey on academic impact, students were also given the opportunity to explain in their own words how their employment has impacted their academic performance. Common themes from these responses included time management and structure and applying learned skills to the classroom and relationships with classmates and professors. One student described that "learning leadership skills at work has given me the confidence to speak up in class and establish relationships with my professors and classmates." Another student shared that:

Having this job encourages me to focus on my professional and academic work more intentionally because it requires a level of time management from me that I would not have to juggle if I were not to have this position. Furthermore, I have been able to apply the skills that I've learned from this job directly to the way I conduct myself in the classroom which has benefitted my academic success and relationships. Having a...job throughout my university experience has contributed...to my ability to communicate effectively with professors.

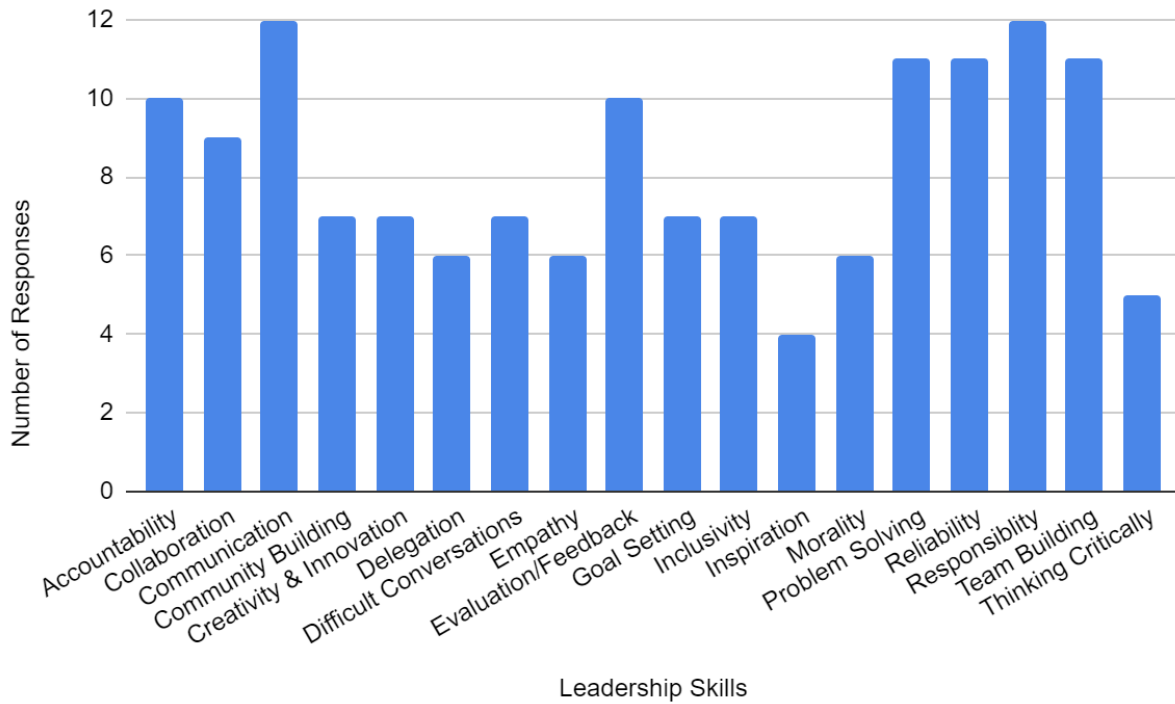
Each of these students mention being able to take the skills they have learned at work and apply them to their work in the classroom and with their classmates and professors. Being able to successfully time manage, as well as build confidence in interacting with those around them, are two important qualities of both students and employees. In addition to this, one student mentioned "having set work shifts motivates me to make the most of the time I have allocated to study when I am not working." Along with these results were also students who did not see as

much correlation between the two identities. One student mentioned that “it has had a neutral affect [*sic*] in my academic success because I only work about 10 hours a week so I am still able to complete all my school assignments and do well in school.” Another student, similarly, stated that “at times, it is difficult to complete assignments on time.” Thus, while skill-building, time management, and application is evident for some students who also work as student employees, some students also either see no relationship between the two, or do in fact struggle at particular times during the semester to find the balance that other students identify. Overall, time management is something that almost each student mentioned and was able to identify in their skill-building, with the understanding that during midterms and final exams, it becomes increasingly difficult.

### ***Leadership Findings***

The leadership-focused section of the survey encouraged students to think about the specific leadership skills that they have learned or developed, as well as reflect on their behavioral experiences as growing leaders in their workplace. Students were also asked to describe in what ways their leadership skills have developed and how they’ve applied them to their work, relationships, and in the classroom. Lastly, they were asked to think about in what ways they would like to develop before their employment is finished, to have a better understanding of their personal goals and how they would like to grow.

In the first part of this section, students were asked to indicate which skills from Figure 3 they feel as though they have been able to learn, develop, and practice most effectively in their work. As seen in Figure 3, majority of the students have experienced or practiced each one of these skills.

**Figure 2***Developed Leadership Skills*

In addition to the list of skills in Figure 3, students also filled in skills that were not listed, such as professionalism, advocacy, detail orientation, and active listening. The most common skills that students reported developing during their work experience included accountability, communication, evaluating and accepting feedback, problem solving, reliability, and responsibility. Cycle II will give more detail as to why some students selected skills less than others. Along with these skills, students were also asked to reflect on their behavioral experiences as experiences in their work, especially when working with their student colleagues and student peer customers and patrons. Table 3 below shows a breakdown of students' experiences as leaders in their employment.

**Table 3*****Leadership Experience Prompts***

Prompt	Somewhat		Neutral	Somewhat	
	Disagree	Disagree		Agree	Agree
I am able to reflect on past experiences and create learning opportunities from them	0	0	1	1	10
I have the space and ability to create new ideas	0	0	1	4	7
I am comfortable receiving feedback and applying it	0	0	0	2	10
I empathize with those around me	0	0	0	1	11
I see value in opinions other than my own	0	0	0	2	10
I motivate others to do their best work	0	0	4	3	5
I empower others	0	0	4	5	3
I embrace diversity and value differences in others	0	0	0	0	12
I engage in inclusive language and behavior	0	0	0	2	10
I consider others' circumstances	0	0	0	3	9
I communicate effectively, verbally and in writing	0	0	1	3	8
I listen intently to others	0	0	0	3	9
I respond positively to adversity	0	0	1	7	4
I create a safe, welcoming space for others	0	0	0	1	11
I consistently follow through on my commitments	0	0	1	2	9

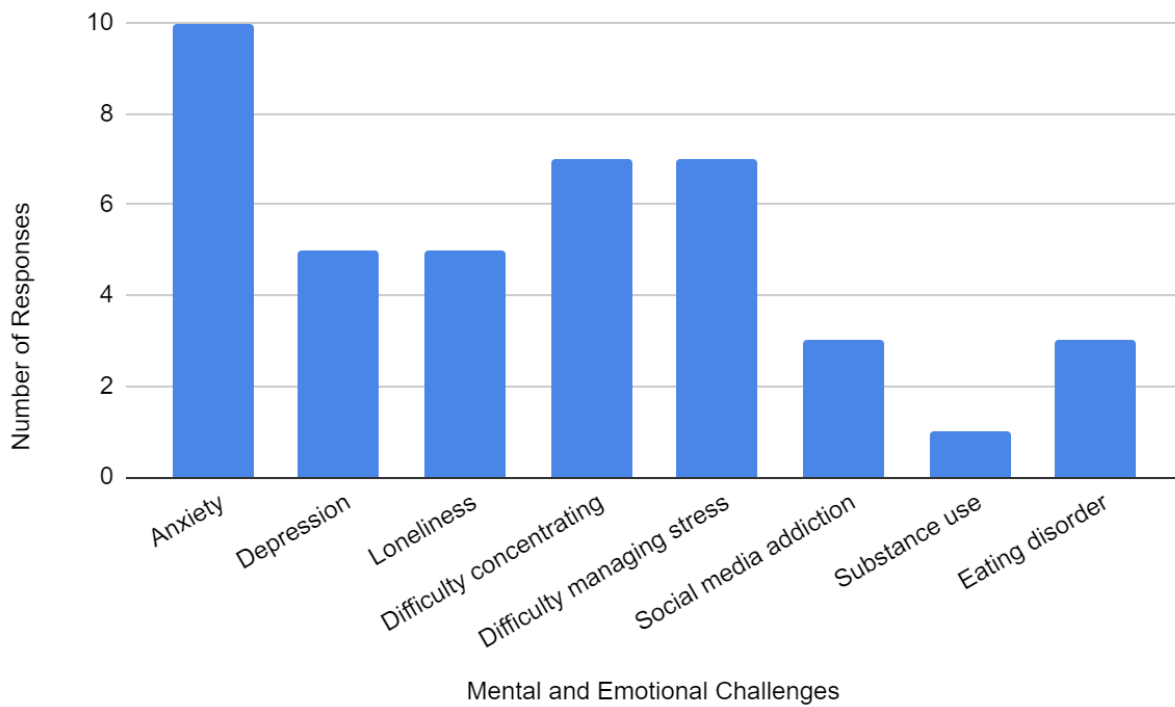
As shown above, most students chose “Agree” or “Somewhat agree” for each of these behaviors, while few chose “Neutral” and none chose either “Disagree” option. Most students in their employment have been able to reflect on their experiences- a quality they performed for this project. They have also learned to receive and apply feedback, empathize with others, value others’ opinions, embrace diversity, and create safe, welcoming spaces. These results are an indication that students are making meaning of their leadership opportunities and experiences while in the workplace, learning skills that they can take with them as they complete their college career and move towards new goals and relationships.

As part of this section, students were also asked to indicate more specifically what they feel as though they have learned in their workplace when it comes to their leadership skills, as well as what they are hoping to develop that they have not practiced yet. Students’ responses

regarding what their biggest leadership takeaways have been included communication skills, managing difficult conversations, handling adversity, and being self-sufficient. One student shared that “work has taught me a lot about the ability to communicate and work with others in many different types of situations, whether it be coworkers, members of different sport clubs/teams, or even conflict situations with patrons not following policies.” In addition to this, another student shared that “the biggest take away from my work is learning what creates a positive work environment. Having relationships with coworkers and patrons makes work more enjoyable and produces better work.” Both of these testimonials illustrate how student employees have been able to learn, develop, and practice new skills in their work that can then be applied to other aspects of their lives. One student spoke directly to how what they have learned has been attributed to their growth even outside of the workplace, sharing that “my most significant skill from work is the ability to have difficult conversations with others. This has made me a...more confident person.” The purpose of students’ work on campus should be aimed towards helping students develop these important skills that they will take with them into their careers. These students have illustrated how their work and workplace have fostered this learning and development.

### ***Mental Health Findings***

The mental health-focused portion of the survey encouraged students to think about how the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing racial injustices impacted their mental health, and then how their on-campus employment further impacted them. Students had the opportunity to share about the different mental and emotional health challenges they faced during the pandemic, and a summary of those challenges can be seen below in Figure 3.

**Figure 3***Mental and Emotional Health Challenges*

As shown in Figure 3, students experienced a variety of challenges, including anxiety and depression, loneliness, difficulty concentrating, eating disorders, and more during the two previously stated crises. It is without question that each of these crises took significant tolls on the world and BIPOC individuals and communities, and it was important for this study to learn how those crises affected students who are in a very key developmental and impressionable stage in their lives. After asking students to identify any challenges they have been facing, they were then asked to respond to prompts more specifically related to COVID-19, racial injustices, and how their employment impacted their challenges and feelings. Below in Table 4 is a summary of how students reported their mental and emotional health changing due to crises and how their employment played a role.

**Table 4*****Mental Health Impact Prompts***

Prompt	Significantly Worsened	Slightly Worsened	About the Same	Slightly Improved	Significantly Improved
How much did the transition into quarantine impact your mental health?	5	4	2	0	1
How much has the transition toward normalcy impacted your mental health?	0	3	0	5	4
How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your mental health overall?	0	6	3	2	1
How has ongoing racial injustices impacted your mental health?	1	7	4	0	0
How much has your employment impacted your mental health?	0	0	2	7	3
How much has your employment helped you feel supported within your workplace?	0	0	0	4	8
How has your time at work played a role in your mental health?	0	0	5	3	4
How much has your employment helped you talk and share about your mental health?	1	0	1	5	5
How much have other factors within the past year impacted your mental health?	0	2	3	5	1

From the information above, it is evident that the transition into quarantine at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the pandemic as a whole, played a significant role in worsening students' mental health. On the other hand, the data also shows that the return toward normalcy over the last year began to help improve students' mental health. This data shows a correlation between the COVID-19 pandemic, quarantine, and students' mental health. In addition to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing racial injustices also played a significant role in negatively impacting students' mental health. Two-thirds of students who participated reported that ongoing racial injustices slightly or significantly worsened their mental health. Each of these correlations shows the negative impact of the two crises as they swept through our country and the world.



While this data may seem predictable, the more significant data relates to how these students' on-campus employment was able to make a difference during these times. As shown in the data, all student responses indicate that their workplace helped them feel supported when it came to their mental health, with almost two-thirds stating that their employment made some kind of impact on them. A majority of students also reported that their workplace provided them the space to talk and share about their mental health- an important resource to have for students who faced challenges like loneliness and isolation shown in Figure 3. Overall, survey data from this section showed a strong connection between the two crises and worsening mental and emotional health, but also showed that their employment played a significant impact on how students felt supported by their workplace.

The final part of this section asked students to share more specifically about how their employment and workplace have impacted their mental health. The majority of students were able to share how their employment has positively impacted their mental health. One student described that "my employment has given me a safe community to vent to. I find myself looking forward to attending work shifts because I get to be myself and let down my walls with my coworkers." Other students reported having "a supportive and positive environment" or feelings of safety and being seen at work. These sentiments are possible due to the closely-knit community that students feel in their workplace, supported by both professional staff and their student peers. Other students reported less of an impact, one sharing that "I do not believe that employment itself has greatly affected it," and another shared how their work makes their academic life more stressful, sharing that "this semester may present unique challenges as the job has gotten significantly more stressful as well as my school work which is always my number one priority." Thus, while the workplace can serve as a safe haven for students, or provide a sense of community and energy that is uplifting, especially during crises, it can also serve as the opposite for students who are already being impacted by their academic workload. Overall, students reported feeling the positive impact of their workplace on their mental health following

the COVID-19 pandemic and during ongoing racial injustices, an important feeling to have as a student employee who is balancing multiple identities and schedules.

## **Cycle II**

The second cycle of my project included one-on-one interviews with unstructured questions that pertained to the students' specific survey responses. Similar to the survey, the questions were broken into the three topics of academics, leadership, and mental health. Of the 12 participants who filled out the survey, 7 students elected to partake in one-on-one interviews. The remaining 5 students were unable to meet the requested interview times given their academic and work schedules. The purpose of the one-on-one interviews was to collect additional data from students and give them the space to describe their experiences in more detail, of which the survey could not collect. The results of these surveys and their common themes are described below, broken down into sections of academic impact, leadership, and mental health.

### ***Academic Findings***

From the one-on-one interviews with students, several key points came up for a variety of students when discussing their connection between employment and their academics. These key points included ways that students' employment has impacted them in the classroom, how their time at work impacts their ability to complete coursework, and a realization of the usage of time outside of their student employment. The goal of the academic portion of these interviews was to allow participants to elaborate on the different ways, and in what facets, their employment impacts their most important identity- being a student.

The first and most prominent skill that students have learned from their work and applied to the classroom is communication. Students shared that working closely with others whom they are unfamiliar with, as well as working closely with their colleagues and supervisors, has helped them to engage in conversation in the classroom with their classmates and professors. One student stated, "I've learned a lot more of how to be more outgoing and advocate for myself

through work...and I think that's really helped me be more comfortable with my professors, and going to them for help." This is an example of how students' work, especially when in a customer-facing environment, allows them to practice a skill like communication, which directly relates to and impacts their performance in the classroom and their ability to make connections with their professors. In addition to this, students' communication skills have also helped them feel more confident in groups and in taking responsibility. Another student mentioned that their work has "made me more comfortable just talking to people" and that "if I am in a group and no one's leading the charge, I'll be like 'okay, what do we want to do,' and be that person to initiate that." When sharing about group work, another student also mentioned skills from work transferring to "group projects where I need to stand my ground or speak my mind...so I definitely think that work...also encouraged me to be interactive and I know that I'm supported in it as well." Thus, communication and growth in confidence are just two of the many skills that students shared that have allowed them to succeed in the classroom.

Another skill that students have learned from their work that applies to their academics is time management. This skill becomes increasingly relevant when discussing with students in their interviews how their time as a student employee impacts their ability to complete their coursework. One student shared that "having a schedule of working helped me to be able to manage my time a lot better in terms of schoolwork or getting stuff done and balancing work, school, and then social time as well." By staying busy, students shared that it really helps them stay on top of the various assignments and identities they hold professionally, as students, and with their friends and family. On a separate note, one student also mentions how work can actually be a break from their academics, sharing that "throughout the semester, work feels like my chance to actually take a break from schoolwork." In this way, this student is able to manage their time by successfully separating their work from their school. However, some students shared the contrary of this, saying that "if I know it's going to be slow...I kind of use work as a time to get my homework done because it's a time where I'm forced to sit down and do it." Both

of these examples of how work impacts students' time for coursework illustrate the reality that students are taught in their work how to manage their time and the importance of trying to balance their workload and coursework- something that either leads to good work-school separation or something that forces students to utilize downtime at work to catch up on their coursework, using that time to focus.

From these interviews, students were able to share how they have successfully learned important and relevant skills that they can translate into their academic experience. Below in Figure 4 are quotes taken from some students who were asked how their employment has impacted their academics.

#### **Figure 4**

##### *Quotes About Employment and Academics*

"My employment has contributed to or impacted my academics by opening me up to new ideas and perspectives and ways of doing things just to make me a more active listener and learner."

"My employment has made a positive impact on my academics by allowing me to grow the confidence to make relationships with my professors and classmates, and not be afraid to speak up and ask questions."

"My academic success is far greater in a work environment that is supportive and understanding."

**"IT SETS OFF MY DAY IN A PRODUCTIVE WAY THAT I DON'T THINK I WOULD GET IF I DIDN'T WORK."**

"My work has contributed to my academics by giving me a space that I'm required not to do school work."

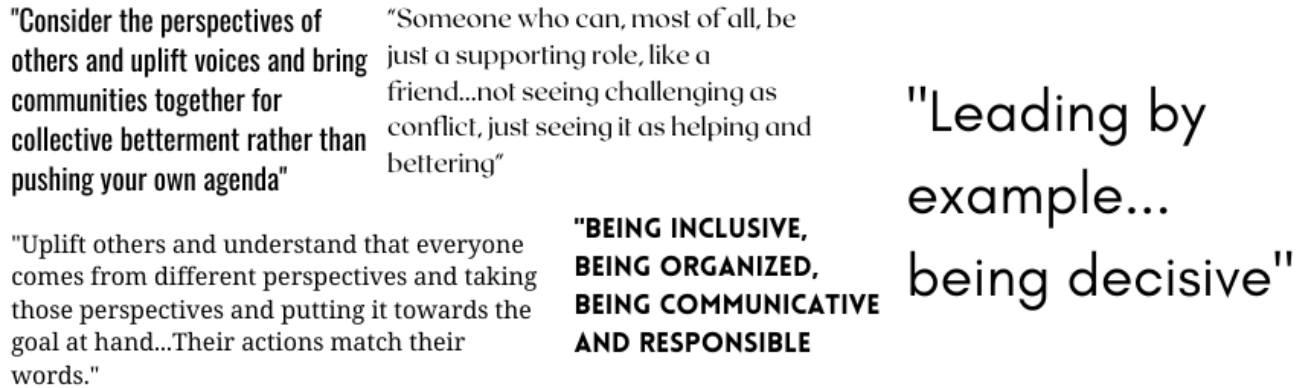
#### **Leadership Findings**

For the leadership portion of students' interviews, discussion revolved around what skills students have learned during their employment that has contributed to their leadership development either within their workplace or within their academic or personal lives. While the original thought was to be able to find patterns or themes of similarly learned or practiced skills and behaviors and be able to quantify them, students overall shared a variety of experiences. In doing so, a longer, more accurate list of all the different experiences of students was found, highlighting that students' work can contribute to their leadership in so many different ways.

Each student was able to give their own, unique definition of what leadership means to them (Figure 5), as well as share how they have met their own definition, in addition to the skills they have learned from their work or mentors.

**Figure 5**

*Students' Definitions of Leadership*



Highlighted below are some of the more prominent skills that students shared experience in.

The first and most talked about theme when discussing leadership with students was their ability to create a positive environment for themselves, their colleagues and their peers with whom they engage with in the workplace. In a position where students may be working their first job, or a position where incoming students are unfamiliar with the workplace and expectations, having students who take on a leadership role to ensure their colleagues and patrons feel safe, welcome, and heard is an important quality. In addition to this, this quality can carry over into other professional realms, as well as students' personal relationships and lives. When sharing about this, one student shared "if you're going to be a leader, you need to make the space comfortable for the people to participate, if you really want the best results, if you want the best feedback when you're leading a team." This outlook on comfortability stresses the importance of first, creating a welcoming environment where colleagues feel as though they matter and their work matters. However, in addition to this, it also highlights the importance of comfortability when it comes to productivity- providing a comfortable space can lead to team

success through results and feedback. Another student was able to share more about this type of environment, stating that:

People that we work with, the environment is just- it's always so positive, and everybody's excited to see you, or happy to see you, even if they're not in, you know, we're not all in a great mood...Community that we have, we all check in with each other and we kind of know what's going on with each other...and make sure we are all doing okay and be there for each other mentally when we need to.

This student shared an experience that depicts the closely-knit community that they experience at work. Students are able to feel welcomed and safe and seen when they are checking in with one another and building their own community and relationships within the workplace. In turn, this leads to productivity and willingness to create a similar community for the population that they serve in their work, but can also then translate into the classroom and their personal lives.

This leads to another prominent theme that students shared in their responses, in being able to serve as a support system for their colleagues and checking in with one another to see how they are doing. Students shared how they are able to connect this to their work but also building personal relationships. From a work perspective, one student stated "my first semester as a Project Supervisor I definitely felt that I was making a positive impact, and [coworkers] said how much they appreciated my support and everything." Similar to what was previously shared, this is an example of how students who take on a leadership role, giving them their own team of coworkers to supervise, are able to serve as mentors and a support system for those they oversee. Students having a position where they lead other students helps contribute to the community that has been previously mentioned. Also referring to the workplace, another student shared how they aim to help new student employees adapt to their new work environment and get to know others. This student shared that they find themselves "reaching out and talking to people trying to make those connections with a lot of the newer staff. They might be more shy and just understanding that I was in their place as well." This is another example of how a

student can serve in a leadership role and help create and contribute to the community. A new workplace can be an intimidating environment for new students, especially with a large staff where most students already have relationships. Having students who demonstrate leadership by making sure new students feel welcome and included is important for their workplace experience. Lastly, one student was able to share that for them, “there has been a lot of personal development” as well, sharing that they “are naturally inclined to be antisocial but it makes work easier just [talking] with your coworkers.” This student has seen growth in their leadership by growing more comfortable outside their shell and interacting with people from different facets of their life.

The third most prominent aspect that students were able to identify and share was the ability to tackle more difficult conversations that might involve conflict, or conversations that are difficult because they are student-to-student and one student is having to critique or give feedback to another. One student shared that they have “learned to have constructive conversations” and have gained experience in their “ability to have difficult conversations and tackle challenging or uncomfortable conversations- I have been able to step up a lot and address those.” Similar to this, another student has grown in their confidence in “bringing up conflict” and that they “feel more comfortable with that- it’s great being able to tackle things when they happen, rather than maybe just letting them snowball and tackling them later.” With this, students are able to reflect on their experience of addressing and managing more difficult situations rather than ignoring them. Students are able to approach conflict with a less avoiding conflict style (Thomas, 2008) and tackle it when it occurs. This can also be applied to the previous themes shared of communicating and creating a comfortable work environment.

### ***Mental Health Findings***

The final portion of Cycle II was to discuss with students how their employment has impacted their mental health given the recent crises of a global pandemic, as well as ongoing racial injustice. In addition to this, students were able to share what their expectation is as

student employees for their employers to support them throughout their time as a student employee. Students had a wide variety of experiences to share about what their employment meant to them while living through multiple crises. They also had a wide variety of expectations to share that they look for while working as a student employee on a college campus. With this, institutions can understand how to better support their student employees based on what kind of support or understanding their students are looking for. Figure 6 below illustrates how students have seen an impact on their mental health while working as a student employee.

### Figure 6

#### *Quotes about Mental Health and Employment*

"My employment has impacted my mental health by giving me a positive outlet to connect with others and feel like I'm cared for."

"My student employment has had a tremendously positive impact on my mental health by giving me a safe place to confide with others about my hardships and learn how to grow and move on from them."

"Being in the [workpalce] helps with mental health because it's a step away from academics and other things- it's a nice break from other life stuff."

**"WORK PROVIDES ME A SAFE WAY TO BE UNDERSTOOD"**

"I have felt a lot of support and understanding in that I'm not just an employee- I'm also a person who holds other roles that can impact the way i show up at work."

To begin, some students in this study were student employees when the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020. For these students, the removal of work played a significant role in their mental health. For one student, it "felt like part of my identity was taken from me- not being able to work alongside classes and my personal life...it was more so 'I don't have coworkers.'" This example highlights the importance of holding a student employee identity, especially when it comes to work supporting students in their relationships. Another student shared that "second semester I didn't have a job and that was...very stressful. But I couldn't go and get a part time job anywhere." This experience depicts the reliance on a job for financial stability that was also stripped from students due to COVID-19. Quarantine and removal from work and campus was a difficult situation and experience for students who were currently



working at the time, whether they saw their work as a social atmosphere, or a job that helped them maintain their financial stability.

Moving forward, returning to work during Fall 2020 in the middle of the pandemic, students reported that employment had a positive impact on their mental health. One student expressed that the impact of having a job was “positive because it gave me another outlet to talk about it and talk about what was happening with other people and I gained some other perspectives and some information.” Similarly, another student stated that:

It was an opportunity to meet people and talk to people- that was the biggest challenge I had with COVID. And when that happened in March [2020], just losing that whole social aspect, and then especially coming to USD- USD really did absolutely nothing for us to go and meet people, like we weren't even allowed to...I was just trying to socialize and school really just did not allow that, except for at work, that was the only place I could go and have an area to go and talk to people.

Each of these examples demonstrate how students' ability to come to the workplace to see others, meet them, and have conversations about what was happening in the world, or just to catch up in general, was beneficial for their mental health given the aspects of their lives that were taken away by the pandemic. Lastly, in addition to these students, another shared that “it was more devastating than anything, I didn't feel motivated...Being able to go to a place where I was meeting really great people who would have great conversations with me...was really motivating, and I kind of felt like I was heard or seen in a way that made me feel a lot better.” These are all very key and clear indications of the benefits of students' employment during the difficult times the world has faced throughout the last two years.

In addition to having the space to share how their mental health has been impacted by their employment, students were also asked to share what support they hope to receive from their workplace. This, too, leads to a variety of answers that workplaces can take into consideration when addressing the mental health of their student employees. Several students

shared the importance of having their workplace understand that student employees are students first- one student sharing “looking at it from being a student first, like the recognition that I have a lot going on other than work.” Similar to this, another student shared that “a big part of that is understanding from employees or supervisors the stress that school brings on, or university life brings on, or living on your own...so having that understanding...between, you know, coworkers and supervisors.” Both of these students were able to identify the importance of recognition from their supervisors that students have a lot going on in their lives and that work is sometimes one of the lowest stress-inducing facets of what they have going on in their lives. Being seen and heard about the outside struggles students may be facing can help supervisors gain a better understanding of where their students are coming from when they enter the workplace.

Lastly, for this portion, it is important to mention some additional steps that were taken following a student interview. During the course of this particular part of the study, a workplace concern that we felt as though needed additional attention was brought to my attention by a participant. For the integrity of the study and my relationship with the student, and to ensure they had a safe space to talk further about the issue, we had a follow-up conversation to be able to address the issue together. Thus, in accordance with the privacy and confidentiality protocols outlined in my project, I worked with the participant to address the issue by meeting with them privately to discuss their experiences. In working with this student, I provided a space in which we were able to discuss those experiences and the student felt as though they were heard.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this project include a wide variety of variables, including the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the diversity in participants when it comes to their on-campus employment and institution. While these limitations impact this project in their own way, they have also

provided knowledge and understanding to help potentially further this project in future years or at other institutions.

### **Participation**

The first limitation for this project is the number of participants and amount of data collected versus the overall number of student employees who were contacted about the project. Just over 50 on-campus student employees were informed about the project and asked to participate, but only 24 percent of students moved forward with the first cycle of the project. In addition to this, only 60 percent of those participants moved forward with the second cycle of the project. Because of this, the results of the project are limited to a small group of student employees within an institution that hosts a significantly larger number of student employees.

Adding onto the previous limitation, another limitation of this project is that student participants included student employees from within the same department at the same institution. Because of this, students may share similar experiences, while other departments whose student employees take on different responsibilities and work with different colleagues would result in more diverse experiences. Thus, it is difficult to take the results of this project and apply it to an institution's entire student employee population and their experiences, in addition to student employees at other institutions. A solution for both of these limitations would be to incorporate a larger, more diverse group of student employees from the institution to better understand the student employee experience.

Lastly, a third limitation was the lack of a third cycle in the project's Methodology. Given students' schedules and the already apparent difficulty in finding time to complete cycles I and II, I decided that a third cycle would not provide sufficient data to incorporate into the project. While plenty of data and information was found in Cycle I and II, a third cycle with additional space for students to share their experiences, maybe in something like a focus group, could have been carried out to promote further discussion. The lack of a third cycle was attributed to

student participants being understandably busy at a difficult time in their work and in the semester.

### **Power Barrier and Relationships**

Another limitation for this project also goes along with the first two, in that I supervise each of the student employee participants in my project. While this relationship can provide a sense of comfortability in sharing for some students, it is also important to recognize that the relationship may also hinder students' ability to feel as though they can share their experiences without experiencing retaliation in the workplace. If students experience a power barrier in this project, it may lead to data and results that students feel as though I want to hear as their supervisor, rather than the authentic experiences they have from their workplace.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic**

Finally, the last limitation for this project is the COVID-19 pandemic and its overall effect on student employment at the institution. In Campus Recreation in particular, the COVID-19 significantly impacted operations and job responsibilities for student employees, as well as significantly decreased the number of staff members. Following the return to campus, staff increased again by almost double. Because of this, most of the department's student employees were new to their positions, leaving the number of experienced employees relatively low. Thus, some participants who engaged in this project had limited experiences with their role, their supervisors, and other important aspects of their work. While their impressions and experience of their work is still beneficial to the project and how they have grown holistically thus far, incorporating more participants with more experience may provide a fuller view of the student employee experience.

### **Recommendations**

From the findings of my student, several recommendations come to mind that I believe would help student employees feel more supported in their academic work, leadership skills,

and mental health. Below are some recommendations that departments with student employees could implement in order to push that support.

### **Study Hall and Study Sessions**

My first recommendation for both Campus Recreation and also other areas on campus with student employees would be to host and provide study hall sessions and opportunities for student employees to focus on their academic work. Students are often overwhelmed with coursework and sometimes use their time at work to complete homework and projects. In addition to this, student employees often like the structure that work provides for their schedules. To help with time management when it comes to coursework and employment, along with providing structure for student schedules, study hall sessions could be a beneficial way for student employees to find the time and space to complete their coursework. Finding a space that is available, and one with the necessary energy to be productive, can be difficult on a college campus, and departments finding and providing that space could help students be more productive and have a secured place to study. Also, having an optional opportunity for student employees in the same department to meet together to complete their coursework can help build a sense of community within the workplace. Departments hosting and providing space for one or two study hall sessions a week for their student employees can encourage them to build time into their schedules outside of work to complete their coursework in a reserved space, while also providing the opportunity to build community amongst students within the same department.

### **Onboarding Meetings and Goal Setting**

A second recommendation would help ensure students have a clear goal of how they are hoping to develop while in their student employment position, as well as what skills they are hoping to learn. The goal would be to understand how departments can help a student prepare for the career they are hoping for during their time as a college student. In order to do this, I recommend allotting part of the onboarding process to include a meeting about setting goals for

what skills, both leadership and career, could help the student prepare for their career aspirations. By doing this, the student and the department can have a better idea and understanding of some of the work-related tasks, projects, and opportunities that would help the student build skills towards their career. Making meaning of the work that student employees are doing in the workplace could help with their sense of purpose and belonging in their area. While potentially difficult, students could be given the opportunity to be creative and innovative in their own way to find things at work that can apply to their career with the help of an administrator.

### **Mental Health Focus**

A third recommendation would be to provide spaces for student employees to focus on their own mental health and well-being. Students have busy schedules, whether focusing on their academics, their personal lives, or their work. Students can struggle to find space to emphasize their own well-being. Thus, my recommendation is two-fold. First, to provide space at staff meetings to incorporate a mental health aspect, whether it is through breathing exercise, moments of silence, or time for journaling. This would ensure that students have some time for themselves to help them disconnect from their busy schedules. Secondly, planning and hosting events to encourage physical, mental, and emotional well-being, can help students put aside time for themselves. This can include a staff yoga, meditation, or workout class that allows students to engage with one another in something fun. Because students are always on-the-go, taking the opportunity as an employer or department to help student employees focus on themselves and their own well-being can help students get in the habit of doing just that.

### **Conclusions**

Overall, this action research project provided me with a more in-depth understanding of the various roles that student employees juggle in addition to their work, as well as an understanding of how students can apply what they learn from work to other aspects of their lives. As a former student employee and student leader, I understand the significance of the

identity I held as a student employee and the importance of being able to take what I learned and use it in a practical way in my everyday life. Similarly, students in this study were able to examine and identify how their work impacts the way they show up in a classroom setting, the way they balance and prioritize the many facets of their college lives, the way they carry themselves confidently, and how their workplace and colleagues can positively impact their mental health, especially during a difficult time in their lives. Students were able to identify both the positives and negatives of holding employment during their time as a college student, understanding that they have learned skills to make them more successful in the classroom, but also that time is finite. They were also able to identify key skills they have learned from their work experience and take a deeper dive into realizing how those skills have made an impact on them outside of work; including communication, confidence, comfortability, and more. And lastly, students were able to identify the impact of work on their mental health- having a place to socialize, meet others, and engage in conversations about the state of the world around them, and having a place where they felt seen and heard. As a higher education professional and supervisor of student employees, understanding these impacts allows me to ensure that I am providing the best possible mentorship and guidance to these students as they balance their academic and professional lives, as well as work with them to successfully prepare them to graduate and take what they have learned and apply it to their post-graduate lives. Student employment can be an impactful tool for students and it's our role as professionals to help students make meaning of their experiences.

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### List of Tables

**Table 1**

***Participant Information Summary***

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Academic Standing</b>	<b>Units Taking</b>	<b>Work Hours/Week</b>
Participant 1	Second-year	9-12	6-10
Participant 2	Second-year	13-15	6-10
Participant 3	Second-year	16-18	6-10
Participant 4	Third-year	9-12	11-15
Participant 5	Third-year	13-15	6-10
Participant 6	Third-year	13-15	6-10
Participant 7	Third-year	13-15	16-20
Participant 8	Fourth-year	9-12	11-15
Participant 9	Fourth-year	13-15	6-10
Participant 10	Fourth-year	13-15	11-15
Participant 11	Fourth-year	16-18	16-20
Participant 12	Graduate	16-18	11-15

**Table 2**

***Academic Impact Summary***

<b>Prompt</b>	<b>Somewhat Disagree</b>	<b>Somewhat disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Somewhat agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>
You are able to match your academic/career goals with your part-time work	0	0	3	3	6
You have learned and practiced transferable skills that will help you succeed in your future career	0	0	0	4	8
Your employment allows you sufficient time to complete your coursework	0	0	0	3	9
You find yourself needing to complete your coursework while at work in order to stay caught up	2	3	0	4	3
You have had to miss work in order to prepare for course-related materials	7	1	1	0	3
You have met your personal expectation of academic performance at the end of the semester	0	1	0	5	6
Your employment has impacted your academic results at the end of the semester	6	1	2	2	1

**Table 3*****Leadership Experience Prompts***

Prompt	Somewhat		Neutral	Somewhat	
	Disagree	Disagree		Agree	Agree
I am able to reflect on past experiences and create learning opportunities from them	0	0	1	1	10
I have the space and ability to create new ideas	0	0	1	4	7
I am comfortable receiving feedback and applying it	0	0	0	2	10
I empathize with those around me	0	0	0	1	11
I see value in opinions other than my own	0	0	0	2	10
I motivate others to do their best work	0	0	4	3	5
I empower others	0	0	4	5	3
I embrace diversity and value differences in others	0	0	0	0	12
I engage in inclusive language and behavior	0	0	0	2	10
I consider others' circumstances	0	0	0	3	9
I communicate effectively, verbally and in writing	0	0	1	3	8
I listen intently to others	0	0	0	3	9
I respond positively to adversity	0	0	1	7	4
I create a safe, welcoming space for others	0	0	0	1	11
I consistently follow through on my commitments	0	0	1	2	9

**Table 4*****Mental Health Impact Prompts***

<b>Prompt</b>	<b>Significantly Worsened</b>	<b>Slightly Worsened</b>	<b>About the Same</b>	<b>Slightly Improved</b>	<b>Significantly Improved</b>
How much did the transition into quarantine impact your mental health?	5	4	2	0	1
How much has the transition toward normalcy impacted your mental health?	0	3	0	5	4
How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your mental health overall?	0	6	3	2	1
How has ongoing racial injustices impacted your mental health?	1	7	4	0	0
How much has your employment impacted your mental health?	0	0	2	7	3
How much has your employment helped you feel supported within your workplace?	0	0	0	4	8
How has your time at work played a role in your mental health?	0	0	5	3	4
How much has your employment helped you talk and share about your mental health?	1	0	1	5	5
How much have other factors within the past year impacted your mental health?	0	2	3	5	1

List of Figures

Figure 1

*Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle*

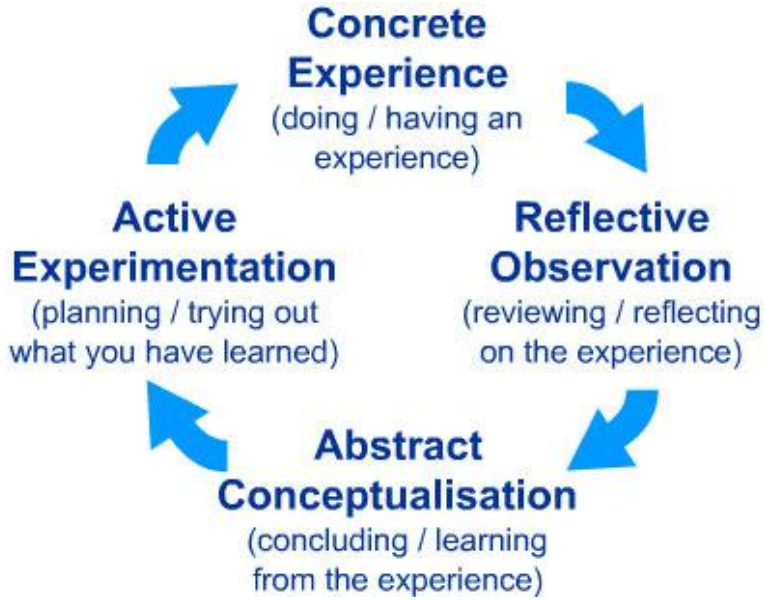
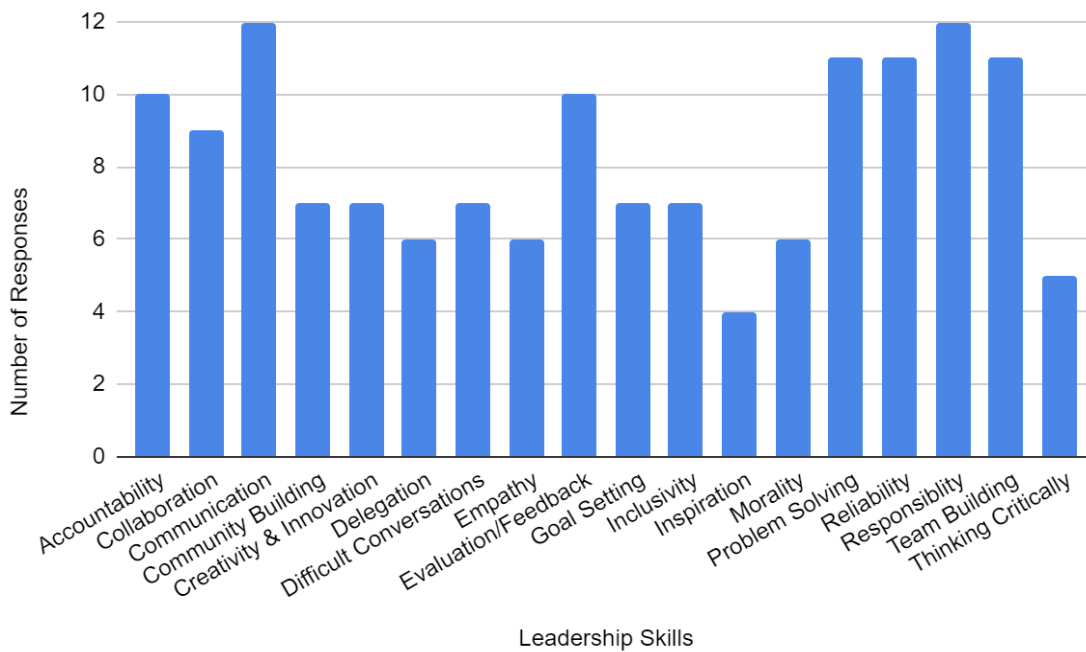
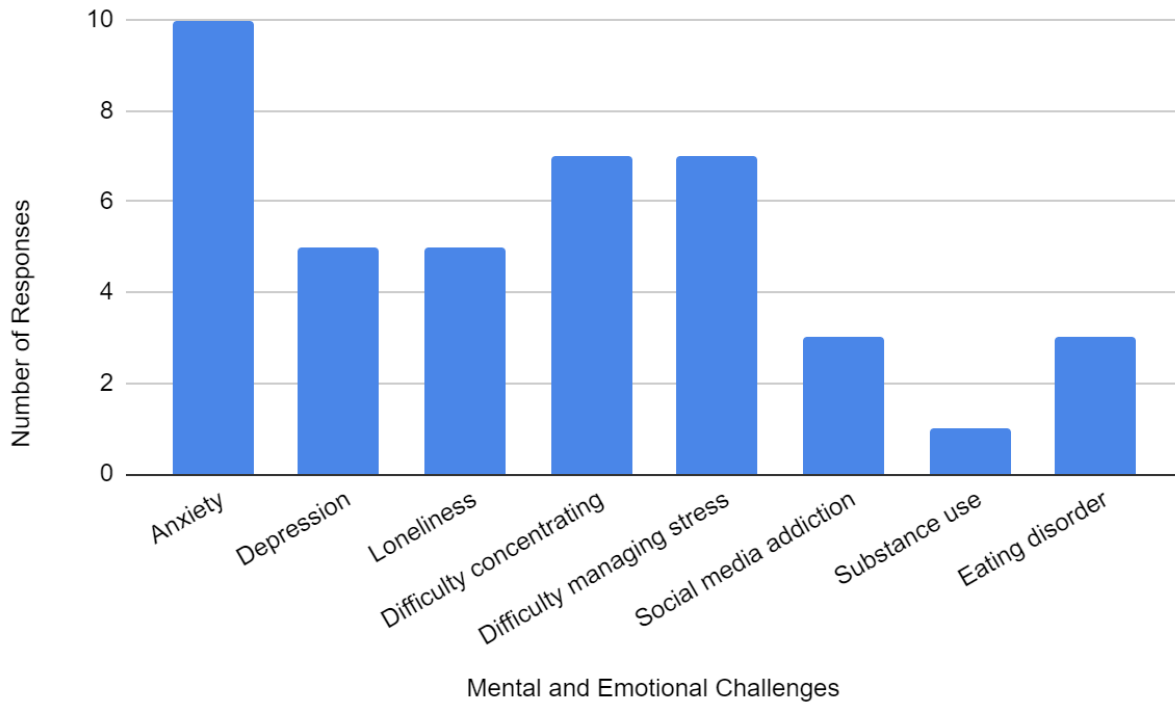


Figure 2

*Developed Leadership Skills*



**Figure 3***Mental and Emotional Health Challenges***Figure 4***Quotes About Employment and Academics*

"My employment has contributed to or impacted my academics by opening me up to new ideas and perspectives and ways of doing things just to make me a more active listener and learner."

"My employment has made a positive impact on my academics by allowing me to grow the confidence to make relationships with my professors and classmates, and not be afraid to speak up and ask questions."

"My academic success is far greater in a work environment that is supportive and understanding."

**"IT SETS OFF MY DAY IN A PRODUCTIVE WAY THAT I DON'T THINK I WOULD GET IF I DIDN'T WORK."**

"My work has contributed to my academics by giving me a space that I'm required not to do school work."

**Figure 5***Students' Definitions of Leadership*

"Consider the perspectives of others and uplift voices and bring communities together for collective betterment rather than pushing your own agenda"

"Uplift others and understand that everyone comes from different perspectives and taking those perspectives and putting it towards the goal at hand...Their actions match their words."

"Someone who can, most of all, be just a supporting role, like a friend...not seeing challenging as conflict, just seeing it as helping and bettering"

**"BEING INCLUSIVE,  
BEING ORGANIZED,  
BEING COMMUNICATIVE  
AND RESPONSIBLE"**

"Leading by example...  
being decisive"

**Figure 6***Quotes about Mental Health and Employment*

"My employment has impacted my mental health by giving me a positive outlet to connect with others and feel like I'm cared for."

"My student employment has had a tremendously positive impact on my mental health by giving me a safe place to confide with others about my hardships and learn how to grow and move on from them."

"Being in the [workpalce] helps with mental health because it's a step away from academics and other things- it's a nice break from other life stuff."

**"WORK  
PROVIDES ME A  
SAFE WAY TO BE  
UNDERSTOOD"**

"I have felt a lot of support and understanding in that I'm not just an employee- I'm also a person who holds other roles that can impact the way i show up at work."

**Appendix A**

## Initial Survey Questions

**Wellbeing @ Work: The Holistic Development of On-campus Student Employees**

Please take 5-10 minutes to complete the following survey. The purpose of this survey is to collect data on how on-campus student employment affects students' academic performance, leadership skills, and mental health. Your identity is used only to connect your survey responses to your interview. Your identity will be erased from data once the pool of data is collected. Please contact Matt McIver ([mjmciver@san Diego.edu](mailto:mjmciver@san Diego.edu)) with any questions.

What is your current academic standing?

- First-year
- Second-year
- Third-year
- Fourth-year
- Graduate (MA, JD, PhD, etc.)

What is your major? (*Please enter "Undeclared" if you have not declared*).

---

How many units are you taking?

- 0-8
- 9-12



13-15

16-18

How many hours do you work per week?

1-5

6-10

11-15

16-20

21+

The following questions will connect your on-campus student employment to your academic workload and success.

Please use the scale to respond to each of the following prompts.

	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Agree
You are able to match your academic/career goals with your part-time work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

You have learned and practiced transferable skills that will help you succeed in your future career

Your employment allows you sufficient time to complete your coursework

You find yourself needing to complete your coursework while at work in order to stay caught up

You have had to miss work in order to prepare for course-related materials

You have met  
your personal  
expectation of  
academic  
performance at  
the end of the  
semester

Your  
employment  
has impacted  
your academic  
results at the  
end of the  
semester

How does your employment affect your overall ability to perform in the classroom?

- Negatively
- Somewhat negatively
- Neither positively nor negatively
- Somewhat positively
- Positively

Please describe how your employment has affected your academic success.

---

The following questions will connect your on-campus student employment to your career and leadership skill development.

Select the skills you have developed and practiced while working as an on-campus student-employee. Select all that apply.

- Accountability
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Community Building
- Creativity & Innovation
- Delegation
- Difficult Conversations
- Empathy
- Evaluation/Feedback
- Goal Setting

- Inclusivity
- Inspiration
- Morality
- Problem Solving
- Reliability
- Responsibility
- Team Building
- Thinking Critically
- Other (list multiple if needed)

Please use the scale to respond to each of the following prompts as it relates to your work.

	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Agree
I am able to reflect on past experiences and create learning opportunities from them	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I have the space and ability to create new ideas

I am comfortable receiving feedback and applying it

I empathize with those around me

I see value in opinions other than my own

I motivate others to do their best work

I empower others

I embrace diversity and value differences in others

I engage in inclusive

language and  
behavior

I consider  
others'  
circumstances

I communicate  
effectively,  
verbally and in  
writing

I listen intently  
to others

I respond  
positively to  
adversity

I create a safe,  
welcoming  
space for  
others

I consistently  
follow through  
on my  
commitments

What has been your most significant takeaway or skill from your work? How has it impacted you?

---

In what ways do you hope you can develop as a leader while you work?

---

The following questions will connect your on-campus student employment to your mental health, specifically in times of crises.

Which of the following mental or emotional health challenges have you faced within the last year?

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Eating disorder
- Loneliness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty managing stress
- Unhealthy usage of social media
- Substance use (alcohol, marijuana, etc.)



- Harassment or bullying
- Something else
- I feel as though I haven't faced any challenges

Please use the scale to respond to each of the following prompts.

	Significantly Worsened	Slightly Worsened	About the same	Slightly improved	Significantly improved
How much did the transition into quarantine impact your mental health?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How much has the transition toward normalcy impacted your mental health?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your mental health overall?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How has ongoing racial injustices impacted your mental health?

How much has your employment impacted your mental health?

How much has your employment helped you feel supported within your workplace

How has your time at work played a role in your mental health

How much has your employment helped you talk and share about

your mental health

How much have other factors within the past year impacted your mental health?



A horizontal scale consisting of five empty circles, used for rating the impact of other factors on mental health.

In what ways has your employment impacted your mental health?

---

Do you feel supported by your workplace when it comes to your mental health? If so, in what ways? If not, how can your workplace support you?

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In what ways, if any, could your workplace help to support your mental health?

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**Appendix B**

## Permission to Engage Co-participants



Sporst Center  
5998 Alcalá Park  
San Diego, CA 92110-2492  
P: (619) 260-4533  
F: (619) 260-2312  
[www.sandiego.edu/campusrecreation](http://www.sandiego.edu/campusrecreation)

October 1, 2021

Dear Matthew McIver:

This letter is to confirm that I give you full approval to conduct an Action Research project entitled "Wellbeing @ Work: The Holistic Development of On-Campus Student Employees." For this project, you are welcome to reach out to current and former FWS and Casual Campus Recreation employees to complete your survey and data collection as stated in your Action Research proposal.

Best of luck with your project,

Seren <sup>a</sup> Gandara

Director, Campus  
Recreation

[serenabovd@sandiego.edu](mailto:serenabovd@sandiego.edu)

u 619-260-77S1

## Appendix C

Participant Consent Form

**University of San Diego  
Institutional Review Board  
Study Participant Adult Consent Form**

For the study entitled:

*Wellbeing @ Work: The Holistic Development of On-Campus Student Employees*

### **I. Purpose of the study**

Matthew McIver is a graduate student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a study he is conducting. The purpose of this study is to explore how on-campus student employment affects student employee experience with regard to academic performance, leadership, and mental health.

### **II. What you will be asked to do**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to complete a brief survey about your experience as an on-campus student employee, as well as complete a follow-up, one-on-one interview with the Principal Investigator to discuss your experiences. Your one-on-one interview will be audio or video recorded for data collection purposes only.

Your participation in this study will take a total of approximately 1.5 hours.

### **III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts**

Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day: San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-(888)-724-7240

### **IV. Benefits**

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped Principal Investigators better understand how on-campus student employment contributes to students' holistic development and experience.

### **V. Confidentiality**

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the Principal Investigator's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and may not be used in future studies.

**VI. Compensation**

You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

**VII. Voluntary Nature of this Study**

**Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this**, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

**VIII. Contact Information**

**If you have any questions about this study, you may contact either:**

- 1) **Matthew McIver, USD Email: [mjmciver@sandiego.edu](mailto:mjmciver@sandiego.edu)**
- 2) **Dr. Kecia Brown, USD Email: [keciabrown@sandiego.edu](mailto:keciabrown@sandiego.edu)**

**I have read and understand this form, and consent to the study it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.**

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

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Signature of Investigator

Date