

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

**Stressors and Self-Reported Emotional Health and Well-Being
among NIU Honors Students.**

A Thesis Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With Upper Division Honors

Department Of

Nursing

By

Kathryn Kaye

DeKalb, Illinois

May 11, 2013

University Honors Program

Capstone Approval Page

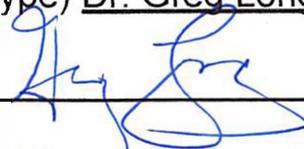
Capstone Title (print or type)

Stressors and Self-Reported Emotional Health and Well-Being
among NIU Honors Students.

Student Name (print or type) Kathryn Kaye

Faculty Supervisor (print or type) Dr. Greg Long

Faculty Approval Signature



Department of (print or type) Allied Health and Communicative
Disorders

Date of Approval (print or type)

5-2-13

HONORS THESIS ABSTRACT

Guidelines

Your abstract should begin with a definitive statement of the problem of project. Its purpose, scope and limit should be clearly delineated. Then, as concisely as possible, describe research methods and design, major findings, including the significance of the work, if appropriate, and conclusions.

Students whose thesis involves "creative" work (original, fine art, music, writing, theatre or film production, dance, etc.) should describe process and production. Indicating the forms of documentation on file as "thesis" materials.

Please have your advisor review your abstract for organization, content, grammar and spelling before submission.

HONORS THESIS ABSTRACT THESIS SUBMISSION FORM

AUTHOR: Kathryn Kaye

THESIS TITLE: Stressors and Self-Reported Emotional Health and Well-Being among NIU Honors Students.

ADVISOR: Dr. Greg Long

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ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS):

Northern Illinois University honors students experience many stressors related to balancing academics with other responsibilities. These stressors can affect NIU honors students' emotional health and well-being. The purpose of

this study was to describe NIU honors students' perceptions of stressors associated with their college experience and their self-reported emotional health and well-being related to these stressors. In this study, focus groups were conducted with NIU honors students currently or previously enrolled in the NIU Honors Program. A qualitative methodology was implemented by using four focus groups that included 13 NIU honors students. Students were questioned regarding their stressors, coping methods, and perceptions of their emotional health. Participants reported that stress can be both positive and negative, but overall, participants reported higher stress levels and a greater impact of stress on emotional health related to being in the NIU Honors Program. These findings are significant because there is little prior research on this subject and this study could lead to identifying better support systems for honors students.

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Abstract

Northern Illinois University honors students experience many stressors related to balancing academics with other responsibilities. These stressors can affect NIU honors students' emotional health and well-being. The purpose of this study was to describe NIU honors students' perceptions of stressors associated with their college experience and their self-reported emotional health and well-being related to these stressors. In this study, focus groups were conducted with NIU honors students currently or previously enrolled in the NIU Honors Program. A qualitative methodology was implemented by using four focus groups that included 13 NIU honors students. Students were questioned regarding their stressors, coping methods, and perceptions of their emotional health. Participants reported that stress can be both positive and negative, but overall, participants reported higher stress levels and a greater impact of stress on emotional health related to being in the NIU Honors Program. These findings are significant because there is little prior research on this subject and this study could lead to identifying better support systems for honors students.

Introduction

College is a time of major transition in a student's life, and he or she may experience many stressors, including changes in academic work load, finances, jobs, and relationships (Darling, McWey, Howard, & Olmstead, 2007). According to Varcarolis and Halter (2010), "stressors are psychological or physical stimuli that are incompatible with current functioning and require adaptation" (p. 196-197). One method of adapting to stress is the use of support systems; however, support systems may change in college. This change could force students to become more self-reliant, which could either cause stress or help a student to feel more confident in their autonomy (Darling et al., 2007). College students, in general, have a lot more autonomy than do students at previous educational levels. They set their own schedules, decide whether to attend class, and make decisions about which peer groups and activities in which they will take part.

With more autonomy, or freedom, one would think that college students would have fewer stressors, but this freedom could also be defined as a lack of control. Along with freedom, a college education offers students greater responsibility with less structure. This lack of structure can make college students feel that their lives have become unfamiliar or out of control (Charlie Waller Memorial Trust, 2007). In contrast, some college students may thrive on stress by using the extra pressure as motivation to work harder in school, career, etc.

Stress can be either negative or positive. Negative stress, known as distress, may occur as a result of the death of a loved one, increased demands on time and other resources, or not meeting expected goals, such as by failing an exam. Distress can lead to anxiety, depression, chronic fatigue, feelings of helplessness or hopelessness, and feeling drained. The opposite of distress is eustress, or positive stress, which is beneficial and motivating. It typically causes feelings of hopefulness, happiness, and purposefulness. Examples of eustress are getting a much-

needed job, starting a new relationship, or passing an exam. Though distress and eustress have different causes, the body cannot distinguish between types of stress, so it reacts the same way to either type. The body reacts by trying to flee, fight, or work through the stress and eventually is overcome by stress (leading to exhaustion and possibly death) or it is able to adapt to stress (development of resistance). Both distress and eustress, if sustained, can lead to depletion of the body's physiological resources (Vaccaro & Halter, 2010).

One group that may feel particularly high levels of stress is honors students. For example, Rice et al. (2006) described how honors students with maladaptive perfectionism often feel a discrepancy between perceived performance and expectations. These authors stated that the challenges of trying to reconcile performance with high self-standards (e.g., not meeting expected goals) typically lead to stress among honors students.

According to Klainberg, Ewing, and Ryan (2010), university and healthcare faculty and staff members need to reexamine the psychological services that are provided to college students because with increased stress, the rates of violence and other problems on college campuses increases. These authors believe that violence and/or emotional or mental health problems require good support services for early detection and treatment.

The purpose of this study is to describe honors students' perceptions of stressors and pressures associated with their college experience and their self-reported emotional health and well-being. There is little prior research about honors students' perceptions of stress and pressure associated with college and the perceived impact of stress on self-reported health and well-being. This is a qualitative study focused on the descriptions of stressors and emotional health of college students. Comparisons of the data collected in this study will be made against stress perception and coping mechanisms among non-honors college students based on the literature

review. This study will be a starting point in research on this topic and can be used as a building block for future research. Moreover, this study can be used as a ground for future research in identifying honors students' risk factors for stress and may be a starting point to the development of support services specifically for honors students.

Methodology

Participants

A combined total of 13 Northern Illinois University honors students participated in one of four focus groups discussing the effects of stress on honors students. A Northern Illinois University honors student is defined as a student currently enrolled in the Northern Illinois University (NIU) Honors Program or a student who has completed requirements for at least Lower Division honors at NIU. Volunteers were recruited from the NIU Honors Program. Participants were recruited directly or through email (See Appendices A and B). About half of the volunteers in the focus groups were unknown to the researcher, and about half were known to the researcher. Demographic data regarding participant gender, age, and year in school were also obtained (See Appendix C). Of the 13 participants, five were male and eight were female. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 33, and 11 of the participants were between the ages of 19 and 25. All but one of the participants were juniors and seniors.

Instruments

A list of eight questions emphasizing honors students' self-reported stressors, coping mechanisms, and perceived emotional health and well-being was asked. The questions were as follows:

- 1 Let's start listing, from your standpoint as honors students: What kinds of stressors or pressures do you encounter during your college experience?

- 2 Now that we have listed these stressors, how do you, as honors students, feel that you respond to them?
- 3 What are some of the positive and negative impacts of these stressors?
- 4 As honors students, do you think that your experience of stress related to your emotional health and well-being is qualitatively different from non-honors students?

*Rephrased question: As honors students, do you think that you experience stress differently than non-honors students do?
- 5 How do these stressors affect your emotional health and well-being?
- 6 What are some general coping mechanisms against stress?
- 7 What do you do to cope with stress?
- 8 How well do your methods work?

Procedure

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained (See Appendix D). Informed consent was obtained by the researcher before the start of each focus group (See Appendix E). Once all participants consented, the focus group would begin. Focus groups lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, depending upon the size of each group. Each group was asked the eight questions from the study instrument. After each question was asked, participants were given time to respond to the question and to discuss their responses as a group. As participants discussed each question, the researcher summarized participant comments. Each group's responses were summarized in a separate Microsoft Works Word document and were password protected. Once all responses had been summarized, participants were given an opportunity to review their comments within their group and to provide changes and/or clarification. At the end of each focus group, participants were thanked for their comments and perspectives and asked if they would like a summary of the study sent to them. The researcher provided phone numbers and available times of counseling

services to participants to give participants resources to help process anxiety if participants felt anxious about topics discussed during the focus groups (See Appendix F).

Results and Discussion

In the discussion following Question One, participants identified several main categories of stressors related to college. These categories of stressors included: high expectations, increased academic workload, social life, time management, job life, self-discovery, family life, and discovering the best approaches to organization. Examples of stressors identified in each category were the “expectation to do above and beyond and be a part of the community of Honors,” additional coursework for Honors Program requirements, maintaining friendships and relationships, balancing multiple things with school, working, “becoming an adult,” family as a 24-hour commitment, and finding the right study strategy, respectively. Money management, fear of losing one’s Honors status, and lack of sleep were also identified as stressors. Participants most frequently cited academic workload and grades, time management, self-discovery, and the expectations placed on honors students as stressors. These findings are consistent with the findings of the Charlie Waller Memorial Trust (2007) regarding stressor types found in the general college student population. Honors students are shown to feel the same stressors as general college students feel. Though honors students share similar stressors with general college students, honors students have some unique responses to, impacts of, views regarding, and coping mechanisms against stressors.

Questions 2, 3, and 5 were related to the effects of stressors on participants and their responses to these stressors, so responses to these questions have been summarized together here. Overall, participant responses indicated that participants respond to stressors emotionally most often, followed by physically, and then intellectually. The majority of participant responses indicated that participants respond negatively to stressors, especially by becoming stressed,

anxious, and “needing to walk away” from stressors. One participant stated, “Honors students are seen as thriving on stressors, but we are actually exhausted.” Many of the participants felt that stress is expected and should be accepted until school is over. A participant said, “You just have to plan out your time because this [being an honors student] is what we chose to be.” Some participants, however, said that they thrive on stress; they “like a challenge,” “like stressors,” “feel confidence,” and feel that stress makes accomplishments more rewarding to achieve. One participant stated that the confidence felt related to stressors has to do with how other students seem to be doing. The achievement of good grades by other students could be seen as a threat to participants’ academic abilities, while participants can feel either irritated or comforted by low academic performance in other students. One participant stated, “I think: if I don’t understand this, maybe no one else does,” regarding difficult class material. Other participants felt that stressors are worth it because the passion and curiosity for one’s major leads to motivation and getting more involved in school.

The majority of the participants reported that stressors have a negative effect on their emotional health and well-being. They cited physical illness, mood changes, social isolation, getting “much more close to the breaking point,” and increased sensitivity to stress as some of the negative effects of stress. Reported mood changes were anxiety, sadness, frustration, depression, and “grumpiness.” One participant stated, “I’m a wreck.” However, participants also reported that stress has both positive and negative effects. Some of the positive effects include increased coping skills and tolerance of stress, personal and professional development, preparation for the “real world,” better organization, networking, better focus, increased confidence, and greater sense of accomplishment. Negative effects of stress are related to the difficulty of maintaining a work/life balance, an inability to see the “big picture,” poor physical

health related to less time to care for oneself, and the “emotional toll” that stress takes on students.

Time management and lack of time were two of the biggest subjects discussed in the focus groups. Participants felt that they did not have as much time outside of schoolwork to see their families and friends. This supports the findings of Darling et al. (2007) that support systems change in college and can result in stress. Participants reported that not getting to see friends and family leads to loneliness, homesickness, and social isolation. One participant stated, “I have told family and friends, ‘Don’t look for me for the next six weeks, come finals, I will come to you.’”

Question 4 compared the experience of stress between honors and non-honors students. Interestingly, when participants were asked whether they think that their experience of stress related to their emotional health and well-being is qualitatively different from non-honors students, the results were mixed. Many participants felt that honors students are more stressed than non-honors students. They cited the minimum required GPA of honors students (3.2) compared to the minimum required GPA of non-honors students (2.0) and the complex time management, goal setting, and organization strategies required to meet honors’ goals as reasons for these findings. Some participants stated that their perception is that non-honors students can think more in terms of short-term goals (going “week by week”) and that they do not care as much about standards.

According to the participants, for honors students, “there is a stigma to care more.” One participant said, “Most non-honors students have no idea of the stress of being an honors student.” Another participant stated that for honors students, the “bar is set higher, so it is harder to let things go.” Conversely, the participants also believe that the stress of college is related to a student’s major, not to their enrollment in the Honors Program. The participants reported that

everyone experiences stress differently related to each person's personality. They felt that "everyone has the skills [to take on more work], but some people just have different motivations," and "non-honors, in the moment, don't feel like they can take on more work, so [stress] is relative."

Questions 6 and 7 elicited similar responses in participants; therefore, results of these questions have been combined for the purposes of this study. Participants were asked to list some of their coping mechanisms against stress. They listed enjoyable activities, such as listening to music, reading, and doing hobbies; exercise; eating; relaxing; and talking with friends most frequently as coping methods. Most of them listed activities to take one's mind off of or get away from stressors. Specifically, the majority of participants cope with stress by "getting things done," organizing and planning, taking breaks, rewarding themselves for accomplishments, self-assurance, socializing, and doing enjoyable activities.

Question 8 focused on how participants view the success of their coping mechanisms. Participants viewed the success of their coping mechanisms as variable, and stated that the success of their strategies depended on the circumstances and the stressors involved. However, a few of the participants felt that their coping mechanisms work well against stress, citing exercise, music, getting work done, prayer, baking, and talking about stressors as the most helpful coping strategies. One participant viewed old coping mechanisms in a better light than current methods, having stated that "looking back with nostalgia affects how you feel about your coping mechanisms." However, most participants agreed that their coping ability has increased since beginning college.

Limitations

The biggest limitation of this study was the small sample size. There were only 13 participants in this study and all of them were NIU honors students. In future research, to avoid

bias, non-honors students could also be interviewed using the focus group methodology and the responses of honors and non-honors students could be compared. Questions in this study could be reordered or changed to eliminate leading participants' answers. For example, because negative impacts of stressors were asked about in Question 3 prior to asking about participants' feelings about how stressors affect their emotional health and well-being in Question 5, participants may have been more likely to report the negative effects of stressors. Questions 2, 3, and 4 on the study instrument required further clarification. In Questions 2 and 3, the terms "respond" and "impacts" needed a clearer distinction. "Respond" was clarified and explained as an individual's general response (i.e., physical, emotional, intellectual) to stressors. When discussing impacts, these were defined as the positive versus negative effects of stress on an individual. Question 4 was rephrased to: "As honors students, do you think that you experience stress differently than non-honors students do?" in order to enhance participant understanding of the question. Questions 6 and 7 were not clear regarding the distinction between "general" and specific coping mechanisms. Therefore, these questions elicited similar responses from participants and could have been combined or question 6 could have been eliminated. In the future, repeating this study using one-on-one interviews between the researcher and each participant could elicit more in-depth, personal responses. The lack of research into the subject of honors students and stress was also a limitation to this study and it is the hope of the researcher that this study will spark future research into this area.

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Direct Solicitation Script



**Northern Illinois
University**

University Honors Program
Campus Life 110
DeKalb, Illinois 60115-2828
815-753-0694
Fax 815-753-9507
honors@niu.edu
www.honors.niu.edu

Dear Honors student,

I am working on a Capstone Project entitled, "Stressors and Self-Reported Emotional Health and Well-Being Among NIU Honors Students." This project will focus on the perceptions that Honors students have of their stressors and the effects these stressors have on their emotional well-being.

I would like to ask you to participate in a focus group to discuss the effects of stress on your well-being and emotional health. Focus groups will be held before or after classes in a location near our common classroom. Questions in these focus groups will address the topic of stressors and their effects on well-being according to Honors students. Total time of participation in this study will require is one session of approximately 60 minutes or less.

The purpose of this study is to describe Honors students' perceptions of stressors and pressures associated with their college experience and their self-reported emotional health and well-being. If you choose to participate in this study, it would allow you to have an opportunity to hear how other Honors students experience university life and would allow you to have opportunities to share your own perspectives of being an Honors student. The process of participating in this focus group may lead to greater awareness of the shared stress and pressure that Honors students face, in addition to psychological insights into how other students manage their emotional health and well-being.

There are few potential risks of this study. If however, should you experience distress related to the topics discussed in the study, resources for counseling will be provided for you both on- and off-campus and a hotline will be provided.

As the researcher, I will do my best to keep all of your information confidential. However, you must be advised that when participating in a focus group, confidentiality among the members of the group cannot be guaranteed.

Thank you for considering participation in this research project. Your input would provide valuable insight into how stress affects Honors students' emotional health and well-being.

All participation is completely voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without any consequences. If you are interested in participating in this study or you have any further questions regarding this study or your participation, please do not hesitate to contact me at (773)808-3902 or z1573731@students.niu.edu.

Sincerely,
Kathryn Kaye

Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow

Email Solicitation Script



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Fax 815-753-9507
honors@niu.edu
www.honors.niu.edu

Dear Honors student,

As an Honors nursing student, I am contacting you by email to request your participation in a study to identify the effects of stress on the emotional health and well-being of Honors students. I am currently working on a project entitled, "Stressors and Self-Reported Emotional Health and Well-Being Among NIU Honors Students." This project will focus on the perceptions that Honors students have of their stressors and the effects these stressors have on their emotional well-being.

I would like to ask you to participate in a focus group to discuss the effects of stress on your well-being and emotional health. Focus groups will be held before or after classes in a location near our common classroom. Questions in these focus groups will address the topic of stressors and their effects on well-being according to Honors students. Total time of participation in this study will require is one session of approximately 60 minutes or less.

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Sincerely,
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Demographic Information Form



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815-753-0694
Fax 815-753-9507
honors@niu.edu
www.honors.niu.edu

This is a form to record participant demographic data for use in the study entitled "Stressors and Self-Reported Emotional Health and Well-Being Among NIU Honors Students." Your responses will help to identify trends in age, gender, and year in school in relation to trends in your self-reported emotional health and well-being. Your demographic information will not be linked to your responses given during the focus group and your name will not be collected or linked with your responses given during the focus group.

PLEASE DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME, ADDRESS, OR ANY OTHER IDENTIFYING INFORMATION ON THIS FORM.

1. What is your age? _____

2. What is your gender? (Please check one) ___ Male ___ Female

3. What is your year in school? (Please check one)

- ___ Freshman
- ___ Sophomore
- ___ Junior
- ___ Senior
- ___ Graduate Student

Appendix D

January 8, 2013

MEMORANDUM

TO: Kathryn Kaye
School of NursingFR: Marilyn Looney, Vice-Chair
Institutional Review Board #2RE: Undergraduate student research involving the use of human subjects for the project titled
Stressors and self-reported emotional health and well-being among NIU honors studentsNorthern Illinois
University

Office of Research Compliance

Division of Research and Graduate Studies
Institutional Review Board
DeKalb, Illinois 60115-2828
815-753-8588
Fax 815-753-1631
researchcompliance@niu.edu
www.orc.niu.edu/orc

This is to inform you that the above-named application for human subjects research has been approved by Subcommittee Review. The rationale for expedited review is section 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110, Category 7. Although you may begin data collection immediately, please be advised that federal regulations require that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) be made aware of all research activities that place human subjects at maximum or minimum risk. Your application will be brought to the attention of the IRB at its next meeting. This approval is effective for one year from the date of this letter.

Unless you have been approved for a waiver of the written signature of informed consent, I have enclosed a date-stamped copy of the approved consent form for your use. NIU policy requires that informed consent documents given to subjects participating in non-exempt research bear the approval stamp of the NIU IRB. This stamped document is the only consent form that may be photocopied for distribution to study participants. If your project will continue beyond that date, or if you intend to make modifications to the study, you will need additional approval and should contact the Office of Research Compliance for assistance. Continuing review of the project, conducted at least annually, will be necessary until you no longer retain any identifiers that could link the subjects to the data collected.

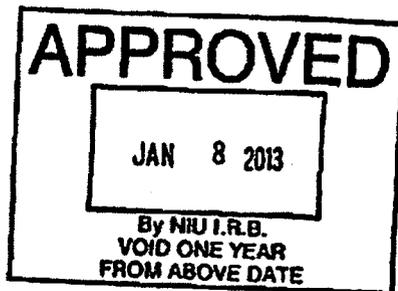
It is important for you to note that as a research investigator involved with human subjects, you are responsible for ensuring that this project has current IRB approval at all times, and for retaining the signed consent forms obtained from your subjects for a minimum of three years after the study is concluded. If consent for the study is being given by proxy (guardian, etc.), it is your responsibility to document the authority of that person to consent for the subject. Also, the committee recommends that you include an acknowledgment by the subject, or the subject's representative, that he or she has received a copy of the consent form. In addition, you are required to promptly report to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems or risks to subjects and others. Please accept my best wishes for success in your research endeavors.

ML:psw

cc: D. Gough
G. Long
Institutional Review Board members
(ORC #HS12-0418)

Appendix E

Consent Form


Northern Illinois University

 University Honors Program
 Campus E, He 110
 DeKalb, Illinois 60115-2020
 815-753-4604
 Fax 815-753-0507
honors@niu.edu
www.honors.niu.edu
Stressors and Self-Reported Emotional Health and Well-Being Among NIU Honors Students

I agree to participate in the research project titled "Stressors and Self-Reported Emotional Health and Well-Being Among NIU Honors Students" being conducted by Kathryn Kaye, an undergraduate student researcher at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to see what Honors students feel is the impact that stressors have on their lives and what the effects of these stressors are on their emotional well-being.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to do the following: participate in an approximately 60 minute focus group to discuss what Honors students feel about their stressors and how these stressors affect their emotional well-being, and I will be asked to answer a number of questions about this topic.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice, and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact Kathryn Kaye, (773)808-3902 and Dr. Greg Long, (815)753-6508. I understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588.

I understand that the intended benefits of this study include gaining a better understanding of the way that Honors students perceive stress and how it affects their well-being, allowing me to have an opportunity to hear how other Honors students experience university life, and allowing me to have opportunities to share my own perspectives of being an Honors student. I understand that the process of participating in this focus group may lead to greater awareness of the shared stress and pressure that Honors students face, in addition to psychological insights into how other students manage their emotional health and well-being.

I have been informed that potential risks and/or discomforts I could experience during this study include anxiety related to the topics discussed in the focus group. I understand that if I do feel anxious or distressed about the topics discussed in the focus group, I can call the Counseling and Student Development Center at (815)753-1206, the Ben Gordon Community Mental Health Center at (815)756-4875, the Ben Gordon Community Response Line at (866)224-0111, and/or the NAMI National Hotline at (800)950-6264. I understand that my name, my answers, and all demographic information relating me to this study will be kept confidential. My name will not be collected for use in this study and my demographic information (my age, my gender, and my year in school) will be kept on a password-encrypted computer and will not be associated with the responses given during the focus group. However, I also understand that, when participating in a focus group, confidentiality among the members of the group cannot be guaranteed.

I realize that Northern Illinois University policy does not provide for compensation for, nor does the University carry insurance to cover injury or illness incurred as a result of participation in University sponsored research projects.

In signing this consent form, I certify that I am 18 years of age or older, that I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature of Subject

Date

Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow

Northern Illinois University is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Institution.

Appendix F

Contact List



Northern Illinois University

University Honors Program
Cannon Life 110
DeKalb, Illinois 60115-2020
815-753-0664
Fax 815-753-9907
honors@niu.edu
www.honors.niu.edu

Counseling and Student Development Center: (815)753-1206

Provides counseling, assessment, psychiatric treatment, crisis response, outreach, consultation, training and educational services to NIU students.

Office Hours: Monday through Friday, 8 am- 4:30 pm, Central time

Walk-in Hours: Monday through Friday, 11 am- 3:30 pm, Central time

Ben Gordon Community Mental Health Center: (815)756-4875

Provides mental health counseling services.

Available Monday through Thursday, 8:00 am- 8:30 pm and Friday 8:00 am- 5:00 pm, Central time

After hours and on weekends, you may call the 24-hour Ben Gordon Community Response Line at (866)224-0111

NAMI National Hotline: (800)950-6264

Provides information, referrals, and support for mental health.

Available Monday through Friday, 10 am- 6 pm, Eastern time



Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow

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