

PROJECT CATEGORIES OVERVIEW

Student Health

# Introduction

Many call it a miracle that IMSA, an institution marked by pressure, stress, and demanding workloads, is not defined by mental health issues. For a community that faces many of the same challenges as college campuses, IMSA has shown remarkable resilience and cohesion. Mental health problems manifest themselves in many forms. Anxiety, depression, grief, addiction, self-deprecation, loneliness, learning disabilities, mood swings, and, perhaps most notoriously, sleep deprivation can be found in many corners of the IMSA community, but are all too often pushed aside as weaknesses or shortcomings. Each mental health problem poses a separate set of challenges to each student and as such improving mental – and general – health across campus will require long-term effort as well as changes to campus culture. Student Council has been interested in finding solutions to these issues since 2014. Landmark projects like the Sleep and Stress Forum and the first Mental Health Initiative Week represent strong first strides. The range of tools that future Student Councils might use to tackle mental health issues ranges from support infrastructure to providing further education about health topics both mental and physical. So far, initiatives have alluded to the issues perceived as most common across campus, such as sleep deprivation, anxiety, and depression, but a much greater swathe of challenges plague the IMSA community, even if they are not often discussed. It is not unlikely that the students most affected by these problems are the ones least likely to knock on an administrator or counselor’s door to let them know. Instead, Student Council must find and serve them as an interlocutor for changing IMSA’s student health climate. Like the cabinet that delivered the first Mental Health Initiative Week, Student Council officers must show adaptability and a willingness to find, understand, and combat related concerns from their classmates. Student Council members may face obstacles related to privacy issues or generally have a hard time finding correct information, as students may feel uncomfortable discussing their personal health issues and some administrators may have their own fears about pursuing projects in this dimension. However, an institution with so much talent, opportunity, and passion will only undermine itself by leaving these problems unaddressed. To truly change the conditions on campus, partnerships with other student organizations are necessary. The Leadership Education and Development (LEAD) Program is the foremost Academy-sanctioned outlet for discussion of social problems at IMSA and represents a forum for the youngest members of our community to think critically about the challenges that we face as a campus. Residential Student Leaders (RSLs) are often looked to as leaders in their halls and wings, where students can really look after and support each other. Class Clubs, too, are traditionally tasked with keeping the spirits of their graduating classes high, but few actively pursue this goal. To quote the sage Kevin Zhang: “At the end of the day, we are not looking at problems, we are looking at symptoms. Because there is a difference between igniting and nurturing creative, ethical minds and burning out the next generation of leaders.” Without a broader community approach, these issues will persist. It will be the job of Student Council to lay the groundwork for future endeavors with strong policies and programs now.

# Notable Projects

## Sleep and Stress Forum

The Sleep and Stress Forum was held by the 2013 Cabinet and was Student Council’s first foray into many things, from the concept of open forums to serious policy and program suggestions targeted at reducing student stress. The forum was led by seven students, one of whom was not a cabinet member, who expressed interest in long-term changes to IMSA. The team presented their ideas near the end of the calendar year in the auditorium to a small crowd of students and several teachers and staff. The actual ideas themselves were not particularly powerful, but the event ended with an impassioned speech from Student Council President Kevin Zhang about how the Academy burns out promising students. One of the main logistical lessons from this first open forum is that the auditorium will never be a suitable location for a forum until levels of student participation rise dramatically. The Sleep and Stress Forum team supposed that a more engaging environment, one that could encompass the entire student body, would be the only way to generate such participation. While it seemed to have little impact on students, English teacher Ms. Townsend stood to speak at the forum and lauded the initiative, requesting that staff and faculty commit themselves to partnering with Student Council to reduce stress on campus.

## StudSnaps/IMSA Compliments

As part of the Wall of the Week project from fall 2013, Student Council placed a form on its website for students to submit compliments for other students. Around 30 submissions were made and Student Council was hesitant to advertise it more actively because IMSACompliments offered a similar service on Tumblr. While IMSACompliments was not continued on Tumblr after 2015, it was revived as a Student Council project in 2017 and is now hosted on Facebook.

## Mental Health Initiative (MHI) Week

In the late fall of 2013, Sunny Shah approached the LEAD team with the idea of hosting a week at IMSA with events dedicated to mental health. For various reasons, the LEAD team was not willing to take up the project and Sunny turned to Student Council. The plan fit nicely with the 2014 Cabinet’s plan to hold a mental health open forum and eventually a team of Student Council members, LEAD members, and other interested students was formed to take on the project. Preparation moved very slowly and by winter break, only the general shell of the week’s events was planned out. The week was originally to be held following intersession, but due to weather concerns and scheduling conflicts, it was moved back. This move proved useful because nearly all preparation was completed in this time. The week had four main offerings: an evening session for de-stressing activities across the building, the mental health forum, a talk on positive psychology by an IMSA parent, and signing a banner and wearing ribbons at midday to close out the week. A series of student discussions on mental health topics were planned for Wednesday but due to scheduling conflicts they had to be cancelled. In addition, the Mental Health Initiative Week was the debut of the Counselor Submission Box, which remained actively used through the rest of the year. As a whole, the first MHI week was poorly executed yet still received well by students. Faculty and staff did not take the week seriously and this led to some unsavory comments on a social front as well as to disorganization on logistical front. The week has since been continued yearly, and is usually held in the fall semester. However, there has been interest and discussion for holding MHI week during second semester or even hosting a second MHI week. Activities vary year-by-year, but usually include inviting mental health specialists to campus to address important topics, such as perfectionism and college stress; ample de-stress opportunities, such as aromatherapy and therapy dogs; and collaboration events with other clubs on campus. In 2018, Student Council implemented a Midday assembly to kick off the week with a speech given by Dr. Colleen Cira followed by a short video from Mamatha Challa (’09). With every MHI week comes debate as to its purpose and actual effect on the student body’s mental health, but in general the week has become one of Student Council’s most recognizable events, and developing new ways to encourage participation and better build awareness about these issues is one of Student Council’s ongoing goals.

## Counselor Submission Box

Designed and launched during the Mental Health Initiative Week, this project collected students’ messages and questions for the counselors and returned them through two different methods. The first was for submissions declared as “public.” Responses to these were posted on the Mental Health Initiative website. The second delivery method, for messages declared “private,” was through envelopes positioned in every residence hall. These envelopes were placed across from the elevator in every hall rather than in the RC office so that students who went to retrieve responses would not be identified. This plays into a reoccurring theme revealed by this project and some of the messages transferred through it: a severe lack of trust and feeling of insecurity between students and their RCs. The project has since fallen out of use, as the LiveSafe app offers similar anonymity.

## Mental Health Forum

Held on the Tuesday of the Mental Health Initiative Week, the Mental Health Forum featured Dr. Hernandez, Area Coordinators, and IMSA’s counseling staff. Topics covered included ways to help ease the transition to IMSA, the context of IMSA’s retention rates, and, perhaps most controversially, IMSA’s policies on dismissing students for issues related to mental health. At one point, after claiming that the Academy had no policy on mental health issues, Dr. Hernandez went on to describe a process for working with such issues at great length. The forum included some dramatic moments when students criticized the administration for their handling of anonymous cases, with one student going so far as to read a note on behalf of a classmate. The forum panel struggled to respond to these students and one important takeaway for future cabinets is that any panel can really only respond effectively to questions and any student content should be phrased as such. Some students suggested that for a topic as sensitive as this, the forum be split into two sessions: one for venting and another with adults for more constructive discussion. Unlike the Course Forum, whose topics were widely-regarded as nonstarters for faculty and staff, Student Council followed up on Mental Health Forum topics aggressively, a helpful process that was repeated to some degree with the Residential Life Forum. The Mental Health Forum has not been repeated in any other MHI week up to the 2018-2019 school year, but there has been interest in making the Mental Health Forum a more regular occurrence.

## Support Slips

This project was conceived of by Jin Komerska and debuted at the Mental Health Forum. The plan proposed to allow students an extension of in-room curfew to discuss potentially sensitive issues. In preparing the proposal for the project, Student Council used an online survey to assess student body need. This data proved helpful in establishing the project but respondents were almost entirely from 1502, Jin’s hall. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy because it was led by a student who at the time was not on Student Council Cabinet. It is a reminder that Student Council must be flexible enough to collaborate with any student and still make active progress. A pilot program to analyze if students would misuse the program and find new ways to deter such misbehavior was pending, but we have no knowledge as to if the program was actually carried out.

## Frequently Asked Questions

Produced in conjunction with IMSA’s counseling staff after the Mental Health Forum, this page on the Student Council website focused on clarifying the role of the counselors. The page also made public a description of the so-called “behavioral contracts” and the process by which IMSA works with families of students who have mental health issues. This set of practices and documents has come under a lot of criticism from members of the IMSA community and is generally shrouded in confusion and rumors. However, the Frequently Asked Questions page was edited by Student Life and approved by the Counseling staff for posting so the information in it can be accepted as official explanations by the Academy. The page can be found online at sites.imsa.edu/studco/mentalhealthfaq. However, it has not been updated since the Dimension Guides were first published in 2014.

## Natural Helpers

Natural Helpers is a program offered at some high schools in the country to train students in ways to help their classmates and neighbors with issues of mental health. Student Council used a survey to help IMSA’s Counseling staff identify students who were considered by their classmates as helpful with such topics and invited them for training in the future. The effort was focused around having trained Natural Helpers from every hall, even if those students were not necessarily Residential Student Leaders (RSLs). This is a good example of the exaptation of a program from other schools for use at IMSA. The Natural Helpers program was not continued, but the 2016-2017 Student Council cabinet expressed interest in bringing the program to IMSA. Unfortunately, the project was turned down, as administration thought the project would put unnecessary stress on the students chosen as Natural Helpers and suggested that students who would need the Natural Helpers be pushed to meet with the counselors instead. At this point, Student Council gave up on the project, but near the end of the 17-18 school year it was made known to the Council that Student Life was interested in implementing Natural Helpers as their own project, unrelated to the previous Student Council initiatives. Administration also demonstrated interest for this program with the advent of the Year of Inquiry data in 2019. However, the team decided against considering Natural Helpers as a recommendation, and as of now the project is inactive.

## De-stress Days

A project sponsored by the Campus Activities Board (CAB), the De-stress Days were offered near finals week in each semester and brought fun activities to the Old Caf for students to enjoy. Due to CAB’s superior logistical capabilities, these events were very successful, and students, as well as adults, were very pleased by their appearance on campus.

## Flow Forward

Due to concerns about students not having access to feminine hygiene products for any variety of reasons – being in the main building and being unable to get pads or tampons during the school day and not having enough money to buy any, among others – Rebecca Xun, 2017-2018 Student Council President put together a project hoping to provide free feminine hygiene products in all of the public female and all-gender bathrooms on campus. Partnering with outside organizations such as Aunt Flow was costlier than anticipated, so it seemed that the project was at a dead end. However, that same year the Illinois General Assembly passed Public Act 100-0163, which requires all public schools in Illinois to provide free menstrual products, solving the problem.

## Sex Education

As IMSA does not provide Sex Education but accepts students who may not have taken Sex Ed classes before, there has been considerable interest in making Sex Ed classes available, if not mandatory. In 2016, a project was designed to tackle the issue, but never executed. The project was revived in 2018, involving several conversations with Assistant Director Andrea Stuiber concerning a proposed sex ed curriculum she had developed. Although no significant progress has been made, it should be noted that the Sex Ed project is one of the few in the Student Health dimension that is related to physical health rather than mental health

## Year of Inquiry

In 2018, Executive Director of OIR Dr. Amber Pareja and Katie Berger began a campus-wide Year of Inquiry to investigate a key issue facing the student body. The topic in 2019 was student mental health, and project team consisted of Student Council members, RCs, faculty, administration, and other members of the student body. Data collection was divided into three sub-groups: analysis of the Challenge Success Survey data, review of existing literature regarding mental health in gifted and/or residential schools, and student focus groups. In March of 2019, each group shared their findings from throughout the year. With the key problem areas better understood, the team ideated various solution ideas that would be proposed to Dr. Torres later that year. The team collectively decided upon three solutions: a revival of a Universal Assignments Calendar to target workload imbalance, a policy prohibiting teachers from assigning homework over extended weekends or giving tests within the first few days afterward, and the integration of sleep education and incentivization into the Residential Life curriculum. Year of Inquiry representatives hosted a town hall in late May to present their work and answer questions from various staff members. Dr. Torres was very receptive of the proposed solutions, and discussions for implementation of these ideas will begin in the fall of 2019 with the hopes of publishing a white paper.

## Relaxation Room

In 2018, IMSA was fortunate enough to have received a $20,000 donation. Dr. Torres tasked the Student Advisory Council, which was comprised of StudCo and non-StudCo members, to decide how that money should be used. After much discussion, it was proposed that the money should go toward the construction of a Relaxation Room, a small, quiet space that students can use to sleep or relax during the day. This room is currently being built near the Academic Pit and will contain comfortable chairs and pillows, among other things. The room is intended to only fit a few people to discourage loud gatherings that would take away from the purpose of the space. The room should be available to the student body by next school year.

# Relevant Administrators

## Ms. Katie Berger, Acting Executive Director of Student Affairs/Associate Director of Student Life

Ms. Berger is often brought into discussions to help families whose students face issues of mental health and stress on campus. She usually manages the so-called “behavioral contracts” and communicates between the counseling staff and parents. Because she is often the linchpin in such matters, her name is most often associated with criticism of the Academy’s handling of mental health on campus.

## Mr. Kevin Kusy, Counselor

Mr. Kusy is one of two counselors currently serving the IMSA student body. He has been active in discussions with Student Council about mental health topics and has helped with MHI Week since his arrival to IMSA. In the 2017-2018 school year, he introduced a monthly advocacy program about a variety of mental illnesses and conditions. Unfortunately, the program has not received a very positive reception from the student body, perhaps due to poor advertising and confusion about events.