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Benefits of Alternative Assessment for College Students'

Academic Success and Mental Well-Being

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Senior Capstone

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Abstract

Assessments play an imperative role in evaluating a student's knowledge within the classroom. Traditionally, educators have relied on traditional assessments to measure students' comprehension of course material. However, in contemporary education, there has been a shift towards alternative assessments for a variety of reasons. This senior capstone research project examines students' and professors' perspectives and how alternative assessments could affect them. Through the use of literature review, surveys with professors and students, and interviews, the findings underscore the importance of integrating alternative assessments in educational practices, not only for enhancing students' academic success, but also for nurturing their mental well-being.

Introduction and Background

Alternative assessments can play a vital role in the evaluation of a student's learning in the classroom. Within the realm of academia, there are two dominant assessments used by professors and teachers universally, including both traditional and alternative assessments. Throughout history it is evident that traditional assessments have been most prevalent in the classroom, but limits the extent in numerous ways to which a student is able to demonstrate their knowledge. Traditional assessments withhold students' full potential of expressing their understanding of course material, which ultimately limits their achievement. The purpose of this senior capstone research project is to examine the necessary shift needed from traditional assessments to alternative assessments for students' success and mental wellbeing.

Historically, traditional assessments have been most commonly used in education for various reasons, but ultimately have downsides that affect students' evaluation of their learning. According to Dikli (2003) the most widely used traditional assessments include multiple choice tests, true or false tests, short answers, and essays. The shortcomings of traditional assessments include treating learning as a passive process, creating biases that do not take account of diverse students, forcing students to rely on memorization, assuming their purpose is to solely document learning, and embracing a hierarchical model of power, all of which lead to hindering student achievement (Anderson, 1998). All of these contributing factors play a key role in why student achievement is affected and have not taken into account the negative effects on students' well being.

Another huge aspect that traditional assessments have on students has to do with their mental wellbeing. Mental well being is defined as the feeling state of well-being which is a reflection of a complex interaction between psychological processes (Beiser, 1974). Mental

being is affected in many ways and has connections to students' overall mood, mental health, interactions, feelings, and much more. Mental health is greatly affected when students take exams in general, however is heightened significantly when taking traditional assessments. One of the main symptoms felt by students is test anxiety as the exam draws near. Zeidner (1998) defines test anxiety as a prevalent phenomenon in modern society that is characterized by stress, anxiety, and coping caused by testing conditions. Therefore, it is evident that students are affected greatly by this phenomenon which plays a huge role in their mental well-being. It is crucial that educators and administrators take this into consideration when deciding which evaluation to use, so that students can perform to the best of their abilities.

This research paper will mainly be focused on the need to transition to alternative assessments due to all the benefits that it offers students. Various formats of alternative assessments will examine what students have experienced throughout their academic career and newer ones that are not as commonly used yet in schools. These alternative assessments include portfolio assessments, projects, oral presentations, and other methods. First hand experiences indicate that traditional assessments have caused anxiety to students, which allows professors and teachers to advocate and to incorporate alternative assessments into their courses. Numerous teachers throughout academia have yet to see the advantages of alternative assessments on student achievement and affect their well being. Through experiences working with students constantly not being able to express their knowledge of the course material to their full potential and the consequences that it had on their mental well-being, I became interested in developing my senior capstone project.

As a future teacher, and evaluator of my students progress and understanding of course material in the classroom, my primary research question is:

How does alternative assessment benefit students' academic success and mental well-being?

My related secondary questions include the following:

1. What is academic success and mental well-being of college students? What causes them to be stressful that affects their mental well-being?
2. What does research say about the benefits of alternative assessment for college students' academic success and their mental well-being as opposed to the typical assessment in college courses?
3. How has the typical assessment of college courses affected students' mental well-being according to students?
4. Are there alternative assessment options that students could benefit from?
5. Ultimately, what kinds of assessment options are there that would empower college students to have academic success and sustain their mental well-being?

For the purpose of answering these questions to the fullest extent of my knowledge possible, I will conduct a comprehensive review of academic literature between the years of 1992 to 2023.

Literature Review

Alternative assessments serve as pivotal tools in evaluating students' learning within the classroom setting. While traditional assessments have historically dominated in academia, they often fall short in capturing the full extent of a student's understanding and potential. This senior capstone research project aims to explore the imperative shift from traditional to alternative assessments for enhancing students' academic success and mental well-being. By delving into the limitations of conventional assessment methods and their impact on student achievement, this senior capstone research project seeks to advocate for the integration of alternative assessment

formats. Exploring diverse methods such as portfolio assessments, projects, and oral presentations, this research will highlight the benefits of integrating alternative assessment practices. As future educators, understanding the significance of alternative assessments in fostering a supportive learning environment becomes crucial for nurturing students' academic achievement and mental well-being. Therefore, this project aims to address the pressing need for educational reforms that prioritize student well-being and achievement through innovative assessment approaches.

The impact of learning is based upon the effectiveness and accuracy of the assessment that has been created to assess the student (Saher et al., 2022). The two categories of assessments are traditional and alternative, also known as authentic, assessments. Traditional assessments are classified as objective tests, while authentic assessments are open ended and focus more on applying the knowledge in a unique way. There are both benefits and consequences that follow both of these assessment options. In order to fully comprehend why alternative assessments provide students with an opportunity to reach their full academic potential while sustaining their mental well-being, educators must first understand why traditional assessments fail them.

Traditional assessments limit students on how they are able to express their knowledge due to the formats of these tests. Traditional assessments are most commonly in the format of multiple choice tests, true or false tests, essays and short answers. These typical tests have an extremely small window to demonstrate students' creativity. Multiple choice assessments are a type of traditional assessment in which students have a series of answers and have the capability of using a process of elimination to find the right answer. Multiple choice assessments demand low cognitive effort, focus on the recollection of knowledge, forces students to guess no questions, introduces the possibility of cheating, and can be very difficult for educators to create

a multiple-choice exam that is successful in evaluating the students' knowledge (Dikli, 2003). True and false assessments rely on making a decision based upon the answer being either true or false. Due to their only two options, it is easy for students to make a justified guess in which their chance to attain the right answer would be 50% correct. Due to the nature of multiple-choice tests it is difficult for educators to know if the student correctly understands the material, or simply guessed (Simonson et al., 2000). True and false exams are easy for administrators to correct, causing this to be one of the main reasons that educators remain conducting these assessments. Essays are a different type of traditional assessment that is more open to assessing higher level thinking, due to the fact that they are more flexible in the topics and students' responses. Simonson (2000) argues subjectivity can be an issue when scoring the essays for educators. Rubrics can be a useful tool to depend on during the evaluation process to track students' performance. However, essays may not be the best use of evaluation because it is extremely time consuming, and can be difficult to properly score students' essays. One last type of traditional assessment includes short answer tests. Short answer questions allow for students to fill in a sentence or word that answers a prompt. However, due to these questions being extremely short it is crucial that they are precise in asking the students exactly what they would like to evaluate, or they have the potential to become open ended. These four different types of traditional assessments have both shortfalls and positive aspects; however, educators can gain more from switching to alternative assessments.

Traditional assessment has many shortcomings in various areas throughout the tests that ultimately hinder student achievement. Multiple choice, true and false, essays, and short answer assessments are all created as a closed ended assessment where the students are limited in expressing their knowledge. These types of traditional assessments measure the students'

knowledge at a specific time, versus tracking the progression that students are continuing to make. Due to the setup of these tests they are made to increase test administration, test score reliability, scoring objectivity, and cost effectiveness (Saher et al., 2022). These assessments fail to consider the students' overall, and focus on mainly making it easier for educators through reliability and time. Koh (2017) discusses how traditional assessments fail to use higher order thinking skills. This is due to the nature of the test being prewritten for students, forcing them to rely on memorization rather than other skills. These assessments also fail to give students direct feedback throughout these assessments not knowing what they got wrong, rather than how much they got wrong (Bailey & Brown, 1999). Additionally, there is no direct marker that indicates what the students were struggling with during the exam, that educators are able to help them with afterwards. Therefore, although traditional assessments may be beneficial for educators and administrators they are not always considering the students and how these assessments will affect them as a whole.

Traditional assessments do not take into consideration the diverse population that are increasingly rising in universities. Objective tests have been created with biases towards favoring white students, therefore neglecting the minorities that are now being forced to take the same exams. Anderson (1998) discusses that there must be new assessment strategies and varieties in instructional strategies put in place to recognize the diverse learning styles. Traditional assessments lack what is needed to fully make a classroom equitable for all nationalities that make up a classroom. Numerous assessments fail to recognize the diverse history that is integrated into the standards. Standardized testing is a main example of how testing fails to recognize the diverse cultures of the student population. Standardized testing was put in places to maintain the social and economic repression of people of color (Gomez et al., 1991).

Standardized testing focuses solely on one group's cultural knowledge and fails to acknowledge other cultural histories. Therefore, it is crucial that there needs to be reform done in order to measure all students' learning equitably, instead of favoring the white middle class. Newstead and Dennis (1994) analyzed different biases that are found throughout traditional assessments that were both deliberately put in place, as well as unconsciously. Traditional assessments give administrators and educators the opportunity to engage in a power trip due to having no limits holding them back. There are no checks and balances implemented that prevent educators from abusing their role, which ties into the unfairness of these assessments (Falchikov, 2005). Traditional assessments are biased towards diverse populations and place educators on a pedestal, creating both unfairness and biases that permeate assessments.

Janisch et al. (2007) highlights that teachers need to question traditional school structures that limit the possibilities of children. Therefore, educators must continue to advocate for alternative assessments that will affect the mental well-being of the students.

Effects of Testing on Mental Well-Being

Mental well-being can be defined as the feeling state of well-being that reflects a complex interaction among psychological processes, which may include the following: negative effects, positive sense of involvement, and long-term satisfaction (Beiser, 1974). Testing affects students in different ways, however one of the main consequences that students experience due to testing is test anxiety. Test anxiety can be defined as an uneasy feeling of impending doom as an exam approach. Zeidner (1998) suggests the spiraling of test anxiety has increased drastically as assessments for higher levels of school learning are placing more pressure on higher stakes assessments that have greater evaluative events. These high stakes assessments affect whether students pass a class, receive a diploma, or are admitted to a top university. When creating these

assessments, classes are more likely to use traditional assessments rather than alternative assessments. Traditional assessments place a huge weight on students causing them to experience test anxiety. Depending on the exam, students may experience higher test anxiety when the stakes are greater, than lower stake assessments (Lotz & Morris, 2017). As the exam approaches, many students experience test anxiety because they are uncertain about the exam format, its potential impact on them, and how it might influence their future. Therefore, as the exam begins to draw near, students' emotions and symptoms due to the test anxiety will arise drastically. Cizek and Berg (2006) found that students experience greater test anxiety when individuals believe that their skills are being evaluated, causing them to think of all of the negative outcomes that are likely to occur following the assessment. Pressure of these assessments are extremely common in students and impedes not only their life, but their achievement in schools and mental well-being. University students in particular feel such pressure from exams that approximately 20-40 percent of the students experience test anxiety (Cizek & Berg, 2006).

Test anxiety leads to a series of consequences that significantly impacts the mental well-being of students. When students begin to experience test anxiety, they can experience a field of symptoms in a manner of different ways. Liebert and Morris (1967) introduced the idea that worry and emotionality had a relation to test anxiety in students. Worry was related to students thinking about their potential failure of the assessment and the emotionality was related to physiological stress reactions that students were experiencing. Lotz and Morris (2017) conducted a study of 158 college students throughout the semester, and found that the week leading up to the exam students reported feelings of daily worry, distraction, and tension, ultimately leading to an increase in test anxiety. Test anxiety also not only affects their academic performance but their quality of life overall. Students will struggle mentally due to an

overwhelming amount of pressure from assessments, affecting more than one area in their life. Rosenberg (2021) discusses that anxiety attacks, breathing rate, and heart rate were all prevalent when looking at students who experience test anxiety before an exam. All of these symptoms will affect students' mental well-being because it has a detrimental effect on an individual's physiological processes.

Additionally, students' test anxiety will lead them down a road of psychological distress as well, causing them to ponder with worrying about future assessments that will take a toll on their future. Mental well-being has declined greatly with the psychological distress that students experience from test anxiety. Mental well-being is directly connected to the emotional reactions that students face, after feeling stressed and anxious about failing an assessment (Doğan, 2023). Moreover, test anxiety can lead students down a path of negative mental health. Kashdan et al. (2020) discusses that students begin to exhibit diminishing psychological resilience that plants a root of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. It has been linked with greater anxiety rises with test anxiety and will take a huge toll on an individual's mental well-being. It is crucial that educators take into consideration the effects of exams overall and how they affect students in various ways. When creating an exam, it is important to recognize that traditional assessments may lead to greater test anxiety because of how restricted the exams may be. When creating high stakes assessments, it is important to note the overwhelming amount of pressure that students experience, and how that will not only affect their test performance, but especially their mental well-being.

Benefits of Alternative Assessments on Student Learning

Alternative Assessments are assessments that provide students with the chance to showcase their learning through the utilization of higher-order thinking skills, emphasizing

student growth and performance (Dikli, 2003). There has been a shift from traditional assessments towards alternative assessments because of the opportunities and benefits that they allow for students. Alternative assessments allow for numerous assessment strategies that allow the students to highlight their skills in a real life situation. In her article, Anderson (1998) underscores various philosophical beliefs and assumptions that form the basis for alternative assessments. These include acknowledging the multiple meanings of knowledge, viewing learning as an active process, prioritizing both process and product, centering on inquiry, promoting learning through assessment, adopting a shared model of power, and recognizing learning as a collaborative endeavor. Advocates of alternative assessment practices, emphasize the connection between students' learning, teaching and assessment as a process that promotes students learning in an entirely different way.

There are different approaches to alternative assessments that are now more commonly used in schools, which are categorized into three strategies: authentic assessment, performance-based assessment, and constructivist assessment (Simonson, 2000). Common formats of alternative assessments include portfolios, projects, debriefing interviews, journals, documented observations, self-evaluations (oral or written), or student think aloud (Herman et al., 1992). However, although there are numerous alternative assessments, the two most widely used from this list are projects and portfolios. These two alternative assessment formats focus more on meaningful work that allow students the opportunity to demonstrate their skill rather than focusing on lower level skills. These alternative assessments set up students for academic success because they are able to demonstrate their skill rather than relying on memorization. Portfolios and projects are becoming more popular throughout schools because of the different strategies that it brings forth.

Alternative assessments can be viewed as to be aligned with constructivist theory. Estrin (1993) discusses that the constructivist theory allows learners to act as the constructors of knowledge focusing on making meaning for themselves, rather than being a set definition that is already given to them. Alternative assessment allows students to engage in the knowledge and make a meaningful connection for themselves as they continue to immerse themselves within the information. Additionally, constructivist theory allows students to continue to take initiative, and within the process of alternative assessments use their own connections to apply that knowledge to different situations. Anderston (1998) suggests that constructivist classrooms students have a choice in which tasks they are evaluated in and which ones they complete, which in turns allows for students to have a voice in the evaluation process. This is extremely beneficial for students because they are able to participate in the process and will likely make them more enticed in engaging in the material because they chose what they are working on.

Portfolio assessment is a type of assessment that is a collection of different forms of evidence of the students' achievements of different learning outcomes (Davis & Ponnampereuma, 2005). Therefore, schools' portfolios are adopted by collecting reports, projects, work, papers, and reflections of their strengths and weaknesses that are collected throughout the school year. Additionally, they may include examinations, evaluations, and grades that can be evaluated based upon all of their learning experiences. One of the difficulties that educators face with portfolio assessments include what is the criteria for judging the portfolio, as well as what is the purpose of the portfolio. Research by Herman et al. (1992) supports these questions by presenting portfolio assessment criteria, exemplified in one of the most renowned instances, the Vermont Mathematics portfolio, which evaluates problem-solving and communication skills in alternative assessments. The mathematics rating grades students based upon their understanding

of the task, quality of approaches and procedures, decisions along the way, clarity of presentation, mathematical representation, language of mathematics, and outcomes of activities (Herman et al., 1992). This portfolio reflects on different portions that will be evaluated differently than traditional assessments because it focuses on understanding and processing, rather than solely the answer you chose. Research from Janisch et al. (2007) supports this idea that students will continue to select the best pieces of work that reflect their academic success and be able to reflect why those pieces were the most successful. This process becomes meaningful for students because they are able to engage in their own self evaluation and reflect on their work in a manner that allows them to demonstrate their skills in a way that allows for academic success. Anderson (1998) mentions that self evaluations in portfolio assessments allow students to become aware of what they need to learn, and what they have yet to complete which allows them to become more engaged. Janisch et al. (2007) emphasizes that the heart of alternative assessment is valuing the students' input and encouraging them to be self aware of their own learning. Alternative assessments can create positive relationships with students and their own learning. It has the opportunity to create a positive learning environment where the students are set up for success. Therefore, portfolio assessments will allow students to create positive attitudes towards different parts of their school work.

Another type of assessment that is commonly used within the alternative assessment formats are project based assessments. Project Based learning is an active student centered technique in which students collaborate and communicate with their peers to solve real world practices (Kokotsaki et al., 2016). Project based assessments focus on working either individually or collaboratively. Dikli (2003) proposes that project-based assessments encompass a wide range of topics, such as the development of plans, artwork, research proposals, oral

presentations, multimedia presentations, dance projects, or any other type of project aimed at stimulating students' minds. Projects are so versatile and can benefit students' success because they are engaging in a project that is valuable to them. When assessing a student, a reason why alternative assessments are so beneficial is because students have a voice in determining their own evaluation, making their learning more worthwhile. Therefore, when students become more engaged in choosing a project, they are creating a process of success due to the positive relationship they are creating with their own learning. Additionally, projects will allow students to use their own strategies to solve real world situations, which benefits students because they are forming meaningful relations outside of just the classroom. A specific example of a project that highlights different benefits of alternative assessments are oral presentations. Nadolski et al. (2021) highlights the oral presentation skills that students will learn from this assessment including the ability to persuade, delivery to the public, vocal variety, articulation, nonverbal cues. This type of assessment is extremely effective because students are not able to be evaluated in a way that benefits their own learning, but they are able to continue to build lifelong skills that they can use outside of the classroom. Project based learning is an extremely effective alternative assessment because of how they are formatted to be student centered based. Kokotsaki (2016) stressed the importance of project based learning because of students' autonomy, constructive investigations, goal setting, collaboration, and reflection with the real world situation that the students are encountering. Project based assessments are extremely beneficial for students and provide them with many opportunities for success .

These formats of alternative assessments evidently have many benefits that support students academic success in the classroom in various ways. Janisch (2007) emphasizes the empowerment of students through alternative assessments because students are able to take

ownership of their own learning. Alternative assessments allow students to succeed academically in numerous ways because of the foundation that these assessments lay out for students.

Alternative assessments allow for student participation and voice to be heard which will only motivate the students to engage in the material. Motivation will come from either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation that will drive students to pursue a goal (Morris et al., 2022). However, students are extrinsically motivated when earning higher grades and obtaining awards (Adamma et al., 2018). Therefore, when students are provided a fair chance in succeeding academically, their motivation will increase knowing they will be able to do well on an exam. Alternative assessments are beginning to become more common in classrooms, and with the benefits that these offer students it is crucial that educators begin to implement them into their classrooms.

After conducting extensive research, it is evident that alternative assessments have an increasing amount of benefits that it offers students. The agreement among current academic literature guided the methods and procedures used to reach this conclusion.

Methods and Procedures

At the start of this semester, I had brainstormed different ideas of different topics that I would thoroughly dedicate time into refining as my Senior Capstone. However, upon reflection discussing my different topics with Dr. Thao, I was able to solidify my topic and specify exactly what I would be focusing on. Upon the completion of my research prospectus, I was able to explicitly state exactly what I would want to focus my senior capstone on and lay a foundation for the research that would drive my Senior Capstone research paper. To thoroughly answer my primary and secondary research to the fullest potential, I sought numerous peer-reviewed scholarly research articles and multiple books that were related to my research questions. Moreover, through examining different current academic literature through library research, I

was able to dive into current literature that would help answer many of my research questions. When researching my topics online, I had difficulties finding information about mental well-being directly being impacted by alternative assessments. However, after continued research and lots of dedication, I got in contact with different students who were able to answer my questions, allowing me to move forward with my project. Beyond just my research for my Senior Capstone, I dedicated many hours to creating surveys for both professors and students, creating interview questions for student participants, conducting interviews, and remaining in connection with students and professors to propel me forward during the process.

In order to fully understand to the fullest potential how students could benefit from alternative assessments, I understood I had to get into contact with students in college courses to know the full extent of their academic experience. Due to being a college student myself, it was extremely easy for me to get into contact with my peers and learn more about their own relationships with assessments and their history with experiencing or not having yet experienced alternative assessments, as well as traditional assessment. Therefore, I conducted a questionnaire online using google forms (See Appendix 2 ~ Google Survey for Students) which was sent out online to different students. Additionally, I was able to create a QR code through Canvas which I printed and shared throughout campus. I shared the QR code strictly with college students, who in turn also asked their own professors to display the code during class. I messaged many of my college peers who I had classes with, as well as college students from different campuses who I knew were in college to help add to my data collection. I continued to share data with my college peers through different formats to help me answer both my primary and secondary research questions. This google survey was completely anonymous in order to be mindful of students' responses and have them answer to the best of their abilities. In total, I sent the questionnaire to

thirty students, in hopes of receiving a generous amount of answers to assist my research process. In total, I received twenty-six questionnaires back. In order to fully grasp the whole topic of assessments, both traditional and alternative, I needed to understand the educators point of view. Therefore, I knew I needed to get into contact with different professors on my campus who would propel my data forward. Thus, I created a separate questionnaire that was solely for professors who have college classes at California State Monterey Bay only (See Appendix 1 ~ Google Survey for Teachers). I emailed different professors on my campus through Gmail and asked them to fill out the questionnaire in hopes of gaining a new perspective. I emailed different teachers the questionnaires personally. Additionally, I reached out to many of my college peers at California State University Monterey Bay and asked to collect their own teachers' email addresses, so I may get in touch with their emails as well. The teacher questionnaire assisted me in answering both my primary and secondary research questions. This google survey was completely anonymous in order to be mindful of professors' responses and have them answer to the best of their abilities. In total, I messaged six teachers personally, that were either my own or my peers' professors at CSUMB. In total, I received three responses back from professors.

When I was collecting data and after speaking with Dr. Thao, I understood that I had to go further into my data collection and dive deeper past the questionnaire. Therefore, I created an interview questionnaire (See Appendix 3 - Interview Questions) which I would use to drive my interview with students to help deepen my research. From my questionnaire, I began to further the questions to deepen the interview process and thoroughly get to the bottom of the answers. Due to my questionnaire being anonymous, I chose two people that I knew I sent the questionnaire to in hopes of conducting an in-person interview with. After confirming the two subject participants, I was able to set a time and place for the two different interviews. I

conducted the first interview on March 17th (See Appendix 4 - Interview Questions and Answer for Student A) and the next interview was conducted during March 27th (See Appendix 5- Interview Questions and Answers for Student B). The in depth interview with both Student A and B allowed me to deepen my understanding from a student's perspective assisting me to answer my primary and secondary research questions. By reflecting on my data collection from library research, peer reviewed scholarly articles, student and professor questionnaires, and in depth interviews, I strongly feel that my research is adequate in answering my primary research question and all of my secondary research questions leading up to final results.

Results and Discussion

Embarking on the journey of my Senior Capstone, I initially explored various topics with the intention of dedicating my time and effort to refining a senior capstone research project that sparked my interest. Collaborating with Dr. Thao assisted in leading me to refine my topic and crafting a research prospectus that laid the groundwork for my Senior Capstone. To ensure a comprehensive exploration, I delved into peer-reviewed scholarly articles and consulted multiple relevant books. Despite encountering some challenges, persistent effort and engagement with fellow peers provided a multitude of insights, propelling my project forward. Beyond the research, I invested significant time and energy in crafting surveys for both professors and students, formulating interview questions, and conducting insightful discussions to enrich my data collection process. Reflecting on my data collection process including library research, scholarly resources, questionnaires, and interviews, I am confident in the diversity of my research to address both primary and secondary research questions.

The findings of my research suggest that student evaluation is enhanced when students are able to be assessed through alternative assessments rather than traditional assessments. *What*

is academic success and mental well-being of college students? What causes them to be stressful that affects their mental well-being? Academic success looks different through the lens of each individual student's perspective. Academic success can range from high grades, to deep understanding of concepts, to having the ability to research and innovate within the classroom, personal growth, a balanced academic life, or being able to set and achieve goals. According to the in depth interviews conducted (See Appendix 3 ~ Interview Questions) when asked what academic success looks like to them specifically, they both had a range of answers. Student A explained how academic success allows her to feel like she is succeeding within the classroom without feeling overwhelmed or as if all of the information that they learn during the semester is one big trick question. Student B discussed how for her she feels like she is succeeding within the classroom when she is performing well within the classroom. However, what they both had in common with assessments that causes them to be stressful is what constrains their academic performance. This traces back to the format of traditional assessments and how it affects their mental well-being. According to the Student Questionnaire #9 (See Appendix 2 ~ Anonymous Google Survey for Students) what causes lots of students to feel stressed is that they feel that instead of assessing how well they understand the material, it is more of a trick question. Additionally, many students commonly feel as if they have not prepared enough for the exam and even if they do the material on the exam might not even be the same. Additionally, what affects students' mental well-being even more is that when spending so many hours studying, they have taken tests that covered no knowledge that was mentioned to study and they feel all their hard work was for nothing. Therefore, it is imperative that educators address the misalignment between the assessments and the students' effort in order to foster a supportive academic environment that allows students to succeed and sustain their mental well-being.

What does research say about the benefits of alternative assessment for college students' academic success and their mental well-being opposed to the typical assessment in college courses? Alternative assessment provides students a fair chance of academic success and mental well-being. Academic success is possible when students have a fair chance at excelling given the high stakes that students face during college courses. When students believe that they have a fair chance of success, their mental well-being inclines, versus when they do not. Within the academia domain, assessments play a crucial part in evaluating students' knowledge of the material. However, assessments do not always factor students when creating the assessments, rather than other variables that do not always set students up for success. Alternative assessments in the academic setting are a necessity in order for students to benefit from the experiences that the assessment process offers to evaluate students' learning. "Assessment performances are day-to-day activities that can also be authentic and engaging demonstrations of students' abilities to grapple with the central challenges of a discipline in real life contexts" (Dikli, 2003, p. 13). Alternative assessments provide students with opportunities to learn in real world contexts that not only benefit their mental well-being but allow them to succeed in their classroom.

How has the typical assessment of college courses affected students' mental well being according to students?

Through my research, it was important to analyze data from students' perspectives to understand exactly to what extent students' academic success and well-being is affected by traditional assessments, as well as comparing them to alternative assessments. I sent an anonymous survey to thirty students, but received twenty six responses in which I will analyze. Through the conduction of a student survey (See Appendix 2 ~ Anonymous Google Survey for Students), based upon the answers of the twenty-six students, ninety-two percents (92.3%) of

student felt as if they had experienced test anxiety before an exam, compared to the seven percent (7.7%) that have never experienced test anxiety. The students who experienced test anxiety exhibited a wide range of symptoms caused by this anxiety. These symptoms included nervousness, heart palpitations, excessive movement, stomachaches, sweating, increased heart rate, general worry, forgetfulness, nausea, dizziness, stomach discomfort, chills, shortness of breath, shakiness, headaches, racing thoughts, difficulty focusing, blurred vision, fidgeting, restlessness, insomnia, loss of appetite, unease, mental fog, nail-biting, a heavy chest sensation, and sweaty palms. When asked whether students had ever participated in a class that allowed them to demonstrate their understanding beyond traditional assessments, fifty-three percent (53.8%) responded affirmatively, while forty-six (46.2%) indicated they had not. The respondents that say yes to alternative assessment reported that they have had a wide range of alternative assessments. These alternative assessments came in the format such as presenting to other students about a question, creating a video, delivering speeches, engaging in conversations with peers, giving presentations, writing essays, completing projects, collaborating on group work, participating in group tests, submitting papers, undertaking laboratory practical exams, developing business plans, working on art projects, undergoing practical assessments, analyzing case studies, and taking open-note assessments. When asked if students had the option to demonstrate their learning in a manner conducive to academic success, they indicated various approaches, including skills assessments, peer presentations, performance tasks, projects, hands-on assessments, practical exams, research papers, real-world application of knowledge, a mix of practical and written exams, poster presentations, brochure design, website creation, creative projects, teaching opportunities with professors, project-based activities, interactive assignments, or additional hands-on assessments. When asked if they had any other ideas to

benefit fellow students, respondents suggested various alternative assessments such as one-on-one interviews, portfolios, informal conversations, or podcasts. When asked if students prefer to be given an option for alternative assessments versus the traditional assessment eighty-four percent (84.6%) reported positive, while fifteen percent (15.4%) responded they would not. When asked if alternative assessments relieve test anxiety if given the option to do so in a college course eighty-four percent (84.6%) responded positively, while fifteen percent (15.4%) responded as negative. When asked how traditional assessments made students feel, there was a wide range of answers. The various ways students felt included feelings of stupidity, anxiety, a sense of being tricked, extreme nervousness, skepticism about the efficacy of studying, loss of confidence, worry about adequate preparation, stress, feeling unprepared, confusion, apprehension about high-stakes tests, difficulty in studying, frustration when tested on material not covered, uncertainty, pressure, feelings of comparison, and doubts about their intelligence. The students were subsequently prompted to rate the emotional impact of traditional assessment methods on a scale from one to five, where one represented a terrible experience and five denoted a great experience. Among the respondents, fifty percent (50%) rated their experience as a 3, twenty-six percent (26.9%) as a 2, and twenty-three percent (23.1%) as a 1. Lastly, they were asked to evaluate how traditional assessment methods positioned them for academic success using the same scale as the previous rating. Of the respondents, almost four percent (3.8%) rated their experience as a 5, seven percent (7.7%) as a 4, thirty-eight percent (38.5%) as a 3, thirty-four percent (34.6%) as a 2, and fifteen percent (15.4%) as a 1. After analyzing these results, it is evident that students have an uncertainty with assessments overall.

Ultimately, what kinds of assessment options are there that would empower college students to have academic success and sustain their mental well-being?

In order to fully comprehend the entire picture of assessments in the classroom, I decided to also survey professors who are evaluating the students using different methods. Because assessments are primarily controlled by educators with limited input from administrators beyond the standards they must adhere to, I chose to exclusively survey professors at California State University Monterey Bay and not administrators as well. Three professors responded to a survey conducted through Google Forms (See Appendix 1 ~ Anonymous Google Survey for Teachers) that followed a series of questions. When asked if professors have ever used an alternative assessment method in their classroom beyond the traditional assessment, sixty-six percent (66.7%) responded yes, while thirty-three (33.3%) responded no. When asked about the alternative assessment methods they have utilized in their courses, professors provided a variety of responses. One professor described their approach: 'For my first-year writing classes, I implement a form of "ungrading," as outlined by Laura Gibbs. Students complete a questionnaire on Canvas every two weeks, detailing their progress on activities. This information determines their score for weekly tasks. For major writing assignments, students assess themselves using a class rubric. If I significantly disagree with their self-assigned grade, I may adjust it accordingly.' Other professors mentioned implementing other alternative assessments such as designing and constructing sculptural monument models, creating poetry, engaging in group projects, producing podcasts, crafting social media posts, or creating art. The benefits that teachers observed from their students using alternative assessments included students beginning to track their own progress and taking responsibility for their learning efforts, encouraging students to closely examine the criteria in their rubrics, fostering greater student engagement, enhancing expression of creativity, promoting cultural sustainability, enabling students to demonstrate understanding in various contexts, and developing skills that are highly valued in students' future

careers, such as collaboration and creativity. When asked between alternative and traditional assessments which do they believe set students up for success, sixty-six percent (66.6%) believe alternative assessments, while thirty-three percent (33.3%) believe that traditional assessments do. The next question asked why it is not more common for professors to allow for alternative assessments in the courses. One professor noted, “ It can be challenging to adapt a course to use alternative assessments if it has been designed in a different way. For greater consistency across classes, if a particular program primarily has traditional assessment, it can be disruptive for one or two instructors to do something different” (Professor A, personal communication, April 12, 2024). Another professor exclaimed, “It requires more creativity, a deeper understanding of assessment design, and more effort to ensure it is an appropriate assessment for the learning - let alone implementation and grading” (Professor B, personal communication, April 12, 2024). While the last professor emphasized, “I'm not sure. Some of it could be comfort level with grading and creating the assessments. Sometimes it can be difficult to utilize alternative assessments in really large classes. Many faculties are most comfortable teaching in the way they were taught as students. Some faculty are concerned about norming alternative assessments” (Professor B, personal communication, April 12, 2024). The next question that the professors answered was what were the cons of alternative assessments. One professor emphasized “There are several drawbacks or pitfalls. One is that students can get confused by a system that is new to them and is different from their other classes. This can create additional cognitive load and actually detract from their learning. Another drawback is that sometimes students are not completely honest in their self-assessment, or they do not understand the standard of work they should be achieving, so they score themselves higher than I think is warranted. For writing in particular, which is fairly subjective, I think that students need a great deal of support and

feedback to understand the objectives for assignments, and the criteria for quality writing in any given situation” (Professor A, personal communication, April 12, 2024). While another professor exclaimed, “It can be challenging for some neurodiverse students if it is too open-ended. It is important to provide a lot of structure for alternative assessments. (Traditional assessments can also be very challenging.) They can be more time-consuming to grade. Collaborative assignments can be very challenging if students don't have time to meet during class” (Professor B., personal communication, April 12, 2024). Using the same grading scale as students, I had the professor rank from one to five how effective they believe traditional assessments are to test students' knowledge of course material. Among the respondents, they were all unanimous in rating it a 3. The last question I had professors rate how they believe traditional assessments affect students' mental well-being, one being very minimally and five being greatly. Out of all the respondents, sixty-six percent (66.7%) rated it a 3, while thirty-three percent (33.3%) rated it a 5. These questions answered by the professors provide an inside perspective to the educators who assess the students and their viewpoints on assessing students.

The last data I collected were from two separate interviews. One with Student A (See Appendix 4 ~ Interview Questions and Answers for Student A) and one with Student B (See Appendix 5 ~ Interview Questions and Answers for Student B). These two interviews looked further into the primary research question and secondary research questions. This in depth interview was with a Biology student and Nursing student who reflected on their different paths of alternative assessments and if they had any experience in taking them. This interview was helpful in looking at students who both took college courses, but completed different majors.

Discussion

Throughout my own educational experiences, I have benefited myself from alternative assessments and believe it is pivotal to connecting students with their own learning. It has become evident that assessments play a critical role in students' academic lives. Assessments play a huge role depending on how high stakes they are. Therefore, it is critical that students are given a fair opportunity. After analyzing the data from library research, data conducted from both student and professor questionnaires, and in depth interviews it is evident that alternative assessments can play a huge role in assessing students' learning. After analyzing numerous articles based on traditional assessments, it became clear that although they are easier for educators to create and manipulate, they do not always prioritize the needs of students. Traditional assessments although are the most common assessment used in courses, it is not necessarily the best for assessing students' knowledge. Traditional assessments fail to recognize the diverse population and may include biases, limit students creativity, do not provide feedback for students, do not teach them valuable lifelong skills, and mainly focus heavily on memorization in order for students to do well. Traditional assessments do not set up students for academic success or mental well-being. After analyzing the questionnaire of student data, it was evident that traditional assessments greatly influence and take a toll on students' mental health. There were numerous symptoms that students experience leading up to an exam that will only end in two outcomes with very little feedback. I believe that there needs to be a better way for students to be evaluated which I believe alternative assessments can do.

Alternative assessments are a form of assessments that have the potential to set up students for academic success and create a positive well-being. Alternative assessments allow students free range with their creativity and teach them life long skills, such as public speaking,

collaboration, or by placing them in real world situations. After having an in depth interview with a nursing student, alternative assessments were key for her because of how they allowed for her to practice real world situations that would prepare her for a career as a nurse. I believe this is extremely crucial because especially in her career, traditional assessments could not give her the same amount of feedback as an alternative assessment could. Additionally, after analyzing the different responses from professors, I think it was crucial that they begin to reflect on the assessments they use in their own classrooms and begin to incorporate them. The teachers declared that the most difficult part could be being one of the only faculty using alternative assessments or because they are very time consuming. However, it is not bad to be different and bring up to your educational faculty and bring change, so everyone can transition to using more alternative assessments. Additionally, because teachers frequently reuse many exams with the same information, once they create an alternative assessment they can use the same process for future classes which could save them time, while also focusing on students' academic success.

I believe that my collection of data and information is extremely sufficient to answer my primary and secondary research question. Due to the fact that I got over twenty students' opinions on traditional assessments and alternative assessments, I believe this was crucial in how similar they all feel towards traditional assessments. Therefore, I feel as if we need a better way that allows students to succeed in the classroom without putting this enormous amount of pressure on them. By persisting with traditional assessments instead of adopting alternative methods, we risk constraining student success and compromising their mental well-being. Denying students equitable opportunities to thrive only perpetuates a cycle of failure.

Problems and Limitations

Overall, when researching different articles for my primary and secondary research problems, it was not too difficult to find research based on alternative and traditional assessments. However, it was more challenging finding connections for specific articles that directly linked alternative assessments and mental well-being. Therefore, what I did was analyze the benefits of alternative assessments and rely heavily on data which I was able to find connections to answer my primary and secondary sources. Additionally, I researched more articles about positive mental well-being and how that is supposed to look. Thus, when I compared this between traditional and alternative assessment, it became clear that there was a connection between alternative assessments and a positive mental well-being. Additionally, one of the things I encountered when researching for different sources, was that many of my sources were over ten years old or more. However, because they were from a while ago does not make them any less meaningful. Assessments are only continuing to improve, especially because within the last ten years there has been a shift to incorporating more alternative assessments, it is crucial for educators and students to understand why in the first place.

Another limitation that I faced was during my data collection. Originally, I planned to seek at least six professors for my questionnaire. However, only three responded to me. Additionally, I planned to seek 30 students for my questionnaire, but only twenty six responded to me. Although the data on the questionnaire came up slightly short of what I sought out, I believe that it was sufficient enough to assist me in answering my first and primary questions. I believe that I got enough data from students and professors that still allowed me to get an understanding of their perspectives to drive forward my projects. Another limitation I faced was

my in depth interviews. I was planning to do at least four individual interviews, but two of them could not make it work with their schedules. Additionally, it went past the deadlines that I had set for myself and would have pushed back my completion of the Senior Capstone, therefore I only had two interviews. Although I only had two interviews, this was very helpful in discussing one on one further in depth the information regarding my primary and secondary research questions. After the completion of this project, I feel as if I could have reached out earlier to more participants in case of the schedule issues, however I do think I got sufficient data to help guide my senior capstone project.

Therefore, after completing my capstone project I feel as if I could have done different circumstances differently. Although, I do feel that the way this project turned out with research and data allowed me to fully understand the issue at hand. I am fully confident in the power of alternative assessments and its impacts on students's success and mental well-being.

Recommendation

Therefore, I recommend that it is essential for educators today to implement alternative assessments in their classrooms, not only for the benefits that they have for their students' academic success, but also for their mental well-being. Students deserve an opportunity to express their creativeness, and not feel an overwhelming amount of pressure due to exams. Assessments can affect not only their school life, but beyond when they are at home. Mental well-being is crucial to living a healthy life and assessments can play a detrimental role in making students' mental well being decline. Therefore, I believe it is crucial that educators begin to implement a few into their classroom. However, I know it may be difficult to switch all at once to alternative assessments. Thus, by adding one or two into a classroom slowly, will allow students to succeed both academically, while improving their mental well-being.

Conclusion

Alternative assessments have the potential to play a vital role in supporting students throughout their education. Students will encounter assessments throughout their entire academic career, whether they are designed with student success and mental well-being in mind or not. Historically, traditional assessments have been most commonly used within the classroom within the past decades. However, there are many factors within traditional assessments that hinder students' abilities to reach their full potential of success in the classroom. Additionally, traditional assessments can cause a huge effect on mental well-being for a multitude of reasons. Traditional assessments are easier for teachers to create, but limit students in different ways. Traditional assessments constrain students' creativity, provide very little feedback, allow for no valuable lifelong lessons to be learned, and force students to memorize knowledge. Traditional assessments also create a sense of test anxiety for students in which they will experience a series of consequences beyond the classroom. Many symptoms will affect mental well-being drastically and will dramatically affect students' academic success. Furthermore, when high stakes are involved within a traditional assessment students' will feel an overwhelming amount of pressure. While traditional assessments have been the norm in education for decades, their limitations in promoting student success and mental well-being have become increasingly evident.

On the contrary, alternative assessments provide an opportunity for students to thrive in the classroom. Alternative assessments come in different formats and allow students a multitude of benefits to succeed within the classroom. Students are able to learn lifelong skills, apply their knowledge in a real world context, and be able to express their creativity in multiple ways. Additionally, when students believe they have a chance to succeed, their motivation will only increase rather than diminish. It is important for educators to continue to explore alternative

assessments and implement them into their classrooms. In conclusion, it is imperative that educators begin to recognize the importance of alternative assessments in order to set up students for academic success and create a positive mental well-being.

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Appendix 1

Anonymous Google Survey for Teachers

1. Have you ever used an alternative assessment method in your classroom beyond the traditional assessment?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. If answered yes above, what alternative assessment options have you used in your course?
 - a. Short answer
3. If answered yes above, what benefits did you notice from your students taking an alternative assessment?
 - a. Short answer
4. Between alternative and traditional assessments, which do you believe will set up students for academic success?
 - a. Alternative Assessments
 - b. Traditional Assessments
5. Why is it not more common for professors to allow for alternative assessments versus the traditional assessment?
 - a. Short answer
6. What are the cons of alternative assessments in your own opinion?
 - a. Short answer
7. Rate how effective you believe traditional assessment are to test students knowledge of course material

- a. Bad -1 to Great -5
8. Rate how you believe traditional assessments affect students Mental Well-being
- a. Very Minimal -1 to Greatly -5

Appendix 2

Anonymous Google Survey for Students

1. Have you ever experienced test anxiety before an exam?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. If you answered yes to the question above, what symptoms of test anxiety do you feel?
 - a. Short Answer
3. Have you ever had a class that allowed you to demonstrate your understanding beyond a traditional assessment?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
4. If answered yes on the question above, what other alternative assessments were you offered?
 - a. Short answer
5. If given a choice to show you understand college material that you have learned in the course, what alternative assessment method would you prefer that would set you up for academic success?
 - a. Short answer
6. Do you have any ideas of other alternative assessments students can benefit from?

- a. Short answer
7. Would you prefer to be given an option for alternative assessments versus the traditional assessment?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 8. Would alternative assessments relieve your test anxiety if given the option to do so in a college course?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 9. How have traditional assessments made you feel?
 - a. Short answer
 10. Rate how traditional assessment methods made you feel emotionally
 - a. Bad - 1 to Great -5
 11. Rate how traditional assessment methods set you up for academic success
 - a. Bad - 1 to Good - 5

Appendix 3

Interview Questions

1. What does academic success look like to you?
2. How have you felt traditional assessments affecting your academic performance as a student?
3. Have you felt as if your mental well-being has been hindered by traditional assessments, and if so how?

4. What symptoms have you felt from a traditional assessment that has affected your mental well-being?
5. Do you know any types of alternative assessments that are used to test students' learning?
6. Have you ever been given an alternative assessment in your educational journey, and if so what types of alternative assessments have you been given?
7. What benefits have you felt from alternative assessments that you did not experience from traditional assessments?
8. What assessment methods would allow students to feel empowered and set up for academic success?
9. What assessment methods will allow students to have a positive mental well-being in the classroom?

Appendix 4

Interview Questions and Answers for Student A

1. What does academic success look like to you? Academic success looks like having the ability to succeed in the classroom without feeling like it is a trick question. I have been in classes where it seems almost impossible to succeed and everything is weighted so heavily, where there is a very limited chance of success.
2. How have you felt traditional assessments affecting your academic performance as a student? The students have felt as if traditional assessments do not give as good an assessment as if you were to do an assessment that focuses on more real life scenarios. The student explained the sit down test does not accurately measure student knowledge.
3. Have you felt as if your mental well-being has been hindered by traditional assessments, and if so how? Yes, she has felt depression. She has experienced lack of sleep and anxiety

leading up to the exam. Especially after the test she experienced depression if she did not do well on the exam.

4. What symptoms have you felt from a traditional assessment that has affected your mental well-being? She has experienced anxiety, such as heart palpitations, nervous pees, jittery, cannot sit still, shortness of breath, nauseous, and an impending feeling of doom.
5. Do you know any types of alternative assessments that are used to test students' learning? Yes, skills assessment would be the only type of assessment she would know. She would do them during clinicals, and actually be evaluated in real life situations.
6. Have you ever been given an alternative assessment in your educational journey, and if so what types of alternative assessments have you been given? The only one that she has experienced was a skills assessment based on her learning.
7. What benefits have you felt from alternative assessments that you did not experience from traditional assessments? She discussed real life feedback, and the ability to improve on real life situations. She has the feedback from exams that does not prepare you compared to alternative assessments. She would explain that traditional assessments were more confusing when receiving feedback from educators, while alternative assessments were able to help her change anything she was doing wrong.
8. What assessment methods would allow students to feel empowered and set up for academic success? Students can benefit from doing more assessments that are more real life. Additionally, going and observing a classroom, and observing your skills as a future career.
9. What assessment methods will allow students to have a positive mental well-being in the classroom? Student said having no more testing would be better. Additionally, instead of

being given a grade, having assessments that have no high stakes but give students feedback.

Appendix 5

Interview Questions and Answers for Student B

1. What does academic success look like to you? Academic success to me makes me think of having good grades, and I am passing all my classes. Academic success is a huge part of who I am and makes me feel good about myself, but when I am doing poorly it sends me into a spiral.
2. How have you felt traditional assessments affecting your academic performance as a student? Traditional assessments affected her performance because she became more stressed out. She knew her material, but she felt that test made her feel a certain way almost if she was not smart.
3. Have you felt as if your mental well-being has been hindered by traditional assessments, and if so how? Yes, to some extent traditional assessments have. She felt as if the tests were playing tricks on her at different times. She felt that they were more memorization than to assess you, so she felt more stressed out.
4. What symptoms have you felt from a traditional assessment that has affected your mental well-being? The symptoms that she felt were anxiety. Anxiety made her feel jittery, and super shaky.
5. Do you know any types of alternative assessments that are used to test students' learning? She does not know of any tests that are used to test students' learning.

6. Have you ever been given an alternative assessment in your educational journey, and if so what types of alternative assessments have you been given? Yes, she has done presentations for her classes before, but they are not that common.
7. What benefits have you felt from alternative assessments that you did not experience from traditional assessments? She feels better prepared for alternative assessments, and has more confidence to ask more questions, versus traditional assessments where you are not allowed to.
8. What assessment methods would allow students to feel empowered and set up for academic success? Presentation would allow students to feel better, because she was more worried about finishing the work, rather than feeling like you are not going to memorize the material and fail the class.
9. What assessment methods will allow students to have a positive mental well-being in the classroom? Presentation and practical assessments were more helpful for students because of the real world situations that they have to apply. This was helpful because they were focused on demonstrating one area very well, rather than attempting to memorize everything.