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## Community Art for Rebuilding College Communities Following the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Literature Review

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Community Art for Rebuilding College Communities Following the COVID-19 Pandemic:

A Literature Review

Lesley University

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Art Therapy

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### Abstract

This paper is an examination of arts-based community engagement projects as a way to creatively engage, support, and endorse healing in college communities. This paper was written with consideration for potential long-term impacts on college students, individually and collectively, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout this paper, college student mental health trends in the United States are addressed and existing community engagement projects that center around community, healing, and resilience are examined. This paper argues that art therapy practices that are meant to advance societal healing can occur outside of the traditional, clinical individual or group therapy session and into community spaces.

Keywords: college, community engagement, mental health, COVID-19, visual arts

Community Art for Rebuilding College Communities Following the COVID-19 Pandemic:  
A Literature Review

“Our thoughts are to the individual, as our art is to the community.” – Wendell Pierce

### **Introduction**

Post-secondary institutions in North America have reported a persistent increase in mental health concerns (i.e., risk factors, symptoms) among their students in recent years (Bourdon et al., 2020). It is noted that traditional college ages correlate with the typical age onset of many mental illnesses; by the age of 26, 80% of individuals with mental health disorders will have experienced their first onset of symptoms (Power et al., 2020). In the Center for Collegiate Mental Health’s Annual Report, a 4-year trend summary shows that the most common and statistically incremental mental health concerns for undergraduate students include anxiety and depression (Pennsylvania State University, 2018). Mental health concerns during the college years have been attributed to disruptions associated with attending college (i.e., academic pressure, life stressors, and work and family responsibilities). Mental health issues are historically known to affect student motivation, concentration, and social life, which can lead to concern for academic success and every day functioning (Son et al., 2020).

Despite an increase in mental health concerns among college students, mental health services utilization has been habitually low, in comparison to reported student need. Lack of service utilization (i.e., counseling centers, disability support services, university health services, etc.) has been attributed to barriers such as perceived risk, stigma, service costs, physical distance from campus services, and knowledge of how to use services (Bourdon et al., 2020). Additionally, service utilization has been historically disparate when considering factors like age, gender identity, and racial identity. Many students of color experience racial trauma,

discrimination and lack of representation in mental health care that can undesirably impact their mental health and wellness, in addition to their experience as students (Liu & Modir, 2020).

Pedrelli et al. (2020) notes the importance of continuing research on mental health needs and concerns of college students of varying identities for a more well-rounded understanding of student needs.

### **COVID-19 Impact on College Student Mental Health.**

COVID-19 has exacerbated mental health symptoms, as stressful life events are a common risk factor for college student mental health concerns (Bourdon et al., 2020). Through the utilization of a semi-structured interview survey, Son et al. (2020) found that throughout the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, stressors in academic, health, and lifestyle-related domains have adversely impacted college student success and mental wellness. Lederer et al. (2020) note, “College students now face increasing housing and food insecurity, financial hardships, a lack of social connectedness and sense of belonging, uncertainty about the future, and access issues that impede their academic performance and wellbeing” (p. 14).

The coronavirus has also worsened inequalities among many at-risk and marginalized student groups. For example, many LGBT+ students faced housing changes due to residence hall closures, which, for some, led to an experience of unsafe or discriminatory home environments (Lederer et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the disparities in access to health care as well as quality living conditions due to structural racism on communities of color. Despite increased risk and greater disease burden, including risk of illness and/or death of loved one, there are significant gaps in mental health treatment for both Black and Hispanic individuals in the United States, in particular (SAMHSA, 2020; Lederer et al., 2020). Additionally, Students of Asian and Pacific Islander descent have experienced marked increase of discrimination (i.e.,

xenophobia) and increased vulnerability due to the geographic origin of the COVID-19 virus (Lederer et al., 2020). Inequalities and experiences of oppression and/or racial trauma among marginalized groups have increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which pose increased, distinct concerns for the mental wellbeing of diverse college students.

Lederer et al. (2020) recommend the prioritization of student support services to address the unique mental health needs of college students during the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is recommended that existing campus-based resources for health (i.e., health centers, counseling centers), student support (i.e., student affairs, university staff and faculty), and offices dedicated to underrepresented student populations (i.e., LGBT+ groups, multicultural affairs, students with disabilities, international students, etc.) adapt and their service provision as well as employ equitable systems of service. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted the necessity of considering creative ways to engage and support students, particularly around mental health needs.

### **Art therapy and community art**

Art therapy in clinical mental health practice is a psychotherapeutic approach which utilizes various artistic mediums and the creative process to encourage self-expression and healing. Art therapy is known for the ways that the utilization of artistic expression can help facilitate non-verbal communication of complex feelings and experiences as well as its ability to reduce barriers in mental health treatment (Malchiodi, 2011). Art therapy has been shown to significantly decrease anxiety of college students (Sandmire et al., 2012) and increase mood, and decrease distress, loneliness, and anxiety in trauma treatment (Pizzaro, 2004). Braus and Morton (2020) note that communities have naturally gravitated toward the arts for therapeutic effect during the COVID-19 pandemic through the creation of masks, art displays to thank essential

workers, and playing music from balconies for neighbors, for example. Braus and Morton (2020) consider the context of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic when stating, “Most individuals are partaking in forms of art therapy by utilizing our natural urge to ‘create’ and ‘express.’ It is in these outlets that the feelings of isolation lessen. All of these and more add to the ability to find a sense of control within the chaos.” (p. 268).

Addressing and strengthening community may be considered a global priority following the COVID-19 pandemic. Lederer et al. (2020) note that college campuses are their own microcosm where living, working, learning, and connecting occur and that COVID-19 had had significant impacts on this experience, “...causing students personal distress and dismantling their interpersonal, institutional, and community networks regardless of where they are physically situated” (p. 15). Engagement in community life, both inside and outside of the classroom, is not only integral to the experience of undergraduate education, but it is fundamental to student success (Lederer et al., 2020). This paper will explore the ways that arts-based community engagement projects can assist in community engagement and connection which can be vital to student success. Horsford et al. (2020) speak to the importance of addressing and processing collective grief, stating, “...it is not only shared difficulty and loss that can bind a community together but the willingness to share in the difficulty, loss and grief of individual members” (p. 76). This paper is an examination of arts-based community engagement projects as a way to creatively engage, support, and endorse healing in college communities during and following the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Literature Review**

Art therapy is defined by the American Art Therapy Association (AATA, 2017) as “...an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals,

families, and communities through active art-making, the creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship” (p. 1). The AATA notes that art therapists develop treatment goals of personal and relational nature with individuals; art therapy is meant to empower individual, communal, and societal transformation (2017). This paper considers modes of art creation and art sharing that may be considered “alternative” or outside of the traditional, clinical conceptualization of “art therapy” for deeper consideration of the role of art in individual and collective healing within a community.

### **Community art as art therapy**

Art is regarded as the earliest form of human expression, with the potential to address social issues, human nature, the human condition, and community social cohesion (Flynn, 2019). Art therapy and community art, sometimes understood as separate entities, share the notion that creative arts benefit overall wellbeing (Meeson, 2012). The separation of art therapy and community art was due to a process of “clinification syndrome”, as the field of art therapy adapted strict clinical approaches to gain clinical recognition in the field of psychology (Finkle & Bat Or, 2020, p. 2). Art therapy typically functions as a form of psychotherapy with a client, art therapist, and the art work(s) created within a session. Community art is typically a less-clinical form of art making, where the creation of art has similar impacts on wellbeing without a psychotherapeutic trajectory. Community arts programs naturally impact wellbeing (i.e., mood, healthy social skills and support, defined purpose, independence, self-esteem, empowerment, etc.) and are typically socially-informed (i.e., with a consideration for social justice, individual/community issues and needs).

Community art has proven to provide therapeutic value to individuals in ways “traditional” art therapy might not; through an inclusive, fiscally accessible, grassroots approach



to healing arts. The divide between art therapy and community art practices are likely a result of westernized and ethnocentric influences on art therapy's construction and dissemination, which have historically lacked cross-cultural influence and collaboration (Kapitan, Litell & Torress, 2011) in addition to the aforementioned process of clinification syndrome. Community practices, such as open studio approaches to art therapy, have been integral to the history of art therapy, yet overlooked in much of the research, historically (Kinkle & Bat Or, 2020). Art therapists in the United States context are also said to "...have had little exposure to community arts due to its treatment as a marginal manifestation of mainstream art" (Kapitan, Litell, & Torress, 2011, p. 65). However, community art has become increasingly integrated into art therapy practice and public health, particularly through the studio art movement (S. McNiff, personal communication, February 8, 2021).

Kapitan (2008) notes the persistence of "rules" and theoretical models that have been handed down throughout the westernized history of art therapy and asserts that a shift in perspective is critical to the enhancement of inclusive art therapy practices. Kapitan (2008) notes that there is power and healing that occurs within a collective that cannot be produced in settings where the "individual expert" is present; art therapists should simply exist as individual members within a complex network of members within a community. This way, the art therapist contributes to the *shared*, collective power of a community. Kapitan, Litell, and Torres (2011) note that, "On the macro level of community practice, art therapy looks outward as well as inward...", which can strengthen community members' ability to see, reflect, and respond, both individually and collectively (p. 64). When art therapists challenge the pervasive "rules" surrounding clinification, that attempt to control the healing processes of art, room for communal healing and harmonization can take place and art therapy can be redefined. Art therapy may be in

need of an individuation process that allows for a balance of art, therapy, health, and community for greater impact on health and wellness.

The utilization of community art, particularly in times of crisis, adversity, and/or recovery from such experiences is an intrinsic process. Communities often work together to utilize art as a tool to process tragedies from personal experiences to shared experiences. Kapitan (2008) notes that communities have worked together to reproduce the therapeutic effects of art therapy like, for example, when a painting studio was added to a low-income housing project in Chicago, when the effects of trauma were visually documented in Darfur, and when art exhibitions were organized with incarcerated youth in Minnesota. The same intrinsic process has been documented during the COVID-19 pandemic in communities across the country, to reassure togetherness, to amplify gratitude, and to highlight universality of pandemic-related experiences. In the context of community art for healing during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also important to note how crises like these can impact each individual and each community differently. Finkle & Bat Or (2020) note that open studio art therapy approaches may be appropriate responses to crises and/or natural disasters, which alludes to the effectiveness of this approach during and following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Art therapists, as members of communities, can influence the growing trend toward community-based health care by first learning about community-specific strengths and needs from the communities, themselves, prior to the implementation of community arts initiatives (Feen-Calligan, Moreno, & Buzzard, 2018). Community-based art therapy empowers members by providing health-promoting art therapy alternatives within shared spaces that integrate all voices throughout the process (Kapitan, Litell & Torres, 2011). Community arts could also provide art therapists an opportunity to reconnect to the places and communities that they belong

to (Finkle & Bat Or, 2020). There are various theoretical approaches and research methodologies that support community art as a form of art therapy, including service learning, participatory action research, participatory arts programs, arts-based research, and open studio approaches.

### **Theoretical Approaches**

#### **Service-Learning**

Service-learning is an experiential pedagogy where community experiences are included within an academic course, where both parties – the student and community entity – benefit from the service by meeting genuine community needs (Feen-Calligan, Moreno, & Buzzard, 2018). Throughout the service learning process, students learn to consider a social justice orientation to service while examining themes of power-differentials, privilege, oppression, and social responsibility. Community based research (CBR) expands service-learning practices with opportunities for research within the community. Service learning can be used within community settings, like when service-learning is integrated into schools for youth to learn more about their community or used for service providers to learn more about the communities in which they are serving.

Feen-Calligan, Moreno, and Buzzard (2018) explored a service-learning approach to teaching research to students within art therapy programs. In their study, art therapy research service-learners studied community agencies, evaluated their programs, and assessed for strengths and potential areas of need for art history service-learners to address through community service in the following semester. Feen-Calligan, Moreno, and Buzzard (2018) note the importance of considering "...whether the work we do mirrors our dream for a community or the community's dream for itself?" (p. 15), which speaks to the foundation of service-learning work.

## **Participatory Approaches**

Participatory research involves individuals or groups of human beings that are defined as the “subject” of the research, typically used by professional researchers and students (Organizing Engagement, n.d.). Research conducted through participatory research methods typically contribute to a growing field of knowledge for scholars -- including both the improved capacity and practice of researchers. In participatory research, the researchers employ an “expert” role and typically do not engage in change-making action post-research.

Participatory *action* research (PAR) centers around a specific problem or targeted need and its solution (Institute of Developmental Studies, n.d.). PAR can use different methodologies -- including qualitative and/or quantitative methods -- to reflect culture, priorities, and concerns of the studied communities (Organizing Engagement, n.d.). The PAR process includes research, action, and reflection and typically evokes social change and participant liberation. PAR is typically led by community leaders/members with some assistance from professional researchers, which can challenge traditional researcher roles (i.e., the “expert”). When communities engage in participatory action research, “the silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world” (Gaventa, 1993, as cited in Kapitan, Litell, & Torres, 2011).

**Participatory Arts Programs.** PAR can take form through community arts-based initiatives such as participatory arts programs. Participatory art is a method of art-making that engages community members to participate in the creative process. Participatory art programs are highly regarded for their ability to create a “safe”, non-medical, and non-judgemental space for individuals to create within their community (Archambault et al., 2020). Participatory art

programs are dynamic in nature and can be used in a variety of contexts for increased community benefit (Lewis, 2013).

**Arts-based research.** Arts-based research (ABR) is a research method that merges traditional qualitative methods with a primary involvement of art. ABR uses artistic forms (i.e., poetry, music, visual art, drama, and dance) to explore and to better understand human behavior and experiences (Wang et al., 2017). ABR is a method used for inquiry, information sharing, and *knowing* through art. ABR typically involves active participation in the research process and can naturally facilitate social change through dialogue, collaboration, creative thinking, and empowerment (Kunt, 2020). The findings of ABR can be supplemental to other research and provide an opportunity for art and science to collaborate and/or inform one another. McNiff defines artistic expression as “heuristic, introspective, and deeply personal” which alludes to the importance of having a solidified focus of the research study and consideration for the study’s relevance to the field (McNiff as cited in Knowles & Cole, 2007).

### **Open Studio Approaches**

Open studio approaches centralize the role of the art in the therapeutic approach while expanding art therapy by integrating it into social and community spaces (Finkle & Bat Or, 2020). The open studio approach originated in Israel and was developed by Janice Shapiro (Finkle & Bat Or, 2020). The approaches have historically used qualitative or mixed method studies within the research. The open studio approach centers around openness and is known for its adaptability in various settings and use with a variety of in-need communities, through the use of non-moderated creative processes. Finkle & Bat Or (2020) note that open studio approaches to art therapy may signify a return to the root of the art therapy profession, outside of well-known “clinical” approaches. In research and practice, community art methods with principals that align

with open studio approaches have been called open studio groups, community-based art studios, therapeutic studios, disability studios, inhabited studios, art hives, and portable studios (Kinkle & Bat Or, 2020). The open studio approach is “a liminal space between academic classes and the experience of clinical practice, in which students are free to take risks and make the connections in order to experience and witness transformation as it happens” (Finkle & Bat Or, 2020, p. 13).

### **Community Art for College Communities**

Community art initiatives have been associated with aspects of mental health and wellness such as socialization, self-perception, affective well-being and global functioning (Archambault et al., 2020). College communities present unique needs, particularly in consideration for the impact of COVID-19 as a collective traumatic experience. Kapitan, Litell & Torres (2011) note that “Collective trauma not only harms individuals but also ruptures cultural practices that give meaning to their lives” (p. 67), thus the following research has been compiled with consideration for elements of community healing. The following arts-based community engagement projects have been organized into three themes that can address issues specific to college communities during and following the COVID-19 pandemic including: (a) community, belonging, and identity, (b) adversity and resilience, and (c) health and wellbeing.

#### **Community, Belonging, and Identity**

Arts-based community engagement initiatives have historically sought to challenge social exclusion and to increase social support, which are factors known to be social determinants of overall health and illness (Horsford et al., 2014). Themes of inclusion, belonging, and community can be particularly strengthened during times of adversity, and may call for new ways of exploring community cohesion and care (Horsford et al., 2014). Hannigan (2012) notes that “Community art helps us realize how our identities are interconnected to Place” (p. 135). In

the case of college communities, Place and identity can be defined by shared identities (i.e., student, faculty, staff member), interests, experiences, or geographic location (i.e., college campus), to name a few.

Hiltunen, Sääskilahti, Vallius, Pöyhönen, Jäntti, and Saesma (2020) utilized a participatory arts-based method in an arts-based research initiative referred to as the “Crossing Borders” project. This research included 23 participants, all of which live, permanently or temporarily, in the region surrounding Jyväskylä, Finland. Hiltunen et al. explored recently-arrived migrants and long-term residents’ sense and experience of belonging through three workshops utilizing various artistic mediums (i.e., film, writing, and visual arts). Hiltunen et al. (2020) found four major stances that participants expressed when considering “belonging” through their artworks including: (a) positive belonging, (b) searching for belonging, (c) struggling to belong, (d) skepticism toward belonging. Hiltunen et al. (2020) note that the concept of belonging is fluid and ever-changing and can vary based on community, culture, and politics but that art can provide a material, physical platform for expression in the moment. A potential limitation of this research includes the geographic location of this research project and its participants, particularly in consideration for the impact of culture on concepts like belonging, which suggests the need for this kind of research with varying populations and geographic locations.

Horsford, Rumbold, Varney, Morris, Dungan, and Lith (2014) used arts-based research methods to explore human experiences of community within the context of public health. Researchers explored themes of community through short vignettes and photographs. The researchers explored where individuals find or seek to create communities through their artistic responses. Horsford et al. (2014) found that healthy communities contributed positively toward

health outcomes, such as health-promoting activities (i.e., gardening, walking, social resources, etc.). Researchers also explored themes of marginalization and rejection that can occur within communities, which contribute to restraints in community building or creation. It is noted that what constitutes well-being will vary by the individual within the community. Researchers note that there is also grief and loss associated with communities, as strong ties can shift or be broken due to distance and change. A potential limitation of this research includes the geographic location of this research project (Australia), and suggests the need for research within the context of the United States or sub-communities, with varying populations and geographic locations.

Hannigan (2012) explores the ‘Story Vessels’ project, which is a sculptural community art project that took place between 2008 and 2009 in the City of Greater Geelong (CoGG), Victoria, Australia. The community art project was centered around themes of community, Place, and identity. The project included nine artists from differing wards of the local government area. Through their sculptural pieces, each artist represented culture and community in their ward, with the incorporation of community feedback throughout the process. Community members offered narratives (i.e., information, stories, photographs, discussions) of their perspectives of the community in their ward to then be interpreted by the artists. This project explored identity formation of a community through the relational connection between community members and artists in the shared art process.

### **Adversity and Resilience**

Art-based interventions have been found to effectively assist with processing grief, crisis, and trauma in many communities who have utilized community art therapy approaches (Kinkle & Bat Or, 2020). In consideration for the varied impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on college students, particularly those who identify with marginalized groups, research has suggested that



the implementation of interventions centered around wellbeing and resilience may assist in reaching students, particularly those who may be at higher-risk for adverse experiences (Warren & Bordoloi, 2020). Additionally, resilience is known to be best defined by each individual and community that is being addressed (Katwyk & Seko, 2019), which calls for individualized ways to approach college communities and their unique needs following COVID-19.

Mohatt et al. (2013) utilized public arts participation to examine the impact of *Finding the Light Within*, a community mobilization initiative to reduce the stigma associated with suicide. The project took place between 2011 and 2012 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. *Finding the Light* is a permanent public mural that addresses suicide that was created with the input of over 1,200 community members throughout its production. The project also supported storytelling workshops and a website to share stories of bereavement or mural-making experiences. Each element of this project -- workshops, community engagement events, outreach, etc. -- informed the design of the final mural. The purpose of the mural was to (a) reduce the stigma around suicide and engage a broad community in dialog; and (b) create a safe space for individual and collective healing in the aftermath of suicide; both were supported by the seven first-person testimonials featured in the paper written by Mohatt et al. (2013). This project also reduced the sense of isolation and increased social support and connectedness throughout the community art process. Mohatt et al. (2013) advocated for how participatory public art can be used as a catalyst for social change and community mobilization, particularly to address suicide and its aftermath. Researchers noted that this model of community art can be applied to other behavioral and social challenges seen in various communities.

Katwyk and Seko (2019) sought to explore how youth, ages 16-29, conceptualize and define resilience through the use of collaborative art-making and the principles of participatory

action research (PAR). Twenty-three youth participants were divided into two groups, each had two three-hour art-making workshops. Group one utilized various arts materials on their own, group two received instruction from two visual artists and a spoken word artist in congruence with related arts materials. Both groups were asked to explore and define the concept of resilience through their own perspective while making art. The researchers found that the unstructured, collaborative art-making workshops produced dialogue amongst the youth with three main themes relating to resilience: (a) belonging and connections, (b) personal strengths and uniqueness, (c) external forces and pressures. The majority of participants were recruited from Southern Ontario, Canada, the majority of whom utilized social services in the area for various reasons; both of these factors may create a limitation to the relatability of this research in other contexts. Additionally, this research did not conclude with an exploration of the impact of the public display of the resilience-themed artworks on the youth and the community, which alludes to further areas of research.

### **Health and Wellbeing**

Shaun McNiff (1981 as cited in Gupta, 2020) notes that art therapy is one of the “most ancient forms of healing” (p. 594) which defends the use of art-making amidst personal and collective times of healing. Individual participation in community engagement projects is known to be central to many health improvement programs for the promotion of health and well-being (Attree et al., 2011). Community arts can address wellbeing through providing opportunities to explore or approach quality of life, life achievement, financial wellness, and rehabilitation through the process and content of arts-based programs.

Attree et al. (2011) explored the benefits of community engagement projects on individuals’ physical health, psychological health and psychosocial well-being through a rapid

literature review. The review included 22 empirical research studies that provide evidence on the impact of community engagement. The findings of the rapid review suggest that there are positive benefits on physical and emotional health and well-being, self-confidence, self-esteem, social relationships and individual empowerment on individuals actively involved in community engagement projects. Researchers report that individual involvement in community arts projects, specifically, "... suggested that, as a consequence of their involvement in the co-production of art works, individuals began to think more positively about health and well-being issues" (p. 255). The literature endorses the notion that community engagement can benefit the health of active participants. The writers note that there are also adverse consequences that may arise from community engagement, including stress, consultation fatigue, and exhaustion related to their engagement. Additionally, the physical demands of the engagement work can be particularly challenging or burdensome for individuals with disabilities. Researchers note that there is a need to examine social determinants of health of communities studied, as well as barriers to opportunities for community engagement. This study strengthened the case for community engagement as beneficial to health, and advocates for the improved practice in community engagement projects.

Archambault, Porter-Vignola, Lajeunesse, Debroux-Leduc, Macabena, & Garel (2020) documented the impact of a community arts-based group program, titled *Transition Space at the Museum*, on young people aged 14 to 25. The goal of *Transition Space at the Museum* was to promote well-being and psychosocial rehabilitation and to combat mental health stigma of young people. The two-hour workshops occurred once a week for a duration of 12 weeks and included three components: (a) a series of thematic visits of the museum's galleries, (b) creative workshops, and (c) the display of the works produced. The research combined qualitative and

quantitative data collection to assess for participant functioning and progress. Participants reported subjective improvements in well-being and social skills and increased socialization and sociability following the program. This study was limited by its small sample size of 12 participants, the majority of whom were female (83%). Participants showed corresponding symptoms or had diagnoses of one of six different psychiatric disorder categories: anxiety, autistic spectrum, depressive, bipolar, personality, and speech. Archembault et al. (2020) note the need for continued research on arts-based community mental health interventions with larger samples and longer-term follow ups post-workshops. Samples with more diverse clinical presentations would strengthen the research on the effectiveness of arts-based programs within varying populations and communities.

Gupta (2020) explored how therapeutic art-making can promote physical, mental, and social health during the challenging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Gupta (2020) explores music, street art, paintings, graphic art, cinema, and digital videos used as expressive forms of art therapy throughout the start of the pandemic in 2020. It is argued that therapeutic expressions of art -- including the acts of viewing, making, and sharing artworks -- can protect physical, social, and mental health. Music, for example, can promote solidarity despite social distancing through the act of playing together at a distance or in listening to lift the collective spirit and soothe the autonomic nervous system. Individuals in this article used visual art to visualize, interpret, learn about, and confront the realities of the Coronavirus, individually and collectively. Cinema, for example, was used to explore the shared human experiences during the pandemic and encourage exploration of self-insight through a multi-sensory experience. Gupta considers the way that crisis can encourage creativity and impact health and wellness and notes the need for continued research about creative engagement during and following the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Discussion**

Art has been used for therapeutic effect as many individuals embrace their natural urge to create and express, particularly during adverse experiences. Arts-based community projects have been utilized to create opportunities to lessen experiences of isolation, to ensure “togetherness”, express gratitude, and, during the pandemic, contribute to a sense of universality throughout a collective experience. It is noted that creativity has been healing, and that the viewing, making, and sharing of art has had positive impacts on art-based project participants (Gupta, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has ultimately encouraged creativity and will continue to encourage creativity as we all work toward communal and individual healing.

### **Arts-based projects with college communities**

Arts-based community projects can assist in creative ways of engaging and supporting students and their mental health needs that may have increased due to the impacts of COVID-19. Arts-based community projects can create additional gateways for students to student services (and vice versa) through community-wide initiatives that include campus-based health resources, student support offices, and offices dedicated to underrepresented student populations. Initiatives that involve the whole community, including students, staff, and faculty may assist in addressing or diminishing barriers to student supports such as knowledge of how to use services, stigma, perceived risk, and physical distance (Bourdon et al., 2020). It is to be noted that arts-based community projects do not nullify other substantial needs that college students may face, including housing, food, and financial difficulties but can assist with connection to appropriate campus or community resources as well as a general sense of connectedness and belonging.

The way in which community is defined is based on the community itself, and various cultural markers, such as race, religion, and socio-economic status that may have more of an

impact on some communities than others (Horsford et al., 2014). College campuses exist as their own microcosms, each unique, thus calling for an integration of all voices throughout the planning and implementation of arts-based projects centered around community. Additionally, themes of marginalization and rejection, which can occur within any community, might impact community building on college campuses, specifically (Horsford et al., 2014) and require thoughtful attention when creating healing spaces through arts-based projects. Wellbeing is also to be defined by the communities and individuals within the communities, as each of their experiences as students and as students who are facing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic vary.

During the 2020-2021 semester, I completed my graduate counseling internship at a state university in New England and have witnessed the impact of college-related and COVID-19-related challenges that students have endured, first hand. In my experience, a longing for connection, socialization, and a search for meaning and identity have been prominent in my formal and informal discussions with students. As a former student from said university, I have noticed an internal shift inside myself to concern and grief as I have walked the university campus, which once bustled with students, events, and recreational activity that now stands desolate and eerie. The artwork featured in *Figure 1* reflects on the feelings of frustration and solitude as we have all experienced the strain of attempting to relieve the experience of isolation within the university community.

**Figure 1**

Artistic Response: *The Distance Between*



*Note:* Artistic response created by Amber Haney, 2021, ink on paper and collage. Background image was taken from *Time* magazine's Mental Health: A New Understanding (2018).

My mind has filled with newfound unease for the field of art therapy, which has undergone a process of clinification due to a fear of invalidation in the field of clinical psychology, particularly during a time where community healing should be a global priority. I feel hope for the clinicians and researchers who are embracing community art in the field of art therapy and allowing for reconnection to the root of art for healing before clinification. There is, of course, benefit to the clinical approach to art therapy, though I have grown curious about the

potential for community art therapy's impact on health and wellness during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. As Lewis (2013) noted, "A small idea can yield tremendous impact; to get started one only needs inspiration, creativity, and the commitment to try something new" (p. 14).

### **An Arts-Based College Community Project**

During my graduate counseling internship at a state university in New England in 2020-2021, I felt compelled to organize a community-centered art project to better connect the community during the pandemic. This project stemmed from my personal experiences as a graduate counseling intern, working closely with students who were actively struggling with isolation, anxiety, depression, and grief (among many other pandemic-influenced personal and academic challenges), as well as the research supporting arts-based projects as vital to healing during crisis throughout this literature review. Additionally, there was a distinct, expressed need for programming throughout all offices on campus during the pandemic, including Counseling Services, as programming has historically been integral to the foundation of the community as well as student success.

The Mosaic project (see *Figure 2*) invited university community members to create a "tile" for a community mosaic installation on the theme of resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Resilience was described to community members as a person's ability to cope with and/or recover from adversity. Participants were asked to select the color of their tile based on the theme of resilience and to share words of support with the community as the pandemic and its impact continued. Due to the COVID restrictions on shared physical spaces, community members were asked to submit their tile through a virtual form. This project highlighted an important factor to communication as well as the implementation of arts-based projects during a



global pandemic, and that is the powerful reliance on technology. The use of social media, media design software, email, and Google suite applications were central to the success of this project. The majority of the Mosaic process depended on the use of technology, for the creation of the art pieces as well as the viewing and sharing of the pieces. This project strengthened my experience and understanding of virtual means of art-making and project-implementation as an emerging art therapist, which is an area of art therapy that continues to need additional research and support.

## Figure 2

### Arts-Based Community Project: *Mosaic*



*Note:* This photo features two viewers at the Mosaic, both gave their consent to share this image.

The results of the mosaic project show that the project organically spoke to the themes of togetherness, community, and wellness, with many of the entries focusing on the destigmatization of mental illness and seeking help. Tiles read positive messaging, for example, “Together we shine,” “It's okay to not be okay. Take some time for yourself and don't be afraid to ask for help,” and “You are not alone”. There were 50 submissions to the Mosaic project over the course of four months; the tiles utilized the entire color palette offered, which included 17 color options. This project allowed for collaboration with student groups, campus organizations, and student support services for a more robust creative response and to create intentional gateways to vital campus resources. The virtual and in-person displays note that this project was created in response to the mental health concerns induced and/or compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and on-campus and community-based mental health resources were shared in both contexts. The Mosaic project embodied the healing and community-building capacity of arts-based projects, as demonstrated and supported in this literature review.

### **Areas for future research**

The majority of the research featured in this literature review was done before the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic in the United States. Many adversities featured in these studies that existed prior to COVID-19 have only been exacerbated since the start of the pandemic, which calls for continued research in arts-based community projects and their impact on mental health and community. Art has been a means for healing, particularly during communities in regions struck by adversity, crisis, and trauma. (Kindle & Bat Or, 2020). Many of the research studies featured in this literature review call for continued research on the topic of arts-based community engagement projects with larger, more comprehensive sample sizes and research within the United States. Additionally, there is a need for continued research on the effectiveness of open

studio approaches to art therapy, and their impact on the general community outside of the studio. As mentioned, there is a distinct need for research within the field of art therapy on the virtual means of art-making and project-implementation; this is particularly vital due to the increased reliance on technology due to the pandemic, which may make a permanent shift the ways we use technology in therapy and in art. Lastly, the information provided in this literature review highlights the need for more arts-based community engagement projects, particularly for the college population post-COVID-19.

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

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