THE PERIOD PROJECT AT SMU

Effects of Menstrual Product Availability on a University Campus Community

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MISSION

In recent months, the topic of providing free menstrual necessities at universities has entered public conversation.

To better understand the value of having free menstrual products at universities, students and faculty at Southern Methodist University (SMU) were surveyed to:

- Assess the impact of menstruation on academic/professional opportunity.
- Understand the attitude of students and faculty toward free and available menstrual supplies.
- Identify the barriers to implementing university-wide availability of menstrual supplies.

BACKGROUND

Worldwide, menstruation ("having a period") affects 52% of the female population and 26% of the total population (House et al. 2013). Most research on menstrual hygiene focuses on women's lack of access to clean water and basic sanitary supplies in developing countries, particularly in Africa and South Asia. Based on public discourse, however, it is apparent that menstrual hygiene is also top of mind in the United States.

Universally, menstruators may encounter difficulty in managing the physical aspects of menstruation—especially bleeding—due to limited access to supplies such as pads, tampons, menstrual cups, etc. (Hennegan et al. 2019). These difficulties can impact many important parts of their lives, including academic success. Because of economic or social factors, menstruation significantly contributes to school absences among menstruators, and access to menstrual products can improve school attendance (Tjon-A-Ten et al. 2011). This observation extends to female and menstruating college students, who may suffer academically when the unpredictable arrival of their period leads to their missing class, bodily discomfort, or the necessity to leave campus to acquire menstrual products.

At a four-year private university one might expect all menstruators to be capable of buying and carrying necessary pads and tampons. In preparation for expanding the availability of period products campus-wide, The Period Project sought to assess whether lack of access to menstrual products on is a problem on the campus at SMU, and if so, the extent of the issue.

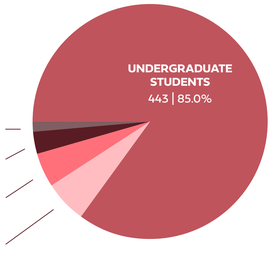
Menstruation significantly contributes to school absences among menstruators, and access to menstrual products can improve school attendance.

(Tjon-A-Ten et al. 2011)

RESULTS

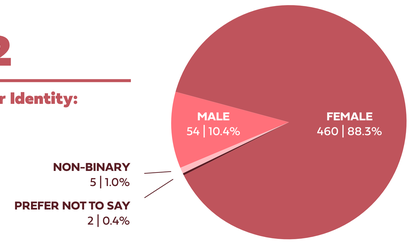
Q1

What is your designation at SMU?



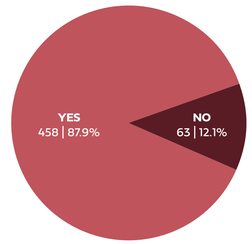
Q2

Gender Identity:



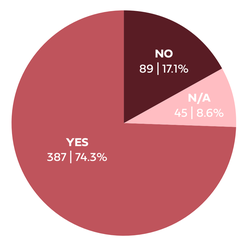
Q3

Do you have a period?



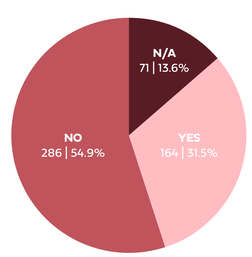
Q4

Have you ever unexpectedly started your period in public while at SMU?



Q5

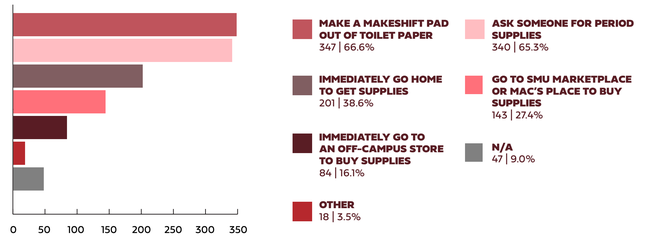
When you started your period unexpectedly, did you have supplies (pads, tampons, etc.) on your person? (in a purse, backpack, pocket, etc.)?



Q6

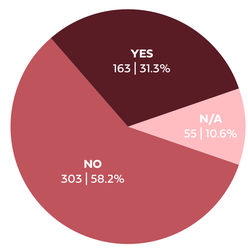
If caught without period products at SMU, what would you do?

(Can check more than one)



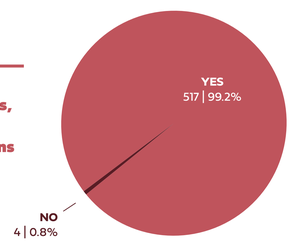
Q7

Has your period ever caused you to miss work or school while at SMU?



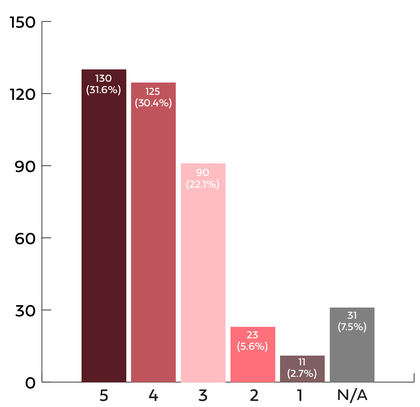
Q8

If it would have no effect on student fees, should SMU provide free pads and tampons in bathrooms on campus?



Q9

On a scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest), how much would the quality of those pads and tampons matter to you?



Q10

We'd love to hear your stories and ideas related to menstrual equity. (83 Responses)

> ***I always need pads/tampons at school, especially because my cycle is irregular and I can never really predict when my period comes. It's really inconvenient having to go to the market to buy pads/tampons because it is much more expensive buying feminine products there than going to the store, but during a busy school day I don't have time to run to the store and buy tampons. I also never have coins to buy tampons from bathrooms that have them.***

> ***I have had lots of accidents at SMU where I have had to make a pad of my own or go back to my house to grab supplies. This has caused me to be late to meetings and has taken time away from my studies.***

> ***Menstrual supplies should be like toilet paper - accessible in each stall. This should not be a constant worry for anyone.***

METHODOLOGY

An anonymous 10-question survey was developed. Nine of the questions had multiple choice answers. The tenth was open-ended. The survey took an average of approximately 3 minutes to complete.

The survey went live on August 24th and at the end of December 2019, 521 survey responses had been collected. Responses included a broad representative sample of the SMU community.

The population included a targeted majority of respondents being students who identify as women, with additional representation from male and non-binary students, faculty, staff, and alums. The Period Project survey was distributed at campus events, and as a link which students, faculty, staff, and alums could share with other members of the SMU community. The survey link was primarily shared among student organizations, sororities, classes, and through student senate.

DISCUSSION

While the idea of providing freely available menstrual necessities at universities has become part of public discourse, and even popular discussion, this study uncovers some of the actual experiences and beliefs surrounding the notion. The majority of menstruating participants in the study reported events of menstruation at SMU without the necessary supplies on hand to meet their hygienic needs. Furthermore, many menstruators reported missing class or work because of their period while on campus at SMU. SMU, and other universities, are encouraged to consider that a lack of available menstrual products may be an academic or professional disadvantage for students and faculty who menstruate.

The findings and methodology of this study may also prove useful to other institutions who seek to address menstruation-based inequality in their communities.

In implementing programs to provide free access to menstrual products at universities, institutions should also note that the quality of menstrual products may also affect their success. Further research may provide more detail into the specific needs of more targeted communities at SMU, such as trans and non-binary menstruators. The findings and methodology of this study may also prove useful to other institutions that seek to address menstruation-based inequality in their communities. The study will be included as an integral part of a "tool-kit" for public use. Initiatives and organizations can then use this tool-kit —which will consist of presentation materials and compelling arguments— to implement programs for free and sustainable access to menstrual products at their institutions.

In the coming year, following implementation, we will asses the impact of The Period Project by tracking use of products and collecting user satisfaction surveys.

REFERENCES

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Tjon-A-Ten, Varina, et al. "Girls' Health and Educational Needs in Urban Environments." Women's Health and the World's Cities, edited by Afaf Ibrahim Meleis et al., University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011, pp. 35–52. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fh73p.7.

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