Objective
This project gained insight for how college students conceptualize mental illness (MI) as the necessary first step in designing messages that could decrease stigma on campus.

Methods
In-depth semi-structured interviews \( (n=26) \) were conducted using social representations theory.

Participants filled 4 boxes with images or words that came to mind for the term “mental illness” and elaborated on their first associations.

Results
MI was defined differently. Some identified depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia as MI, others were either unsure or misidentified autism and Alzheimer’s disease as a MI.

Many believed stress and anxiety were the biggest MI problems among college students. Yet despite its frequency, participants expressed students’ hesitation to seek help.

Participants anchored mental illnesses to treatable physical diseases, believing that MI could be similarly treated. They cited media, specifically movies and prescription drug commercials, as places where they see messages about MI.

Implications
Students conceptualize – by anchoring and objectifying – mental illness to form mental representations. Students anchor MI with physical illness, using the latter as a comparison for understanding. Furthermore, they objectify the abstract concept of MI with concrete implications for daily activities. These insights are a critical first step in the design of a campaign to help eliminate barriers to mental health treatment.