



Student Mental Health & Well-Being Strategy

McMaster will strive to nurture and support all students to be as healthy as they can be and to reach their potential. Mental health and well-being are understood as key components to health. We will achieve this outcome through our ongoing commitment to creating an inclusive, supportive, and healthy educational environment.

Background

In April 2013 the McMaster Student Mental Health Forum, a student initiative, brought together student leaders, mental health professionals, administrative leaders and academics with a specialization in mental health to discuss the needs of our particular students. The forum provided key recommendations moving forward, one of which was to establish a Mental Health Strategy. In January 2014, Student Affairs, in partnership with the Faculty of Health Sciences, undertook a project to assess the McMaster landscape in order to identify the strengths, challenges and gaps to adequately address the mental health needs of our students.

To date, Dr. Catharine Munn and Allison Drew-Hassling, co-leads for the Student Mental Health & Well-Being Strategy, have interviewed over 150 students, staff and faculty, with over 200 hours of direct face-face contact with the community. Based upon consistent feedback from the community, and in consideration of the current fiscal climate, short-term priorities have been identified. This project is on-going with an expectation for consistent reviews and refinements, as the recommendations are implemented. The recommendations emphasize the importance of cross-collaboration with the use of working groups and an overarching Advisory Committee. The implementation of initiatives will be evaluated for quality improvement and effectiveness.

The McMaster Student Mental Health and Well-being Framework has been developing by relying on current, relevant research and practices which address post-secondary mental health and policies such as the World Health Organization's Health-Promoting Universities document, the JED Foundation's Healthy Campus model in the U.S., and the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) and Canadian Mental Health Association's (CMHA) recommendations regarding a systemic approach to mental health in post-secondary settings.

Based upon our literature review, environmental scan and interviews with members of our McMaster community, we have observed that mental health and well-being is an issue that intersects with the entire campus. Mental health impacts a student's engagement and overall academic performance. There has been an increase in the number of students self-identifying as having a mental health challenge. Many campus front-line staff identify that there are more and more students with complex mental health challenges seeking support. In order to respond

appropriately to the current demands on our services and in anticipation of the rise in requests for care, as we educate and train our campus about mental health, we must: (1) increase our capacity to respond, through a commitment to ongoing assessment of access to and efficiency of our services; and (2) increase the number of front-line staff within the Student Wellness Centre to support the demands for service.

A number of other issues and questions will require our consideration:

- Striving to identify innovative approaches to teaching and learning for all, in part, by creating a safe and inclusive environment and also by using teaching styles that build on our increasing understanding of cognition through psychology and neuroscience is a new frontier to be explored and one in which McMaster is well-positioned to take the lead.
- McMaster has the capacity to be a leader in North America given its mental health and research expertise. The transition aged or emerging adult population is an under-studied area, especially in the Canadian context. Establishing collaborations within the university and outside community partners to further understand this population should be an area of continued focus as it will benefit our understanding of the needs of our students and the broader Canadian context.
- We also play a significant role in society as a leader and an advocate for change. There are many social determinants to mental health, as well as, funding barriers that cannot be resolved at the post-secondary level without lobbying the provincial and federal level for a reconsideration of how to most effectively support and serve our young adults within the post-secondary context and within broader society.

Summary of Phase One Recommendations

There are five actions that comprise the first phase of our strategy:

1. Provide robust mental health and well-being education, training and resources for campus gatekeepers.
2. Implement a proactive, coordinated, consistent, and unified approach to students in difficulty across campus.
3. Adapt accommodation policies, processes, organizational structures and pedagogies to changing and growing student mental health needs.
4. Increase capacity within the Student Wellness Centre building on the existing collaborative care model.
5. Establish a program of research and health policy focused on emerging adults in post-secondary settings and building on existing McMaster strengths and resources.

Through the implementation of these actions, champions for this cause will emerge, helping McMaster to demonstrate its commitment to students by creating and sustaining a 'culture of caring'.

- 1. Provide robust mental health and well-being education, training and resources for campus.**

Establish a working group reporting to the Student Mental Health Advisory Committee to develop training and resource recommendations and guidance for the community. Relying upon the cross-professional expertise of the working group, this guide will explore the use of a 'tiered' approach to the development of resources and training that will empower the campus to 'recognize, respond and refer' a student in distress.

- A special focus on support for Faculties and in particular the Academic Advisors and other 'navigators'. Navigators are those on campus providing an advising or supportive role to students, who are able to help navigate students to appropriate services and supports. Academic Advisors play a critical role in identifying a student in distress and should receive the highest mental health education available to campus, along with support for professional development to support the increasing demands on their role.
- Promote positive mental health and well-being and consider the potential impact on student mental health when making decisions across campus. Address attitudes and behavior through anti-stigma education, with an emphasis on normalizing help-seeking behavior and taking responsibility for oneself and each other.

2. Implement a proactive, co-ordinated, consistent and unified approach to students in difficulty across campus.

It is important to identify the varying ways a student may demonstrate distress and to create mechanisms to respond appropriately. In situations in which a student may be displaying signs of acute distress and/or at risk of harm to self or others, a more coordinated and collaborative decision-making approach is necessary to create a comprehensive and effective care plan.

- Establish a working group reporting to the AVP Dean of Students charged with identifying ways to establish a proactive, coordinated, consistent and unified approach to students in distress: the development of mechanisms (e.g. explore the use of tracking MSAF's as an early alert mechanism) to identify students in distress, proactive coordinated responses, including processes to provide a comprehensive response to acutely distressed students.
- Ensure that each Faculty has established processes to ensure that students are able to access an office or an identified individual who can provide advice and support for a student in difficulty. This identified office or individual should be at arm's length from those in evaluation or disciplinary positions.
- Establish a Postvention protocol for campus following a critical incident and develop a landscape scan procedure for identifying and mitigating environmental risks (i.e. for suicide).
- Enhance off-campus community partnerships, with a specific focus on improving coordination and communication to support distressed students.

3. Adapt accommodation policies, processes, organizational structures and pedagogies to the changing and growing student mental health needs.

The number and complexity of mental health cases has resulted in a need to re-think the policies, processes, competencies and pedagogies needed to accommodate these cases in an educational environment, especially with respect to experiential learning.

- A review of the Academic Accommodations policy is required to reflect the changing face of disability on campus (mental health concerns and illnesses rising), the highly varied environments in which education is occurring (e.g. experiential, and in particular clinical), and that reflects the unique characteristics of some mental health disabilities (e.g. some not a “permanent” diagnosis but temporary)
- As there is a continued increase for accommodations for ‘invisible disabilities’ and an influx of students identifying with mental health difficulties without a permanent disability diagnosis but requesting accommodation who are presenting to faculties and other services (e.g. Housing, Student Conduct Office), it is necessary to assess how to effectively respond, organize and resource the campus.
- The development of guidelines to reduce unnecessary stress/distress for students through program and course design and organization and to encourage universally accessible learning approaches while preserving academic integrity is a priority. This has the potential to reduce the need for individual mental health accommodations and to enhance student learning. This is an opportunity for McMaster to leverage and build on its expertise in innovative teaching and learning. Students and faculty will be essential partners in this area. MIETL has also been identified as a collaborative partner in this endeavour.

4. Increase capacity within the Student Wellness Centre building on the existing collaborative care model.

The Student Wellness Centre’s (SWC) integrated model provides a collaborative multi-disciplinary approach to care. There are more students requesting mental health support and more students presenting to SWC with complex care needs. With the increase in education, training and awareness about mental health on our campus, it is expected that more students will access the service.

- There is a need for more mental health professionals - and more specialized - mental health service professionals within SWC, who can provide care to students who are acutely distressed.
- Additional capacity should be focused in part on the needs of under-represented and marginalized students including: international students, students with substance abuse issues, students who have experienced trauma, students living in poverty, students from diverse/minority background and cultures.
- Outreach to under-represented and marginalized groups who often will not present to the SWC should be an important component of the role for these additional professionals.

5. Establish a program of research and health policy focused on emerging adults in post-secondary settings and building on existing McMaster strengths and resources.

Research is very limited regarding the epidemiology of mental health concerns and effective approaches among transition-aged or emerging adults in post-secondary settings, particularly in Canada. This is an area where McMaster's expertise can not only support an evidenced-based institutional strategy, but it can also strengthen our contribution and reputation as a recognized leader in health, both nationally and internationally.

- With the support of the Faculty of Health Sciences, we will build collaborations within McMaster and with the community that lead to increased post-secondary and transition aged youth research in mental health. Priority areas include: epidemiologic research, impact of mental health on academic outcomes, mental health-related disability and accommodations, addiction in post-secondary students and suicide prevention.

"We envision a community that recognizes improving the health of our campus is a shared commitment. We strive to foster a healthy, supportive and inclusive educational environment and one of our primary goals is to create a culture of caring and support: 'we care for the whole student and we care for one another'. We as a campus recognize that student well-being and good student mental health are critical foundations for student success. We are committed to campus wide mental health literacy and education about wellness and we, as a campus (through our policies, employee relations and the way we support our students) model the importance of wellness, self-care, resilience and social responsibility. Our campus community, including Faculty, staff and students are equipped with information about how to identify, respond and refer a student (or staff) in distress. When our students do reach out for help, they should feel supported and be validated, as the ability to ask for help is a strength, not a weakness. Through the identification of key mental health and student well-being indicators and measures, we can monitor the success/uptake of our programs and initiatives, and further our understanding of the changing needs of our students."