



## **PRESIDENT'S COMMISSION ON MENTAL HEALTH**

During the Team Sophie campaign for the University Students' Council Executive, students consistently spoke about the state of mental health on campus and asked what the USC would do if Team Sophie was elected. Recognizing that positive mental health has faced barriers on campus, this scan hopes to address efforts of the current USC and guide next steps.

### **Advocacy to Western Administration**

*One of the most important roles the USC can play is being an advocate to Western Administration on behalf of students. This can be done through partnerships with service providers on campus, policy change through Senate, and encouraging proactive initiatives from the University.*

This year: By working with the Vice-Provost of Academic Programs at Western, Team Sophie was able to successfully advocate for increasing the awareness of health resources on campus. This project was implementing a Mental Health and Wellness tab on OWL that would house the newly created Mental Health Resource Guide produced by all campus partners.

Further Steps: A recognizable gap in supporting students struggling with mental health barriers are restrictive and poorly applied accommodations policies. In the future, an examination of accommodation policy should be done by representatives of Senate, academic advisors from all over campus, and the leadership of Services for Students with Disabilities. This coordination is important to recognize those that

make and administer the policy can often have different intentions or beliefs. The contributions of SSD are also necessary because of their involvement with students who have permanent mental illness and therefore ongoing accommodations.

### **Funding of Services on Campus**

*The biggest challenge in delivering mental health services to students is a lack of resources. While there are limited opportunities to find new and necessary funding, working with the university to explore creative solutions for units on campus should be a priority.*

This year: The Student Services Committee at Western is a committee of students that oversee the increase of some Ancillary Fees to improve service to students in ways that the operating budget can not support. This year, SSC identified priorities that undergraduate and graduate students both had; the most important being more resources for mental health. After proposals from different units, SSC approved three fee increases relevant to better service delivery. The addition of a social worker in Student Health Services, the addition of Single-Session Therapy to the Student Development Centre, and stabilizing the Elders program for indigenous students through Indigenous Services.

Further Steps: To better use scarce resources that the university has for mental health support, and to prevent student fee increases when possible, Western should seriously consider the amalgamation of Student Health Services and the Student Development Centre. This would allow for many professionals to work under one united strategy, rather than having psychologists and psychiatrists report to different people in different departments.

### **Accessibility and Visibility of Services**

*While services need to improve, the accessibility and visibility of places to turn for help is also crucial in student-centric spaces on campus. Working to connect students to resources can break down barriers while they seek assistance.*

This year: February was an exciting month for the USC and Student Experience because it marked the opening of the Wellness Education Centre in the lower level of the University Community Centre. This partnership between the two groups began as an idea to give students another place to turn when in need and expanded to include the services of health promotion, programming space, and a Sexual Violence Prevention and Education Coordinator.

Further Steps: Another step in services for student in the University Community Centre could be re-purposing more space on the lower level for services providers. While the University provides professionals at no upfront charge to students, the USC Health Plan offers generous benefits to students that are currently not being taken advantage of. If space existed to have more practitioners on site, students would only benefit.

### **Heightened Awareness of Mental Health**

*In tandem with promoting the actual services that exist on Western's campus, general awareness of mental health and the stigma associated with mental illness reaches many students on campus who require education about the issue. By focusing resources towards the promotion of mental wellness, they will hopefully lead to a healthier campus overall.*

This year: A cornerstone USC event was the speaker series made possible by partnering with Student Experience and a donor. This initiative brought Kevin Breele and Clara Hughes – two very prominent mental health advocates – to campus for free events for students. These events helped build a stronger community on campus and promoted positive dialogues about mental wellness.

Further Steps: While some awareness events do not receive as much attention from the campus community, the Peer Support Centre is consistently providing programming and awareness campaigns to students. Parallel to running large-scale speaking events, the USC should fight to increase participation in events being held by the PSC that can be equally beneficial to students. Some of these include Holistic Health Week, weekly workshops, and simple motivational events like exam de-stressors.

### **Peer Support Centre**

*A great contribution the USC makes to mental health on campus is by facilitating the Peer Support Centre and its associated services. The Centre is not perfect, but its ability to adapt to student needs can ensure its legitimacy to users and partners.*

This year: The PSC started with a bang this year when the USC re-opened the centre in a new space and with a new funding model. By partnering with Student Experience and a donor, the PSC was able to increase foot traffic, hold more programming, better train volunteers to staff the centre, and create formal processes that should last into the future of the PSC.

Further Steps: Now that the PSC is much more functional and prepared to help students, the next step is to continue promoting its model to increase the amount of students who access services. Promotional campaigns and the support of the University can go a long way in increasing participation.

### **Education for USC Executive**

*Above the general education that students should receive on health and wellness, the USC has witnessed the need for Executives to take a leadership role in the advocacy*

*and service provision for the cause. This intimate involvement should require the Executive be well-educated on the problems and the solutions to mental wellness.*

This year: To better understand how the USC can combat mental illness, Alex Benac, USC Vice-President Internal travelled to the NASPA Strategies Conference. NASPA is known as the leading association for the advancement, health, and sustainability of the student affairs profession. After returning, Alex was able to report on many new strategies such as Wellness Coaching, the differentiation of best vs. desperate practices, economic impacts of these pervasive issues, and gatekeeper training.

Next Steps: With the shifting of the Peer Support Program from the VP Internal to the newly created Student Programs Officer, the learning curve for the individuals elected to that position might be large. To ensure the proper transition of the Program year over year, the USC should continue to educate the SPO in Safe Talk and Mental Health First Aid. The organization should also invest in continuing to attend relevant conferences and meetings that can provide new insight to Western and allowing USC staff or Associates to participate.

## **Orientation Week**

*Of all of the programs Western and the USC can be proud to provide students, Orientation Week holds a special place in the hearts of students. While the program is designed to support students through their transition to university, it can also be a time of high-stress and anxiety of incoming students and Sophs. A strategy to combat these reoccurring problems should be explored by all parties involved in the program.*

This year: One of the most glaring gaps in Orientation planning was the lack of resources on campus for volunteers and students after regular business hours. During a chaotic week for these students, support is necessary at all times of the day. This year, the USC was able to work with SDC to introduce a psychologist into the Peer Support Centre during the week for Soph support. The initiative received

very good reviews from individuals in the program and is something the USC hopes to continue for future years.

Further Steps: Getting students professional help is ideal in avoiding an incident of a mental illness crisis during Orientation Week, however having trained volunteers on the ground to recognize student needs is just as important. The Orientation Planning Committee has begun discussing the next steps of volunteer preparedness to hopefully increase the amount of people with training, but also improve all Sophs' ability to act when a student needs help.