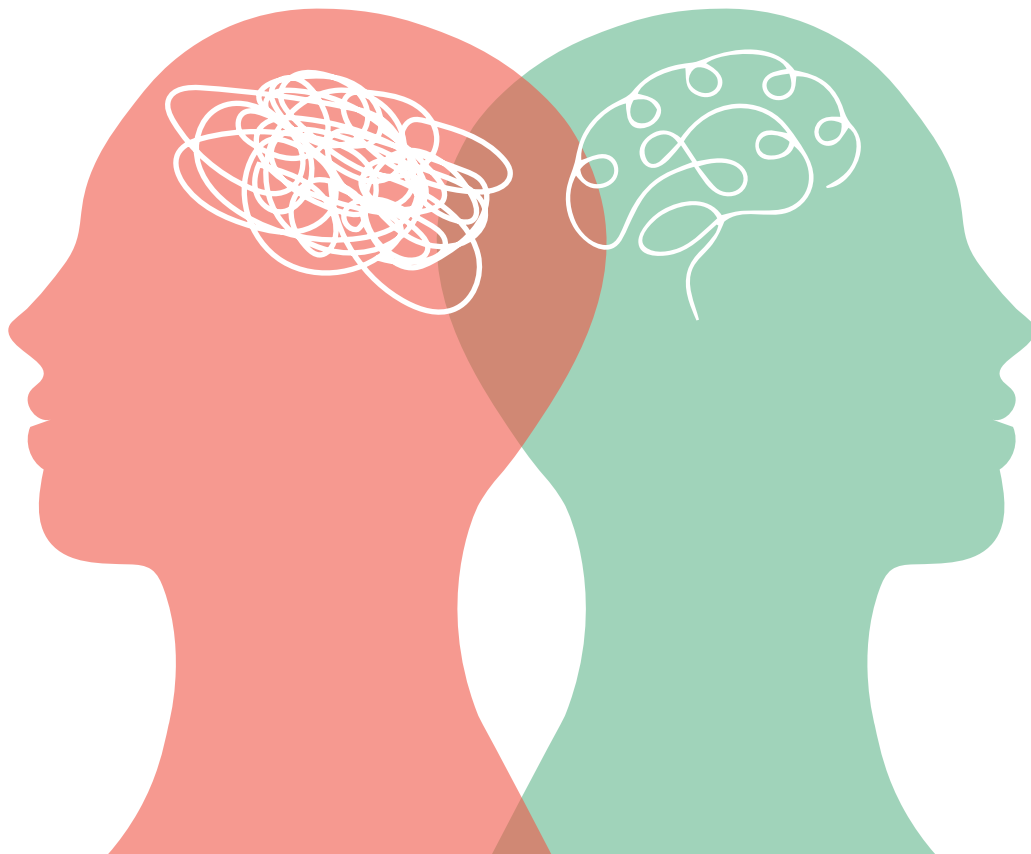
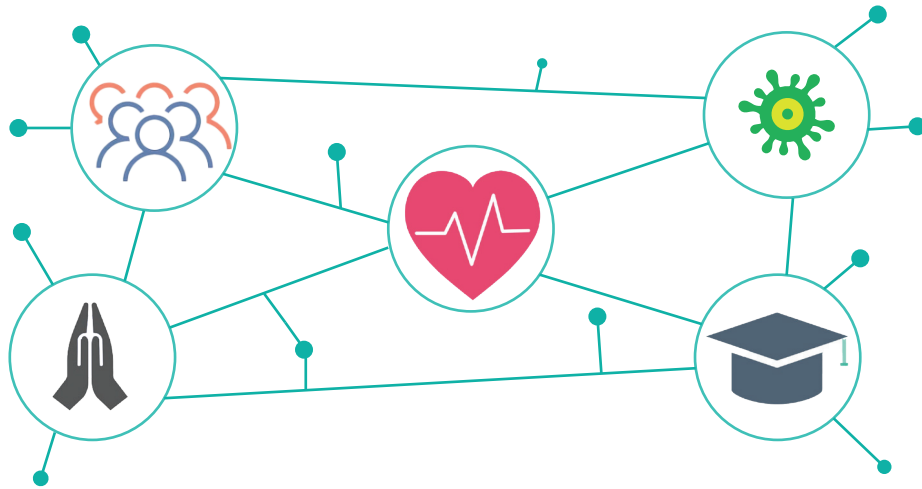




University Students' Council Standing Policy Mental Health Policy Paper



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Legislative History

Approved by Council November 29th, 2023

To be reviewed by Council in its 2026-2027 sitting

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The University of Western Ontario is located on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Lunaapeewak and Attawandaron peoples, who have long-standing relationships to the land and region of southwestern Ontario and the City of London. The local First Nation communities of this area include Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Oneida Nation of the Thames, and Munsee Delaware Nation. In the region, there are eleven First Nation communities and a growing Indigenous urban population. Western University values the significant historical and contemporary contributions of local and regional First Nations and all of the Original peoples of Turtle Island (North America).

To learn more about these Indigenous communities and how you can best be an ally, please refer to the London & Middlesex Indigenous Culture Card. For more information about land acknowledgements, please refer to the article “Rethinking the Practice and Performance of Indigenous Land Acknowledgment” by Robinson et al. A land acknowledgement is an important step in recognizing colonial history but should by no means be the full extent to which we acknowledge and support indigenous communities.



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DEFINITIONS

Mental Health - a state of emotional, psychological, and social healthfulness

Mental Illness - a disorder or inability to function “normally” in society over a prolonged period of time, a change in one’s way of thinking, moods or behaviours

Mental Health Crisis - severe distress or inability to cope often related to a specific event, an inability to function within the community or care for oneself. Possibly risk of harm to self or others but generally seen as stable enough to seek treatment within 24-72 hours

Mental Health Emergency - imminent risk of harm to self or others, psychosis/paranoia, overdose, medication side effects. Often used interchangeably with “Mental Health Crisis”

The journey to the hospital was traumatic enough, but for a University of Toronto student, the fact that it was done in handcuffs as she was put into a police car in view of a busy campus bus stop made it even more difficult to process. It was not the result of violence or an accident, but rather under the direction of a mental health counsellor on campus who insisted the student needed further intervention to prevent self harm¹.

The student in question sought help from the Health and Counselling Centre on campus in November of 2021. She was struggling with the same feelings that many students have as exams approached: stress and anxiety about academic workload, as well as some personal issues. When she revealed that she had some suicidal thoughts and had a bottle of pills with her, the counsellor insisted she be transferred to a nearby hospital and called campus police. When the police arrived they took her into custody, handcuffed her, and transported her to the hospital in a marked police cruiser. Visibly confused and frightened, no one seemed inclined to explain what was going on or why her friend was not allowed to accompany her to provide support. At the hospital, she was seen by a psychiatrist who suggested she continue seeing a counsellor and released her with a medical note for missed classes².

1 Sarah Treleaven, “Inside the mental health crisis at Canadian universities,” Maclean’s Education, November 14, 2022.

2 ibid



This is not an isolated incident seen only on post-secondary campuses, but is a daily reality for an increasing number of people who suffer from mental health concerns while trying to seek assistance from a mental health system that is not prepared to handle the emerging crisis.

Good mental health supports us throughout our lifetime, allowing us to participate in activities, make positive choices, engage in healthy relationships, and deal appropriately with life stressors. It affects our physical health, productivity, creativity and our ability to enjoy the everyday. However, one in five Canadians will experience mental illness at some point during their lives³ and many will need help to overcome the challenges. Roughly 75% of all mental health problems first manifest and are diagnosed in youth between the ages of 16-24⁴. The vast majority of post-secondary students fall directly into this age range, and many contend with emerging mental health problems at the same time as undergoing a number of potentially stressful adjustments during their educational journey. Periods of great transition and stress can take a toll on mental health, particularly for those who haven't developed strong coping mechanisms or established good mental care practices⁵. The University Students' Council believes it is of vital importance that post-secondary students are able to access the services they need to help support optimal mental health during this transitional period of life. Post-secondary institutions have the ability to provide early intervention services, preventative care, and help students develop self care strategies that will not only assist them while at school, but provide solid foundations to help them navigate and succeed in life.

Left untreated, those with minor mental issues may develop serious mental illness, turn to substances to try and cope and are prone to higher rates of suicide. The mental healthcare system in Canada is unable to support all patients currently in need of care, and is facing mounting pressures to support more and more Canadians. The University Students' Council at Western University has commissioned this paper and is calling on Western University and all levels of government to improve the mental health system so that no one is left behind.

3 Mental Illness and Addiction: Facts and Statistics," CAMH <https://www.camh.ca/en/driving-change/the-crisis-is-real/mental-health-statistics>

4 The National Standard for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students, Canadian Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2021

5 LaKeisha Fleming, "Finding Ease With Transition in Ever Changing Times," Verywellmind, February 8, 2022, <https://www.verywellmind.com/transitions-in-life-can-be-mentally-stressful-5216254#:~:text=Transitions%20can%20be%20stressful%2C%20and,you%20navigate%20life%20transitions%20successfully.>



BY THE NUMBERS

The mental health of post-secondary students has been a long standing concern in the university and college sector, and current trends are showing an alarming increase in the number of students who feel that their mental health is not optimal. In 2017, a report published by the Council of Ontario Universities noted that the number of students with mental health disorders had more than doubled over the previous five years⁶. They looked at statistics from the 2016 National College Health Assessment (NCHA) results showing that the rate of mental health concerns were increasing along with a growing rate of suicidal thoughts and attempts. Almost half of students (46%) responded that they had episodes of depression that affected their ability to function. Overwhelming anxiety was cited by 65% of students as an issue. Those with suicidal thoughts increased to 14% of respondents and 2.2% had attempted suicide in the past year⁷. In the report “Who is coming through the door?” researchers looking at the same study isolated 8248 Canadian students who had sought on-campus services for help⁸. Of those students who reached out for help to cope 95% were feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, 68% depressed, 76% hopeless, 87% sad, 81% lonely and 83% anxious⁹. More recently, a 2019 survey from the Centre for Innovation in Campus Health reports a drastic increase in reported stress and anxiety with 87% of students surveyed indicating they felt “overwhelming” anxiety¹⁰. Exposure to periods of overwhelming anxiety or stress can have a lasting impact on both physical and mental health. Students can experience problems with concentration, fatigue, insomnia and eating disorders which can in turn affect their academic performance.

6 In It Together Taking Action on Student Mental Health, Council of Ontario Universities, November 2017

7 ibid

8 John Ogrodniczuk, David Kealy and Oliver Laverdiere, “Who is coming through the door? A national survey of self-reported problems among post-secondary school students who have attended campus mental health services in Canada,” pub. July 2021, Wiley Online Library, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/capr.12439>

9 ibid

10 Stress and Anxiety on Post-Secondary Campuses, Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health https://campusmentalhealth.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CICMH_StressandAnxiety_Infosheet-rbc.pdf



If not addressed, more serious issues like depression, withdrawal from society, and reliance on drugs or alcohol can emerge¹¹. Conditions may worsen in those who have pre-existing issues, and may lead to long term disorders such as Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Phobias and Panic Attacks¹². Eventually, long term exposure to stress and anxiety will weaken the immune system and can lead to a deterioration of physical health and increased chances of suffering from hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, depression, and memory problems¹³. Not only can these issues affect students while they are on campus, but they can have long ranging effects on their future employability, the economy, and the health care system.

Many of the stressors that post-secondary students face are directly related to the transition to the post-secondary environment. Institutions are positioned to provide assistance at a critical window of opportunity to provide support, treatment or resilience strategies which will not only improve immediate outcomes but also provide lifelong benefits to individuals. Unfortunately, a lack of services and service providers on-campus and in the community threatens the ability of many to access the help they need, when they need it.

11 “The Dark Side Of Anxiety: 7 Effects of Anxiety on the Body,” Medanta, April 21, 2019 <https://www.medanta.org/patient-education-blog/the-dark-side-of-anxiety-7-effects-of-anxiety-on-the-body>

12 ibid

13 “Stress symptoms: Effects on your body and behaviour,” Mayo Clinic, August 10 2023 <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-symptoms/art-20050987>



A NOTE ABOUT THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Possible long term effects on mental health from additional pressures experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e. social isolation, loss of income, frequent shifts from in-person to on-line learning platforms, missing out on milestone events like graduations) are yet to be fully realized. Long range studies are still in the data collection stage, but preliminary findings support the reported decline in general mental health as a direct result of difficulties experienced during the pandemic. The uncertainty, social isolation and loss of income that many faced during the pandemic contributed to an increase in anxiety and depression, with around 40% of Canadians indicating a significant negative impact on their mental health during this time¹⁴.

Post-secondary populations are among those most affected by the pandemic¹⁵. A 2022 report published jointly by the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) and the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) in September 2022 found that 75% of students indicated that the pandemic negatively impacted their mental health; 74% said that the pandemic worsened their pre-existing mental health challenges; and, 61% said it created new mental health struggles. Those identifying as a visible minority, 2SLGBTQ+, Indigenous, living with a disability, or living with a pre-existing mental health concern were disproportionately impacted¹⁶.

The pandemic exposed existing inadequacies in the mental health system as increasing numbers of students sought aid. A lack of mental health staff lead to long wait times for appointments, there was inadequate funding to cover the expressed needs of students, restrictive campus policies didn't recognize the effects of poor mental health on schooling, students had difficulty accessing accommodations and faced a general lack of consultation about mental health strategies from school administration¹⁷ all of which contributed to students feeling a lack of much needed support.

14 "Cycle 2: Symptoms of anxiety and depression during the COVID-19 pandemic." Public Health Agency of Canada, May 2021 <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/cycle-2-symptoms-anxiety-depression-covid-19-pandemic.html>

15 "The New Abnormal: New Study Finds Post-Secondary Students Struggling to Manage Mental Health Two Years into Covid-19," Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, Mental Health Commission of Canada, (2022).

16 *ibid*

17 S. Treleaven, "Inside the mental health crisis at Canadian Universities," Maclean's Education (November 14, 2022).



As COVID-19 has shifted from epidemic to endemic, newly released studies are showing a trend towards a slow recovery and return to pre-pandemic mental health levels¹⁸. Healthy Minds Network conducted a survey in the United States with results indicating a slight reduction in anxiety, depression and suicide rates during 2022-2023, and an overall increase in positive mental health rates¹². McGill University has also released preliminary results from a global study suggesting that reports of worsening mental health during the pandemic was indicative of a snapshot of a specific period of time, and overall there was a “limited impact of the pandemic on mental health, underlining the strength of human resilience” as numbers begin to return to near pre-pandemic benchmarks²⁰. Despite this, students are continuing to seek professional help in increasing numbers and mental health care on campus requires further investment to deal with the demand.

18 J. Blake, “Student Mental Health Slightly Improves”, Inside Higher Ed (September 1, 2023).

19 J. Blake, “Student Mental Health Slightly Improves”, Inside Higher Ed (September 1, 2023).

20 “World’s most comprehensive study on COVID-19 mental health,” McGill Newsroom, March 8, 2023.



EVALUATION AND MEASUREMENT OF SERVICE STANDARDS AND PROVISION OF SERVICE

The only way we can determine the strengths or failures of a system is through evaluation. Great programs and services cannot be implemented without the appropriate funding, but of equal importance is the ability to track and gauge the effectiveness of programs, ultimately creating a service level benchmark. Western's 2018 Student Mental Health and Wellness Strategic Plan expires in 2023; a summit was scheduled for 2019 to assess the plan, and evaluation reports were to be released by the Office of Student Experience. To the best of the University Students' Council's knowledge, the 2019 summit did not occur. The USC is concerned about the lack of progress reports regarding the 2018 plan and that it does not appear that work has been done to create a new plan to commence in 2024. We request that Western commit to the creation of a new strategic plan that will outline the proactive steps and policies that will be adhered to, including a data tracking and reporting mechanism. We also recommend the re-establishment of the Student Mental Health and Wellness Advisory Committee which should include student representation.

The 2018 plan included an initiative to create an electronic health record that could be shared between different on-campus services with the intention of streamlining the care process and preventing students from having to explain their conditions repeatedly to different care providers. The University Students' Council would like an update on the status of this potentially helpful tool, and information on how students' privacy will be protected.

Students are concerned that Western's Wellness and Well-being services do not have the required resources to meet the needs of students on campus, but there is little to no publicly available information regarding the current status of Western's Mental Health system. Specifically, students want to know:

- How many students are accessing the services
- If any students are being turned away due to capacity issues
- The wait times for service
- Which types of service programs have the greatest impact on students (individual therapies, group therapies, self-guided programs, holistic programming etc.)
- How effective promotion of the services are

Statistics regarding Western's Mental Health system are crucial to ensure Western



University and its stakeholders can determine what has been successful and what areas require improvement.

A lack of measurement and reporting in both the public and private sectors also makes it next to impossible to hold Western or Community agencies to a service standard. Neither the provincial or federal governments have mechanisms in place to measure the provision of mental health services as they do for other health issues like surgery wait times. In 2005, measurement tools to track wait times for certain types of surgeries were implemented in Ontario and as a result, areas of weakness were identified and subsequent funding was re-directed to appropriate avenues resulting in a reduction of wait times²¹. According to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, there is a national standard for mental health services in the development stages²², but an estimated launch date is not provided. This oversight needs to be corrected in order to accurately determine the needs of Canadians and make sure the supports are put in place so that timely and effective services can be provided.

Based on information that is available, current wait times to obtain an initial consultation with a community based mental health professional range from 22 days to 4 months on average, with wait times for specialists at over two years²³. By comparison, Western's Student Wellness and Well-Being services should be commended that they are able to schedule appointments for students within approximately two weeks and are working towards the ultimate goal of providing appointments in 72 hours. Wellness and Well-being also tries to hold some same-day appointment slots for emergencies²⁴. From September 18 until December 11 2023, Western has engaged the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) to provide crisis counselling services from 5 to 9 pm twice a week to address requests from students for increased after hours assistance for those in immediate need. A Gazette article from April 2022 reported that 3327 Western students were treated by mental health counsellors in the fall of 2021²⁵. With a total enrollment for that year of just over 43 000 students this equals about 7% of the student body receiving services. It is unknown whether this is the capacity that could be seen by campus counsellors, or is simply a reflection of the number of students who sought help. Without accurate tracking mechanisms in place, we cannot definitively determine if these supports are effective or are addressing the needs for those seeking counselling or crisis services.

21 Rachel Loebach, Sasha Ayoubzadeh, "Wait times for psychiatric care in Ontario," University of Western Ontario Medical Journal, 86:2 (Fall 2017).

22 <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/52749.html>

23 Jennifer Ferreira, "Some Canadians waiting months for public and private mental health services," CTV News (December 23, 2022) <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/some-canadians-waiting-months-for-public-and-private-mental-health-services-1.6204350>.

24 Estella Ren, "Students face long wait times for mental health support," The Gazette (April 7 2022).

25 *ibid*



Universities for their provision of student services²⁶. The types of mental health services offered at Western and those of the University of Manitoba, which ranked second best in the prior year, are highly comparable. Similarly, mental health services at other U15 schools in Ontario (limited to Ontario as other provinces may be subject to different health care mandates) tend to share several common attributes and services:

A centralized hub for mental and physical health services.

Provide short term care to students while referring those with more intensive needs to community services better equipped to assist.

Most use a call-for-appointment system in order to triage the service level needed and have very limited walk-in appointment slots available.

Students are placed with the professionals who have the most experience with their particular issue.

Holistic programming is available on most campuses with some schools being more robust in their offerings than others.

There are a few exceptional mental health initiatives at various U15 institutions that are worth noting. McMaster's Student Union has created Maccess which focuses on providing supports for those with a disability, chronic illness, mental health or accessibility issues²⁷. McMaster utilizes a colour coded "Pathways to Care"²⁸ service stream on their website that is very easy to use. Students either choose the best option for themselves or are directed to an option by a counsellor, and they can follow the recommendations, services etc. that are indicated by that particular colour route to provide optimal wellness. The University of Toronto uses a chatbot to help students quickly navigate to areas of interest on their Mental Health website, and the University of Waterloo has posted videos to demonstrate what a student can expect during intake procedures and appointments, and how to get the most out of self help resources. They also host Impact²⁹, a program which partners crisis support personnel with campus special constables to help manage triggering situations for those in crisis.

The ultimate goal of the University Student's Council is to ensure that mental health provisions are adequate to meet the needs of the student body. Until tools are put in place to allow for the collection and examination of services, we must rely on what has been reported to us by the students who are trying to access assistance. Based on an informal poll that the University Students' Council conducted with students

26 <https://education.macleans.ca/feature/canadas-best-medical-doctoral-universities-rankings-2024/>

27 <https://msumcmaster.ca/service/maccess/>

28 <https://wellness.mcmaster.ca/services/counselling/accessing-counselling/>

29 <https://uwaterloo.ca/campus-wellness/partnership-impact>



in September 2023, particular emphasis has been placed on the following services needing improvements:

Decrease wait times for initial consultations and between sessions through the hiring of more counsellors.

According to International Accreditation of Counseling Services the ideal ratio of counsellors to students on campus should be 1:1000 or 1:1500 (if other supportive services are offered); however, the average number recorded in 2013 shows that most campuses are operating closer to 1:1600³⁰. Based on information taken from Western's staff directory it appears that there are 16 mental health counsellors and/or specialists on the Student Experience staff as of October 2023. With total enrollment just over 32 000 undergraduate students in 2023, Western's counsellor to student ratio is 1:2000. To achieve a ratio closer to the ideal of 1:1500 mentioned above, Western would need to hire 5 to 6 additional counsellors. As Western plans to increase student numbers to 50 000 over the coming years, we expect additional counsellors to be hired in order to maintain or improve upon the ratio.

Expand hours of service to include more after hour and weekend supports, and increase service levels during periods of higher stress like exams.

As mental health issues can occur at any time, not just during business hours, it is important to provide service outside of traditional business hours, including holidays and increase service during known high-stress periods like midterms and exams.

Aim to hire counsellors with diverse backgrounds and lived experiences allowing students to see someone that they can make a connection with.

Students are asking for increased diversity in mental health professionals at Western University (racial, cultural and gender) and would like to have the ability to choose the healthcare practitioner they will work with.

³⁰ "Statement Regarding Recommended Staff to Student Ratios", International Accreditation of Counseling Services (2019), <https://iacsinc.org/staff-to-student-ratios/#:~:text=Since%20the%20standard%20ratio%20of,as%20the%20center's%20ratio%20increases.>



Increase Access Points to Service / Expand Methods of Booking Appointments

Students have expressed frustration in having to make a phone call to set up an appointment, and with the amount of time spent on hold waiting to talk with reception. Students have requested a call back system which would allow them to leave their contact info, carry on with their day and receive a phone call when reception is available to talk. Students have also suggested that an online appointment calendar or user profile for subsequent appointments could streamline the service.

Continuity of Care

Students are interested in consistency and long term care in their mental health appointments so that they can work with the same counsellor for the duration of their time on campus, eliminating the need to re-explain their history with new care providers and switch to a new style of treatment.

Religious and Cultural Supports

Students of various religions have been asking for religious and cultural service offerings for many years. More multi faith spaces for prayer and quiet contemplation are needed and they should be accessible at times students need them. Students who adhere to Kosher and Halal faiths often have difficulties in finding appropriate food offerings on campus that would allow them to share in a meal with other students.

There are a limited number of faith leaders listed on the Western Chaplains site. A recruitment campaign to bring more leaders on campus for office hours should be undertaken or a list of active liaisons should be compiled in order to provide students who are new to the community access to a variety of faith contacts. The website also needs reviewing as the activities page indicates that updates are coming in Fall of 2021.

Recommendations:

- Western University should implement an updated mental health strategic plan for 2024 that will outline the proactive steps and policies that will be adhered to, including a robust data tracking and reporting mechanism with a commitment to release information about service provisions and use on a regular basis.
- Western University should re-establish the Student Mental Health and Wellness



- Advisory Committee, which must include student representation.
- The University Students' Council would like an update on the status of the electronic health record, and information on how students' privacy will be protected.
- In the absence of adequate data on service levels and standards Western University should improve their levels of service to more adequately reflect the needs that students have identified as lacking.
- The government of Ontario should implement a wait time reporting tool for mental health services to ensure accountability and track service levels in order to make improvements.



DEDICATED VARSITY SPORTS MENTAL HEALTH SPECIALIST(S)

Varsity athletes add much to Western's culture and are a source of pride. Their dedication to sporting excellence should be reciprocated with access to dedicated mental health supports that will allow them to thrive personally and excel at their peak performance levels. Athletes are expected to maintain high academic standards while trying to balance grueling practice and game schedules, frequent travel and injuries. Their punishing schedule makes accessing counsellors through Western's Wellness and Well-being site even more challenging. Western's coaches and assistant coaches are required to take a 45 minute training session on mental health³¹ which is inadequate to address the varying needs of diverse athletes. The majority of universities across Canada have recognized the additional challenges that athletes face and many have already included mental health coaches and dedicated specialists to their athletic teams. Many have also implemented SAMHI Campus Teams³² (Student Athlete Mental Health Initiatives) to promote positive mental health in sport.

Recommendations:

- Western University should hire dedicated mental health specialists to service student athletes
- Western University should establish a chapter of SAMHI to promote mental health and well being among varsity level athletes

31 Safe Sport at Western University, <https://westernmustangs.ca/sports/2023/10/1/safe-sport-at-western-university.aspx>

32 "Campus Team Handbook," Student-Athlete Mental Health Initiative, 2022. <https://campusmentalhealth.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/SAMHI-Handbook-2021-2022.pdf> SAMHI was established in 2014 by a former student athlete to protect and promote the mental health of post secondary athletes.



A SERVICE THAT IS UNDERFUNDED AND UNDERSTAFFED

Early identification of potential issues in youth can lead to better prognosis and targeted services, ultimately saving the individual years of struggles and the community substantial amounts in tax dollars³³. In 2009 the Minister of Health & Long Term Care reported that “each \$1.00 spent on mental health and addictions saves \$7 in health care costs and \$30 in lost productivity and social costs.”³⁴ He further added that investments were required to support the system and it simply could not be ignored.

Unfortunately, despite acknowledging the importance of positive mental health for the whole person and the benefits of early prevention and treatment, mental health remains poorly funded. Conservative estimates from 2011 indicate that mental health care alone cost the Canadian Health Care system approximately \$49 billion³⁵- a number that could be reduced by early intervention and preventative care. CAMH indicates that while other OECD countries allocate 10-11% of their health budgets on mental health, Canadian Federal contributions are only 7% even though mental health issues represent a significant disease burden. They estimate that the system is currently underfunded by \$1.5 billion³⁶.

In addition, in a large part due to the increased stress and demand for service during the pandemic, large numbers of mental health professionals moved from community based providers into private practice, or left the profession altogether³⁷. The resulting shortages have meant longer wait times and more difficulty in finding the appropriate services for all members of the community, including post-secondary students. Without increased funding for mental health care professionals, including increasing the number of seats available to train them, this shortage will not improve.

33 “Making the Case for Investing in Mental Health in Canada,” Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2016
“Making the Case for Investing in Mental Health in Canada,” Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2016
www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/wp-content/uploads/drupal/2016-06/Investing_in_Mental_Health_FINAL_Version_ENG.pdf

34 Legislative Assembly of Ontario, Committee Transcript October 7, 2009 <https://www.ola.org/en/legislative-business/committees/mental-health-addictions/parliament-39/transcripts/committee-transcript-2009-oct-07>

35 Wait times for psychiatric care in Ontario, R. Loebach and S. Ayoubzadeh, University of Western Ontario Medical Journal Vol. 86 No. 2, 2017

36 “According equitable funding for mental health care,” CAMH News & Stories, <https://www.camh.ca/en/camh-news-and-stories/according-equitable-funding-for-mental-healthcare#:~:text=Relative%20to%20this%20burden%2C%20mental,care%20budgets%20on%20mental%20health.>

37 Ariana Kelland, “Mass exodus of psychologists from Eastern Health leaves high vacancy rates and patients waiting,” CBC Investigates, June 22, 2022.



During the 2020-2021 academic year, the Ontario government allocated \$19.25 million to post-secondary institutions for mental health supports to assist students during the pandemic. No further dedicated mental health funding has been made available to colleges and universities. Recent funding announcements focus on children in primary and secondary schools, Kids Help Phone, and the Get-A-Head program (which includes a post-secondary specific stream, endorsed by University of Waterloo and Humber College). The government of Ontario should reinstate a funding stream dedicated to post-secondary mental health to ensure adequate supports can be provided to all students.

On World Mental Health Day 2023 Federal Ministers Mark Holland (Minister of Health) and Ya'ara Saks (Minister of Mental Health and Addictions) released a statement proclaiming that Mental Health is a universal right. They noted the importance of mental health education and supports as part of the national health care plan, and especially the need to provide additional support for children and teens. Despite the proclamation, the \$500 million in funding to support the hiring of counsellors for colleges and universities that the Liberal party promised in 2021 has not yet materialized. CASA and Universities Canada have mounted an awareness campaign to appeal to the government to release these funds immediately. To show their commitment to the importance of mental health supports for post-secondary students, the Federal government should deliver on its promise and release the funds.

Recommendations:

- The government of Ontario should reinstate a mental health funding stream dedicated to supporting post-secondary students.
- The government of Ontario should increase funding for seats to train and retain mental health professionals.
- The Federal government should immediately release promised funds to support the hiring of additional mental health practitioners on post-secondary campuses.



STANDARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Western University launched their Mental Health Strategy in 2018 with the intent to implement campus policies and services modelled on the CACUSS³⁸ Mental Health Framework, which has been endorsed by CMHA. The “Framework” was developed collaboratively by 300 association members from over 70 post-secondary institutions across Canada³⁹. It provides guidance on how to support mental health on campus through a series of actions, including:

- A commitment to Institutional planning and policy that emphasizes wellness
- Providing a supportive and inclusive campus
- Raising mental health awareness
- Acting on early indicators of student concern
- Providing students with the means to self-manage their health and develop coping skills
- Providing accessible mental health services

While very much in line with other mental health strategies, the CACUSS framework places more of an emphasis on the student to actively participate and take ownership over their own wellness journey, ultimately placing more of the responsibility on the patient to ensure their needs are being met.

While this system may be the most advantageous for Western University, the University Students’ Council urges our campus leaders to implement other standards to further improve their offerings to students. The National Standard for Mental Health and Wellbeing for Post Secondary Students takes a more community minded approach by sharing the responsibility of care between students, staff, the institution, and the community⁴⁰. It raises the focus of mental health to being the priority in all aspects of (campus) life. By committing to the National Standard, not only would Western University have access to supports provided by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, but could utilize pre-existing audit tools and tap into additional sources of funding for programming through Bell Let’s Talk grants. Students would benefit from more patient-friendly policies which reduce the need for as much self-advocacy.

38 CACUSS or The Canadian Association of College and University Student Services is a nationwide group of front-line student advisory service providers.

39 <http://cacuss-campusmentalhealth.ca/framework.html#/>

40 “Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students,” MHCC and Standards Council of Canada, July 2020



The University Students' Council also recommends that Western University sign the Okanagan Charter. Drafted in 2015 with input from 45 countries, it is a global commitment to promote physical and mental health and wellness on campus. It emphasizes student participation in identifying and actively engaging in finding solutions to problems through the lens of human rights and environmental sustainability, and champions the use of holistic approaches in understanding the connections between physical and mental health.

Most mental health strategies include a mandate to increase awareness of mental health on campus in an attempt to reduce stigma as well as to promote available services. However, many Institutions tend to overestimate the levels of knowledge students have about support services offered on campus. A recent article by Inside Higher Education suggests that 60% of students were not aware of the full suite of supportive services offered to them, with health services, peer mentoring, and success coaching being the services that the fewest knew about⁴¹. This is an area that warrants some attention at Western University. Based on responses to the University Students' Council September 2023 poll, there are clear indications that students lack awareness of the Wellness and Well-being website and subsequently the knowledge to access the range of services available to them. Students indicated that they would like to see the following actions taken to improve awareness of services on campus:

Active promotion of the Wellness and Well-being website on social media, with links provided on Brightspace and included on syllabi.

Inclusion of links on that website to other helpful resources such as Accessible Services, Peer Support Groups, Academic Accommodations and Considerations (Academic Support and Engagement), Skills Learning (Learning Development, and Success), Financial Counselling and Financial Aid programming (Office of the Registrar).

Continuous monitoring of the Wellness and Well-being website for broken links and improvements that could make site navigation more user friendly.

By improving awareness of the wide range of on and off-campus support networks that can be found on the Wellness and Well-being site, Western University could not only help students take a more active role in their own health and wellness journey, but could address some of the complaints raised by students who are simply unaware that these services are already available.

41 Lack of Awareness Causes Student to Fall Through the Cracks, A. Mowreader, Inside Higher Ed., July 20, 2023.



Recommendations:

- Western University should adopt the National Standard for Mental Health and Wellbeing for Post Secondary Students.
- Western University should become a signatory to the Okanagan Charter.
- Western University needs to increase awareness of their Wellness and Well-Being website and include links to the wide range of other supportive services that are available across campus to create a truly one stop service hub.



CONCLUSION

Students arrive at university excited and hopeful for a full range of experiences that will become a launching point for their careers and shape their future lives. For many, this will be their reality. Unfortunately, for an ever growing number of students, the time at post-secondary institutions coincides with enormous stresses both academically and personally that can have a negative impact on their mental wellness. Post-secondary institutions, if they so choose, can play a crucial role in providing timely intervention that can positively change the trajectory of a young person's life. Supports may be in place for those who reach out, but we need to ensure that the community as a whole is willing and able to recognize students who may be in distress and not able to advocate for themselves.

As we enter a period of recovery after the effects of COVID-19, we cannot assume that the crisis is over. Students will continue to need access to supports that will help them navigate what is oftentimes a complicated life. Continued compassion is needed at all levels of society, and policies should reflect care for both mental and physical health while acknowledging that there are many factors that may influence the two.

Post-secondary institutions should not carry the burden of providing wellness services alone. Mental health, or lack thereof, affects many sectors of society and the health care system. Both provincial and federal governments must contribute financially to bolster and support a system that impacts one fifth of Canadians. They must also be able to measure the successes and failures of the system in order to make improvements so that we can have a mental health care system to rival any in the world.





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