

2013

Ryerson Mental Health Advisory Committee Report

BACKGROUND

The Ryerson Mental Health Advisory Committee was established in January 2012 to respond to the increasing recognition and impact of mental health issues on student, staff, and faculty success. The Committee was tasked with creating a mental health strategy for Ryerson University.

The Advisory Committee reports to the Provost and Vice President, Academic and the Vice President, Administration and Finance. It is co-chaired by Su-Ting Teo (Director, Student Health and Wellness) and Jan Neiman (Manager, Pensions and Benefits). The Committee's membership reflects a wide range of Ryerson University stakeholders: students, staff, and faculty; and people with mental health experience and expertise. Toronto Public Health is represented as an external stakeholder.

The Advisory Committee developed a Terms of Reference, began an overall strategy for moving forward, and established four working groups.

MANDATE AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

At its initial meetings the Advisory Committee discussed its mandate and formulated its basic approach to mental health issues that was informed by multiple approaches. Coming to shared understandings, the committee decided to adopt the Public Agency of Canada vision/definition of mental health: "*The capacities of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections, and personal dignity.*"

A major part of the committee's mandate, as described in the Terms of Reference is: "*To create a comprehensive mental health strategy for Ryerson that aims to develop and maintain a campus environment that fosters this broad vision [i.e., the vision adopted from the Public Health Agency of Canada] of mental health and well-being. Through decision-making, policies, systems, pedagogy, structures and delivery of education and services the strategy will align with the Ryerson University mission, the Academic Plan, diverse knowledge bases, campus cultural centres and external strategies.*"

The Terms of Reference also indicate that: "*In keeping with our diverse community, it [mental health] may extend not only to medical conceptions of illness and health but Indigenous conceptions of social, spiritual and community well-being, critical notions of Madness and disability and cultural interpretations of wellness.*"

WORKING GROUPS

In order to develop a comprehensive mental health strategy for Ryerson the Committee established four working groups: Awareness, Education and Training; Curriculum and Pedagogy; Policies and Procedures; and Services and Programs. The working groups were composed of members of the Advisory Committee and additional student, staff, and faculty recruited from the Ryerson Community. They met over the course of the 2012-13 academic year and submitted interim reports which form the basis of this Interim Report.

Awareness, Education, and Training

The Awareness, Education, and Training Working Group gathered information on current mental health training, awareness and education programming at Ryerson University and other Canadian universities. The working group conducted a Ryerson departmental and staff survey and a Ryerson student survey asking about programs; and education and training needs. They reviewed Canadian university websites regarding mental health communications and asked colleagues at other institutions about training programs. The working group found there was a great need/desire for education around mental health issues from those surveyed. They also found that there is a wide range of education and training available at Ryerson, but that there is a lack of co-ordination and consistency, in addition to gaps.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

The Curriculum and Pedagogy working group conducted a scan of all available courses at Ryerson to gauge mental health content in curriculum on campus and had one focus group of educators on issues of pedagogy and mental health. A second focus group is planned for Fall of 2013. The group determined that there is a substantial amount of mental health content in the Ryerson curriculum; that existing curriculum is mostly of the kind that is in line with positivist and medical approaches; that a small group of educators are teaching critical/structural/Mad positive aspects of mental health, but they are definitely in the minority.

Policy and Procedures

The Policy and Procedures working group discussed overarching policy concerns, general principles and issues and how to review existing policies with a mental well-being policy lens. They examined three major academic policies (134, 135, and 145) in the context of mental well-being and used the ideas and insights from these more focused discussions to further inform ideas about overarching policy and general principles and issues. The working group drafted two documents: a “Mental Well-being Statement of Commitment” and a list of proposed “Overarching Policy Principles” to provide a mental well-being lens to guide Ryerson policy review (see Appendix).

Services and Programs

The Services and Programs working group gathered information about existing Ryerson services and programs that support/promote mental health. The information was collected via e-mail, direct face to face contact, and by searching the Ryerson website. For the areas of HR, Centre for Student Development and Counselling, Access Centre, RAC, the information came directly from members of the working group. The student representatives on the working group provided information on the extent to which services were perceived by students as having either a positive or negative impact on mental health. The working group was able to identify a wide range of existing services and programs, but noted that there are many gaps and a lack of consistency in message and content. They also noted that services and programs can be difficult to find and navigate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Advisory Committee proposes that the following recommendations be implemented in the short term, and that they are critical in providing a framework and foundation for organizational change and future work.

- The “Mental Well-being Statement of Commitment” should be endorsed by the Ryerson senior leadership and subsequently by the Senate and the Board of Governors;
- The “Overarching Policy Principles” providing a mental well-being lens for policy review should be endorsed by the Ryerson senior leadership and subsequently used in the context of policy reviews done at the university;
- The Statement of Commitment and the Principles should inform and be integrated into the new Academic Plan;
- The Statement of Commitment and the Principles should be applied to other relevant areas and processes (e.g., leadership core competencies, People First, other sub-committees of the Mental Health Advisory Committee);
- In line with the proposed Statement of Commitment and Principles, the strategy should be named the ‘Ryerson Mental Well-being Strategy’ (rather than the Mental Health Strategy).

The Advisory Committee recommends the following recommendations should be implemented in the longer term. These recommendations will increase understanding and communication of information and knowledge of mental health, and of services available to students and staff. This in turn will help to create a more supportive campus community.

- Ryerson should create a central website for services, programs, workshops, and any other information and resources related to mental health at Ryerson, informed by best practices at other institutions as appropriate;
- Ryerson should develop a strategic plan to
 - a) co-ordinate and enhance services, and
 - b) provide standard, systematic and co-ordinated education and training.

ONGOING WORK FOR 2013-14

The working groups will be re-configured and their work re-defined, based in part on the acceptance of the recommendations in this Interim Report.

We expect that the work of the Policy and Procedures working group will continue with further recommendations coming forward related to specific Ryerson policies and procedures.

We expect that the work of the Services and Programs and the Awareness, Education and Training working groups will use the information gathered and move to planning a possible central website and developing a strategic plan for services, supports, education and training.

The Curriculum and Pedagogy working group will continue its work and provide recommendations.

In addition, the Advisory Committee will work with the Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and with Access Ryerson to ensure that our work is integrated with theirs, with the overarching goal being the creation of a supportive and inclusive environment for all students, faculty and staff at Ryerson.

Finally, the Advisory Committee, after continuing investigation, analysis, discussion, and implementation will submit another report in 2014.