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# AAU Student Mental Health Strategy: From Survive to Thrive

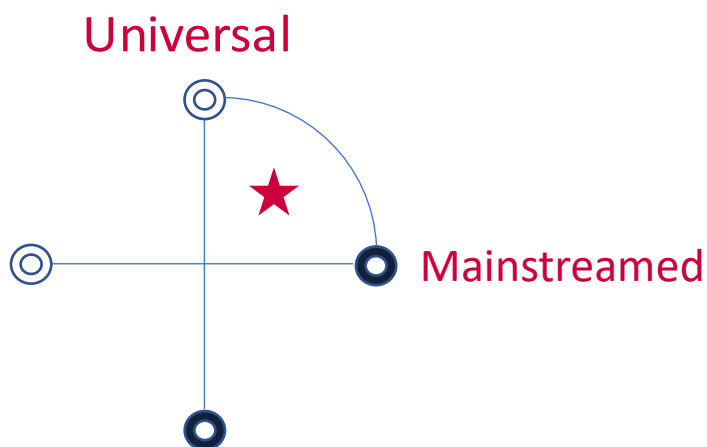
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The AAU vision is to create an environment where students possess the skills and resources necessary to flourish! The AAU Strategy covers three primary areas: 1) Institutional commitment, 2) Decrease unmet need through innovation in service design, and 3) Resiliency.

## **1. Institutional Commitment:**

Campus policies and the broader institutional structures have an impact on the environment and culture of a university by reinforcing or promoting certain beliefs, values, and behaviours; while simultaneously discouraging others (CACUSS, 2013). As policies and institutional structures have an impact on the culture of an institution this is an important and advantageous avenue by which University's can set the tone vis-à-vis mental health. The recommendation to engage in strategic policy reviews has been included in mental health strategy documents at every level, from Canadian colleges to national organizations. It is recognized that reviewing and adopting policies that underscore fairness and inclusion can be transformative to the mental health landscape by establishing norms, building awareness, improving the quality of health services, protecting students, and discouraging harmful behaviours.



The conceptual framework from *Policy Approaches to Post-Secondary Student Mental Health* is built around the idea of two spectrums and specifies how universities can evaluate each of their policies using two discrete continua. On one axis is the mental health policy type that ranges from individual to universal. Individual

policies specifically support students experiencing mental health concerns while on the other end universal policies attempt to address a single issue for all students, regardless of disability or mental health status. The second axis focuses on approaches to policy development, implementation, and evaluation. This axis spans the distance between consolidated or

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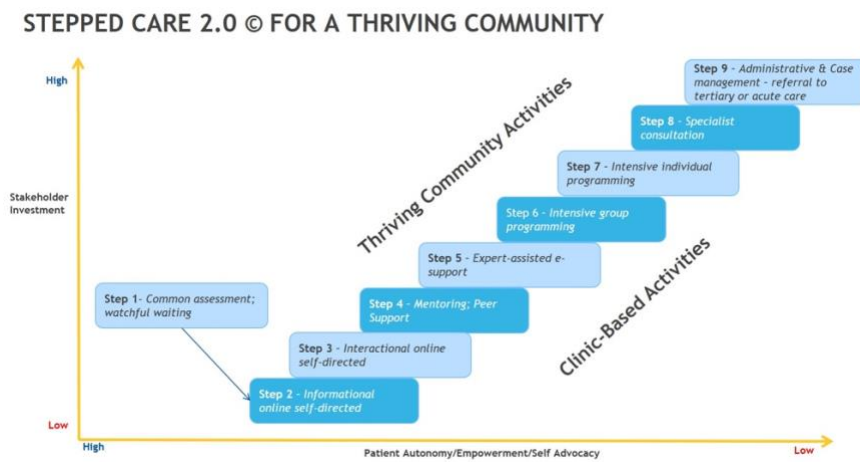
mainstreamed approaches. A mainstreamed approach does not necessarily create specific mental health policies *per se*, rather stakeholders focus on creating mechanisms or guidelines to facilitate examining university policies through a mental health or wellness lens.

## **2. Decrease unmet need through innovation in service design:**

The *accessibility* of mental health services is a key factor that can impact how effectively campus mental health services can serve the campus and its student population. As students with high levels of psychological distress tend to have lower academic self-efficacy, and low self-efficacy is often correlated with lower use of available campus resources (Brackney & Karabenick, 1995), it is our prerogative to provide the most visible and accessible set of services possible.

### ***Stepped Care:***

Stepped care is a model of service delivery where treatment options are organized in a hierarchy of intensity (O’Donohue & Draper, 2011). Stepped care does not confine itself to traditional 50-minute one-on-one sessions as the default for each patient. Stepped care focuses instead on triaging patients into the least intensive evidence-based treatment intervention possible and then monitoring the client’s progress. Following the initial triage, treatment intensity can be either stepped up or down depending on the level of student distress or need (see O’Donohue & Draper, 2011 for a review). The National Institute of Clinical Excellence has included stepped care in their guidelines for the treatment of both depression and anxiety disorders (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 2004; 2010), the two most commonly diagnosed conditions for students





### Technology

Innovations in service delivery are necessary. One such innovation is the inclusion of technology-based treatment options, which have been shown to have tremendous potential, particularly for early intervention. In a recent review, internet-based cognitive behaviour therapy was compared to traditional face-to-face therapy and fared well. Not only were there no significant differences in dropout rates and overall effects between internet-based therapy and traditional face to face therapy, but internet based therapy required little therapist involvement, typically only 10-15 minutes per client a week (Andersson et al., 2014). Dr. Cornish has integrated a number of tech-based tools into his counselling centre and is a strong proponent for their use to increase the service's capacity; including Breathing Room, Mind Well, Thought Helper, and Wellness Inventory, 7 Cups of Tea, and Therapist Assisted Online. In addition to increasing service capacity, the addition of online therapy tools is also desired by the students. Research has found that young people feel empowered online and are more confident accessing information and talking about sensitive topics. Given this, the internet is an important medium over which to reach students and offer mental health interventions (Blanchard et al., 2008).

### 3) Resiliency

The importance of helping students with their integration into the school's community and build coping skills and resiliency is an aspect of university life that is often overlooked. Post-secondary students frequently report loneliness, homesickness, conflict, and distress in interpersonal relationships as well as high levels of stress; all of which have been found to interfere with academic performance.

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***Resiliency programming***

A number of strength based resiliency programs are in development for post-secondary students. Increasing coping skills and students’ ability to handle the stress and rigor of university and their personal life should have a significant impact on the campus community.

Post-Secondary Student Mental Health: Guide to a Systemic Approach document, that identified four specific areas (see Table 1) to strengthen students’ capacity to flourish in a university setting, manage the range of demands they face, and find meaning, purpose, and satisfaction in their lives.

<u>Intrapersonal development</u> Realistic self-appraisal, self-understanding and self-respect; identity development; commitment to ethics and integrity; and spiritual awareness	<u>Intrapersonal competence</u> Understanding others, meaningful relationships; interdependence; capacity for collaboration; and effective leadership
<u>Humanitarianism and civic engagement</u> Understanding and appreciation of cultural and human differences; social responsibility; global perspective; and sense of civic responsibility, acceptance of responsibilities inherent in community membership	<u>Practical competence</u> Pursuing goals, communicating effectively; managing personal affairs; maintaining health and wellness; managing emotional responses.