



# Collaborations for Change Conference

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## Current Context of Canadian Post-Secondary Student Mental Health and Future Directions

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Best Practices in Canadian Higher Education Network &  
The University of Calgary Mental Health Strategy



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## Executive Summary

Hosted by the Best Practices Network and the University of Calgary Campus Mental Health Strategy, with support from the Canadian Association for College and University Student Services, the [Collaborations for Change Virtual Conference](#), held in August 2021, was the first national conference that focused solely on post-secondary student mental health within the Canadian campus context. The conference provided a venue to 1) address the gap between evidence-based recommendations and the clinical landscape amongst post-secondary students in wellness centres and across campus as a whole; 2) enhance knowledge translation where science on campus mental health practices or issues among emerging adults can inform practice and where practices can inform research; 3) encourage collaborations, to present and discuss research, and to exchange knowledge and practices among post-secondary stakeholders; and 4) bring together students, practitioners, student life professionals, and faculty to define problems, identify gaps, and brainstorm ways to enhance the mental health and wellbeing of post-secondary students.

The conference included keynote sessions, poster sessions, Ted-style talks, formal presentations, movement breaks, and networking sessions. Presentations addressed diverse content across seven themes: COVID-19's impact on student mental health; Indigenous/Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility; Evaluation, Research, and Assessment; Physical Activity; Health Promotion; Service or Program delivery; and Technology within the Post-Secondary Setting. Conference presenters varied across roles and regions, including 7 provinces and territories, 14 universities, 4 colleges/technical institutes, in addition to 3 post-secondary mental health networks, and 6 organizations. With respect to presenter stakeholder groups, 22% were students, 20% were in leadership roles (e.g., directors, deans, managers), 15% were faculty/professors, 13% were non-clinical staff, 11% were clinical staff, and 7% were post-doctoral students or researchers.

The variety of conference registrants suggested that the over-arching goal of the conference and the program were relevant to their interests. Of the 367 registrants, 31% were staff, 22% were students, 10% were clinicians, and 10% were faculty (27% were speakers and partner/sponsors). Participants from external organizations from various stakeholder groups also attended, including government, non-profit organizations, private organizations, and healthcare. In total, 124 Post Secondary Institutions (PSIs) and other organizations were represented at the conference. Regionally, the majority of registrants were from nine of ten provinces (except Prince Edward Island) and the Yukon Territories, with some international participants from the United States and Ireland. Overall, the registrants reflected a broad range of students, staff, and faculty and good representation across Canada.

Community supporters committed to post-secondary mental health were instrumental in helping to fuel these conversations intended to spark change and collaboration. Collaborations for Change was made possible through lead funding from the Rossy Foundation, lead sponsorship from Bell Let's Talk and is supported in part by the Mental Health Commission of Canada and Health Canada.

## Key Presentation Themes

### *Emerging adult research*

Several conference presentations reported on data on emerging adult mental health and the implications for intervention. Large cohort studies highlighted the importance of research and its translation into intervention and preparedness, specifically supporting transitions from high school to first year studies or for specific populations, such as international students or graduate students.

Student mental health research has gained value and traction across campuses and is beginning to be formalized at institutional levels.

### *Research and program evaluation*

A majority of presentations featured research on student mental health and wellbeing and evaluation of programs and services, with some involving collaborations between faculty and practitioners. For research, cross-sectional and longitudinal studies were presented, with several including both quantitative and qualitative data. Research projects tended to focus on patterns of symptoms, coping skills, and psychosocial stressors and their relationships with academic outcomes, life satisfaction, or wellbeing across different student populations. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student mental health also has been studied. Several studies evaluated interventions, including physical activity and impacts on mental health, while evaluation programs assessed the impact of peer support, group therapy, occupational therapy-based interventions, and mental health literacy courses, to name a few. Program evaluation appears to be increasingly adopted across campus wellness centres and will ultimately allow centres to share emerging, promising, and best practices to support student mental health. There also has been increased momentum and focus of efforts in population level assessments, including the usefulness of large data sets such as the Canadian Campus Wellbeing Survey and the National College Health Assessment.

### *Health promotion*

There was broad representation of health promotion and upstream programming at the conference. These presentations focused on the implementation and evaluation of campus mental health strategies, mental health literacy programming, peer support, and resiliency initiatives inside and outside of the classroom.

### *Clinical interventions*

Clinical interventions and programs were also highlighted at the conference, with all utilizing evidence-informed or evidence-based practices. Highlights included group therapy programs, physical activity programs to support mental health, interventions for bipolar disorder and psychosis, and measurement-based integrated care pathways for depression. Cross-discipline programming were featured, for example, occupational therapy or career development interventions to support student mental health. Implementation science and evaluation frameworks for mental health programming were also represented.

### *Equity, diversity, and anti-oppressive practices*

Several presentations highlighted campus initiatives with an equity, diversity, and inclusion lens. Anti-oppressive practice and its intersection with campus mental health resources and barriers to help-seeking was featured. Indigenous and community-based research was presented as pathways for individual and collective healing, reconnection to ceremony, and relationships with diverse communities. One presentation focused on Indigenizing and decolonizing mental health research. Two presenters challenged us to rethink the experiences of neurodiverse students and South Asian international students. Three institutions also reported on anti-stigma programming with respect to help-seeking, health behaviours, and suicide.

### *Student voice*

The value of the student voice was central to the conference theme in identifying gaps in service or knowledge. The majority of the programs and initiatives highlighted how student perspectives are driving their research and service delivery actions, including co-design efforts between practitioners and students. Featured presentations included the use of student feedback as central to program development, the Indigenous student voice in mental health research, a formalized student advisory committee in the development of strategic planning for student mental health research, and student co-design thinking by students for students. The conference brought the student voice to the table and closed off the conference with a student panel discussion – a fitting way to set the stage and identify gaps and priorities that can fuel the future collaborations, research and initiatives that lie ahead.

The Collaborations for Change conference created a unique space for a range of clinicians, researchers, students, student affairs professionals, and other professionals in the field to come together to exchange knowledge about student mental health emerging and best practices. Based on the conference participant feedback, this unique space created an opportunity for collective thinking and engagement to advance evidence-informed approaches and the potential for future collaborations. The conference highlighted current and emerging themes ranging from cross-sectional and longitudinal emerging adult research, health promotion practices, evidence-informed and evidence-based clinical practices, mental health strategies and frameworks, and mental health curriculum and teaching practices.

While the conference received positive feedback, future conferences will aim to increase Indigenous and Francophone participation and enhance technology to improve participants' online experience and engagement. Based on current campus trends and conference participant feedback, we highlight areas for future conference content: 1) equity, diversity, and inclusion practices; 2) enhancing clinical effectiveness practices; 3) balancing academic excellence and rigour within thriving and caring learning communities that promote health and wellbeing; 3) technology and mental health --- considerations around privacy, confidentiality, ethics, data governance, and effectiveness; 4) alignment of research and provincial and national campus mental health frameworks and policies; and 5) a national forum to discuss national trends and priorities to advance excellence in student mental health care and research.

## Collaborations for Change Conference: Connecting Research and Practice in Post-Secondary Mental Health

The [Best Practices in Canadian Higher Education Network](#) and the [University of Calgary Campus Mental Health Strategy](#), with support from the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), hosted the Collaborations for Change virtual conference on August 12 and 13, 2022. Lead funding was provided by the Rossy Foundation, lead sponsorship from Bell Let's Talk, and funded in part by the Mental Health Commission of Canada and Health Canada.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the Canadian post-secondary student mental health context and associated drivers that contributed to the development of the Collaborations for Change conference. A review of the conference presentations and themes will be presented in order to provide a snapshot of current developments within the campus mental health sector. Future directions and recommendations will be outlined for consideration for future conferences.

### Current Context for Post-Secondary Mental Health

Over the past 15 years, post-secondary mental health has been a topic of increasing interest. In particular, various data sources have pointed to an increase in mental health problems in post-secondary students over time. One of the most prominent and visible sources, the National College Health Assessment (NCHA), has shown steady increases for the three survey cycles at Canadian post-secondary institutions (PSI) in 2013, 2016, and 2019.<sup>1-3</sup> For example, participants report having been diagnosed or treated for mental health problem in the past 12 months rose from 19.8% in 2013<sup>1</sup> to 26.3% in 2016<sup>2</sup>, and finally to 33.0% in 2019<sup>3</sup>. There have also been similar increases for other mental health-related NCHA items, such as those related to suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

Many, including media outlets, have termed this rise in rates of mental health problems a “mental health crisis” on post-secondary campuses. This current situation may be due, not only to increases in prevalence of mental health issues among post-secondary students, but also due to other factors that are occurring on campuses and beyond (for a more complete discussion of the post-secondary “mental health crisis”, please see Szeto and Lindsay<sup>4</sup>). On post-secondary campuses, there has been the emergence and an emphasis on mental health promotion and mental illness stigma reduction, coupled with increases in mental health resources in the past decade. These factors may all contribute to more students coming forward to disclose their mental health status and to seek help to address it. Indeed, increases in help-seeking at campus wellness centres have been observed, particularly for counselling services.<sup>5</sup>

PSIs have increasingly recognized the important role that higher education has in supporting student mental health and wellbeing through increasing health-seeking behaviors, reducing stigma, and greater health promotion and resource development.<sup>6</sup> Concurrently, the release of two guiding documents in the past decade have shaped how PSIs engage in campus mental health. Both guiding documents, the Post-Secondary Student Mental Health: Guide to a Systemic Approach<sup>7</sup> and the Okanagan Charter: An International Charter for Health Promoting Universities and Colleges<sup>8</sup>, advocate for a holistic approach to mental health and wellbeing on campuses as opposed to just focusing on services or students in isolation of the broader campus community.

The confluence of all these above factors led PSIs across Canada, particularly in the mid 2010s, to develop and implement strategies or frameworks to address mental health on their campuses. The Best Practices in Canadian Higher Education identified 29 mental health strategies across post-secondary institutions, with many taking a whole campus approach inclusive of the broader campus community including students, staff, and faculty.<sup>6</sup>

To support the increased interest and commitment by PSIs to address the mental health of their students and the broader campus community, various networks and communities of practice have developed at the provincial and national levels. Provincial groups include Healthy Minds|Healthy Campuses (British Columbia), Healthy Campus Alberta, Healthy Campus Saskatchewan, Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health (Ontario). National groups include the Canadian Health Promoting Campuses (supporting implementation of the Okanagan Charter), the Post-secondary Education Partnership Alcohol Harms (PEP-AH), the CACUSS Mental Health Community of Practice, and the Best Practices in Canadian Higher Education Network. These networks and communities of practice have grown over the past decade to support PSIs with resources and programs, a place to connect and share practices and learnings, and play an advocacy role to formal bodies.

The growing number of networks is also complemented by national initiatives that address and support mental health and wellbeing at PSIs. Launched in October 2020, The National Standard of Canada for Mental-Health and Wellbeing for Post-Secondary Students<sup>9</sup> is an innovative initiative that assists PSIs to develop holistic frameworks to address post-secondary student mental health and wellbeing (<https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/studentstandard>). The National Standard was developed over a three-year period with a nationally representative technical committee of students, faculty, and professionals in student mental health. This work culminated in a voluntary standard that supports PSIs through the process of identifying gaps and opportunities to address local student mental health and wellbeing needs. At the core of the National Standard are six strategic principles of student-centredness and equity, diversity and inclusion, knowledge-informed practices, health promotion and harm reduction, and thriving community and continuous improvement. Another national initiative is the Canadian Campus Wellbeing Survey (CCWS) that began development in 2018. This survey was developed as a tool for PSIs to assess mental health-related behaviours at the institution level, and to inform interventions, prioritization, implementation, and evaluation of programs and services.<sup>10</sup> The CCWS also serves as a tool that was developed with the Canadian post-secondary context in mind and as an alternative to other institutional survey tools (e.g., NCHA).

These recent advancements in addressing post-secondary student mental health have been integral in addressing the mental health concerns on campuses across the country. Despite these advancements, coupled with the increasing interests, resources, and supports, there are still gaps that exist within post-secondary mental health. One of these is the gap between researchers and practitioners and a forum for knowledge exchange where science on campus mental health or mental health issues among emerging adults can inform practice and where campus mental health practices can inform research. A second gap is a national venue to create space for collaborations, to present and discuss research, and to exchange knowledge and practices among the post-secondary stakeholders. At the provincial level, there are several venues that do this well. For example, the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health, Health Campus Alberta, and Healthy Minds|Healthy Campuses all host a conference or summit where PSIs from those provinces gather and exchange ideas and experiences. At the national level, the Best Practices in Canadian Higher Education Network held a conference in 2017. This conference included five panel discussions on topical issues including mental health literacy, evaluation and assessment, integrated mental health centres, and stepped care. More recently, The Best Practices in Canadian



Higher Education Network in collaboration with CACUSS has incorporated a mental health stream at their annual conference since 2019.

Although these provincial and national conferences have offered needed spaces to discuss student mental health at PSIs, their focus on student service professional perspectives have left clinician, researcher, and student perspectives underrepresented. More specifically, a venue for various campus stakeholders to come together and forge collaborations to better address post-secondary mental health is lacking. The conferences mentioned above also focus on the student service professional perspectives but lack that of the clinician or researcher perspectives. Most importantly, the student voice is also underrepresented at these conferences. A national conference becomes more urgent in view of the current mental health context at PSIs and the launch of the National Standard. All these reasons provided the impetus for the Collaborations for Change Conference.

### Gap between researchers and practitioners

Young adults attending PSIs are not unlike their non-academic counterparts. The experience of depression, anxiety, difficulties with emotional regulation, and other mental health struggles are not foreign to this population. Campus student health centers, originally structured to support student mental health from more of a wellness maintenance lens, have increasingly needed to adjust their practices to care for students experiencing significant mental health challenges. Health professionals working in these wellness centers are being required to prioritize their time to care for students presenting with complex needs, including risk of self-harm. While evaluation efforts of PSI mental health programming are growing, there have been few opportunities for campus practitioners to partner with researchers.

Recently, post-secondary student mental research appears to be gaining recognition by research funding organizations. For example, in 2019, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) funded strategy for [patient-oriented research collaboration grants \(SPOR\) for five PSIs](#), led by McGill University, Memorial University, Queen's University, the University of Calgary, and the University of Toronto --- bringing together teams of faculty and practitioners. More recently, the Public Health Agency of Canada provided a [funding opportunity](#) aimed at supporting populations whose mental health has been most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and targeted PSIs, among other organizations, coalitions, networks and associations. CIHR also recently announced a [Transitions in Care \(TiC\) Team Grant](#) initiative that has a designated pool for post-secondary mental health.

One of the driving forces behind the theme of the Collaborations for Change Conference was to address the gap between evidence-based recommendations and what is happening clinically amongst post-secondary students in the wellness clinics and across campus as a whole. It was important to bring researchers, clinicians, academics, and students together to define problems, identify gaps, and brainstorm ways to work together towards a solution. A case example to highlight the various perspectives would be the following:

A student in post-secondary, with an anxiety disorder and in possession of academic accommodations permitting them an extra 15 minutes or an hour to write exams and flexible deadlines, presents to the wellness centre a day before an exam, stating that they have been having panic attacks, including one during an exam the day prior, and are seeking to have their final exam deferred. They have already sent their instructor the request via email, detailing their stress and impairments, and stating that they have been contemplating suicide. The instructor



responds by encouraging them to seek immediate medical support but is unsure how to respond to the request for a deferment. The medical professional in the wellness centre assesses and determines the student's level of impairment at this time is significant, risk of self-harm elevated, and provides documentation supporting a deferral.

This scenario can pose challenges for the student, faculty member, and the clinician. From the faculty level, although concerns for the student's wellbeing is the priority, there may be questions about how to support with the potential accommodations process, additional actions to support the student, whether the appropriate actions were taken, etc. For the clinician, advocacy for the student is balanced with the student's level of engagement with treatment interventions, their response to treatment, deadlines around accommodation forms, and risk management. From the student perspective, issues around help-seeking and self-advocacy, disclosures of mental health issues to faculty and staff, concerns around confidentiality and privacy, unfamiliarity with the accommodations process, and managing academic demands in the context of a mental health challenge need to be considered. Furthermore, institutional policies, risk, and reputation can become considerations. Clearly, there are no perfect solutions to scenarios as the one illustrated above. However, it has become evident that opportunities for multiple perspectives and voices to gather, to share and develop an appreciation for each other's perspective, and arrive at a best practice to address situations such as the scenario above, is invaluable. The spirit of the Collaborations for Change conference was to start this dialogue, create connections, and pave intentions and paths for collaborative projects.

## Conference Program: Current Landscape of Post-Secondary Mental Health

### Participation and Reach

The Collaborations for Change: Connecting Research and Practice in Post-Secondary Mental Health Online Conference was held on August 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021 (<https://www.collaborationsforchange.ca>). Over the day and a half, attendees watched and participated in the opening keynote address, and two keynote sessions focusing on the student voices on Day 2. There were also opportunities to engage at networking sessions at the end of the first day and to explore posters, TED-style talks, and virtual booths during the conference.

Conference presenters varied across roles and regions, suggesting fairly good representation of Canadian PSI student mental health research, programming, and initiatives. Of the 130 presenters, 18 PSIs were represented across 7 provinces and territories (14 universities, 4 colleges/technical institutes), in addition to 3 post-secondary mental health networks, and 6 organizations. With respect to roles, 22% were students, 20% were in leadership roles (e.g., directors, deans, managers), 15% were faculty/professors, 13% were non-clinical staff, 11% were clinical staff, and 7% were post-doctoral students or researchers.

The variety of conference registrants suggested that the over-arching goal of the conference and the program were relevant to their interests. Of the 367 registrants, 31% were staff, 22% were students, 10% were clinicians, and 10% were faculty (27% were speakers and partner/sponsors). Staff were represented by campus wellness centres (e.g., clinics, health promotion) and various other units (e.g., staff wellness, research services). Students came from different faculties, both undergraduate and graduate level. Faculty members were also represented by different faculties; post-doctoral scholars were also represented. External organizations were well represented, including government, non-profit organizations, private organizations, and healthcare (e.g., psychiatrists). In total, 124 PSIs and other organizations were represented at the conference. Regionally, nine of ten provinces (except Prince

Edward Island) and the Yukon Territories represented the majority of registrants, with some international representation from the United States and Ireland. Overall, the registrants reflected a broad range of students, staff, and faculty and good representation across Canada.

### Conference Themes

The conference program involved a variety of session types, including 3 keynote sessions<sup>11-13</sup>, 42 presentations<sup>14-56</sup>, 12 TED-style talks<sup>57-68</sup>, 6 poster sessions<sup>69-74</sup>, 6 movement breaks, and 5 networking sessions. The conference sessions addressed diverse content across 7 themes: COVID-19's impact on student mental health (5 sessions); Indigenous/Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (9); Evaluation, Research, and Assessment (8); Physical Activity (3); Health Promotion (8); Service or Program delivery (7); and Technology within the Post-Secondary Setting (3). See Appendix A for the full conference program.

### *Research and program evaluation*

A majority of presentations featured research on student mental health and wellbeing and evaluation of programs and services, with some involving collaborations between faculty and practitioners. For research, cross-sectional and longitudinal studies were presented, with several including both quantitative and qualitative data. The U-Flourish program at Queen's University, for example, reported on a two-year cohort study of first year undergraduate students and patterns of depression and anxiety, mental health outcomes, access to mental health services, academic outcomes, risk factor profiles, and potential determinants of outcome.<sup>14,15</sup> These researchers concluded that first year is a key time for identification and engagement of students with mood and anxiety symptoms. Several studies included scoping reviews or systematic literature reviews on various topics. For example, the University of Calgary explored best practice research to support students during the transition from high school to post-secondary.<sup>69</sup> For some projects, intentional co-design with students was a key feature, as well as studying targeted populations, including undergraduate, graduate, and international students. Some studies used surveys to assess specific student populations and the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on student wellbeing. For example, Ryerson University presented on graduate students reported levels of anxiety, depression, burnout, supervisory relationship satisfaction, and financial strain.<sup>13</sup> Research studies tended to focus on population-level assessment of student mental health and wellbeing status (e.g., depressive and anxiety symptoms), psychosocial stressors, and coping skills of post-secondary students.<sup>16</sup> Queen's University conducted a multi-site study, using a validated psychosocial stressor scale and provided a broad picture of the patterns in student stressors in different regions of Canada.<sup>63</sup> This study has implications for improved targeting of upstream campus mental health services. The University of Calgary examined predictors of university student satisfaction with life, academic self-efficacy, and self-reported academic achievement in their first year of university.<sup>60</sup> They found that academic satisfaction and school connectedness predicted satisfaction with life, conscientiousness predicted academic self-efficacy, college wellbeing, and anxiety predicted achievement. Several studies evaluated interventions, including physical activity and impacts on mental health, while evaluation programs assessed the impact of peer support, group therapy, occupational therapy-based interventions, and mental health literacy courses, to name a few. Program evaluation appears to be increasingly adopted across campus wellness centres and will ultimately allow centres to share emerging, promising and best practices to support student mental health. Consistent with this, the Best Practices Network in Canadian Higher Ed Network presented on a best practice framework to help evaluate campus mental health practices and plans to share these practices through an online members portal.<sup>18</sup>

There has been increased momentum and focus of efforts in population level assessments and program level evaluations. At the population level, conference presenters demonstrated the usefulness of large data sets such as the NCHA and CCWS. For example, the University of British Columbia presented research collected from CCWS survey results, with a focus on post-secondary student adherence to the Canadian 24-Hour Movement Behaviour Guidelines.<sup>19</sup> Their findings identify how movement is associated with socio-demographic factors and student mental health, information which can be transferred into action such as messaging and psycho-educational programming on campuses. This study highlights the benefits of institutional participation in the CCWS and provides an example of knowledge translation and mobilization. The University of Toronto Health & Wellness Centre showcased their quality improvement and evaluation program.<sup>20</sup> This presentation shared the Centre's evaluation framework highlighting how in-house systems are used to support evaluation and are translated to data-driven programs, policies, and improved services to students overall. Knowledge exchanges such as these strengthen the whole of the PSI community.

### *Health promotion*

As noted above, Canadian campuses have focused on health promotion and upstream programming and there was broad representation of these initiatives at the conference. The University of Saskatchewan studied the implementation of the Okanagan Charter across ten campuses. They identified the importance of strong leadership and report on a collaborative leadership model with intentional and systematic connections among leaders.<sup>21</sup> Using social capital theory, the University of Waterloo reported on their community of practice, a novel way to implement the Okanagan Charter.<sup>59</sup> The University of Calgary presented on different aspects of their mental health strategy, including their evaluation program and a recent process evaluation of the strategy implementation, as well as links between mental health interventions and the strategy recommendations.<sup>22</sup> Several institutions reported on embedding mental health literacy and resilience training in academic curriculum and the classroom, with some providing for-credit courses to students (University of Calgary<sup>23</sup>, Queen's University<sup>24</sup>). A unique example was the University of Ottawa's development of a course for music students to build occupational resilience and health literacy.<sup>67</sup> Other universities reported on their peer support programs and their evaluation programs (e.g., University of Toronto<sup>25</sup>, McGill University<sup>26</sup>).

### *Clinical interventions*

Clinical interventions and programs were also highlighted at the conference, with all utilizing evidence-informed or evidence-based practices. Group programming was featured by Queen's University and the University of Toronto, including an online unified protocol for transdiagnostic treatment of emotional disorders at the University of Calgary<sup>27</sup> and an integrated cognitive-behavioral and acceptance commitment therapy program for bipolar disorder and psychosis<sup>28</sup>, a measurement-based integrated care pathway for depression<sup>29</sup>, and an occupational therapy-based mental health intervention at the University of Toronto<sup>30</sup>. Mount Royal University took a holistic approach and reported on the use of career development intervention as a mental health intervention.<sup>31</sup> An ongoing trend has been the use of physical activity programs to support student mental health (e.g., University of British Columbia<sup>19</sup>). Using implementation science, McGill University presented on their student wellness hub and their development of a resilience framework.<sup>32</sup>

The conference featured numerous presentations outlining research projects that have been completed or are in progress within PSIs. An evidence-based lens brings structure and thus measurability to such initiatives. University of Calgary's partnership between their Student Wellness Center and psychology researchers serves as a perfect example.<sup>27</sup> They piloted and evaluated a standardized treatment

protocol designed to address emotional dysregulation in students, demonstrating the translation of research into practice, all while increasing capacity across the campus community and addressing a significant gap. The University of Toronto presented their pilot project involving a collaborative care model (psychology, psychiatry and general practitioners) for students with bipolar disorder or psychosis.<sup>28</sup> In this pilot, students are offered a 12-session cognitive-behavioural therapy and acceptance and commitment therapy approach. The evaluation framework was also shared in this session. This university also shared a pilot project highlighting an Integrative Care Pathway (ICP) to effectively support students experiencing clinical depression.<sup>29</sup>

Best practices, the cornerstone of the conference, were discussed in a session by the Best Practices in Canadian Higher Education Network.<sup>18</sup> In this session, participants were introduced to a best practices guide that would allow PSI practices to be evaluated along a best practice continuum ranging from cutting-edge, emerging, promising, and best. The sharing of this guide offers a repository of tools and information that can guide and assist campuses to disseminate, share, adopt, and learn about evidence-informed programs and practices designed to support student mental health.

### *Equity, diversity, and anti-oppressive practices*

Equity, diversity, and inclusion is a priority for PSIs as witnessed by various anti-racism policies and the recent creation of the Scarborough Charter resulting from the 2020 National Dialogues and Action event (<https://www.utoronto.ca/principal/scarborough-charter>). The Centre for Innovation and Campus Mental Health kicked off this theme through exploratory discussion around anti-oppressive practice and its intersection with campus mental health, specifically with respect to provision of resources and barriers to help-seeking.<sup>33</sup> The Indigenous Research Support Team from the University of Calgary discussed how Indigenous and community-based research can create pathways for individual and collective healing, reconnection to ceremony, and be in relationship with diverse communities.<sup>34</sup> Keeta Gladue, an Indigenous social work researcher, presented on her experience of Indigenizing and decolonizing mental health research and her learnings from University of Calgary Indigenous student stories.<sup>35</sup> Two presenters challenged us to rethink the experiences of neurodiverse students<sup>36</sup> and the SOCH mental health team featured their linguistically appropriate mental health promotion videos for South Asian international students.<sup>37</sup> Three institutions also reported on anti-stigma programming with respect to help-seeking, health behaviours, and suicide.

### *Student voice*

The value of the student voice was central to the conference theme in identifying gaps in service or knowledge. The conference program and the presentations offered were student-centered. In fact, the majority of the programs and initiatives highlighted how student perspectives are driving their research and service delivery actions, including co-design efforts between practitioners and students. As an example, McGill's Student Wellness Hub resilience-building BEAR program (Building, Enhancing, and Achieving Resilience) places student feedback at the center of their actions.<sup>32</sup> At Queen's University, a valuable tool, the Post-Secondary Student Stressors Index (PSSI), was created and validated through extensive collaboration with students.<sup>17</sup> At the University of Calgary, the Indigenous Post-secondary Student Mental Health Research honours the Indigenous student voice at the core of its work.<sup>35</sup> The University of Toronto's Innovation Hub spoke to their model of student consultation, using a design thinking approach<sup>38</sup> and their Student Mental Health Research Initiative highlighted the importance of a diverse student advisory committee in the development of their five-year strategic plan.<sup>72</sup> Students were welcome to present at this knowledge exchange, and we were pleased to see that numerous students submitted and presented. The Collaborations for Change conference brought the student voice to the

table and closed off the conference with a student panel discussion – a fitting way to set the stage and identify gaps and priorities that can fuel the future collaborations, research and initiatives that lie ahead.

### *Emerging adult research*

Several conference presentations reported on data on emerging adult mental health and the implications for intervention. Important data from the U-Flourish study, which sampled two large cohorts of first-year undergraduate students studying at Queen's University was presented.<sup>14,15</sup> It was shared that upon entry to university, almost one-third of students screened positive for anxiety and depression. Mental health problems increased over the first academic year, were more marked in females, and were associated with lower grades and students' overall wellbeing. International students reported similar positive screen rates for common mental health problems, but felt less connected and struggled even more so academically, as compared to domestic students. Lower self-esteem and social support, higher stress, and substance misuse were associated with mental health distress. Valuable information such as this helps arm campuses with knowledge that can be translated into intervention and preparedness. The University of Toronto presented on the vision of a new Student Mental Health Research Initiative that will drive research innovation in student mental health and wellness by leveraging cross-divisional expertise and a stakeholder engagement model.<sup>70</sup> Their findings highlighted future research directions and a framework for PSIs interested in developing research initiatives to support student mental health and wellness.

### *Conference Evaluation*

While only 32 registrants completed the post-conference evaluation, using both a 1 to 5-star rating scale and open-ended feedback, the conference appeared to achieve its goals and objectives. Overall, participants rated their experience at the conference very positively, with 94% of respondents rating the overall conference as 4 or 5-stars and 91% of respondents rating the conference content as 4 or 5-stars. In terms of expectations, 63% of the participants had "medium" expectations for the conference, while 25% had "high" expectations for the conference. Interestingly, almost 10% had no expectations. Of those who had medium or high expectations, 44% indicated that their expectations were met and 47% indicated that the conference exceeded their expectations. In sum, conference participants had relatively high expectations for this conference and they were either met or exceeded. Despite the conference being delivered in a virtual environment, 74% of respondents reported that the conference "...facilitated meaningful conversations among diverse stakeholders", providing 4 or 5-star ratings. Further, 77% of respondents felt the conference "...provided opportunities for future collaboration", indicating 4- or 5-star ratings. However, only 36% of respondents rated the networking opportunities as 4 or 5-stars. For a future conference, 31% of respondents preferred an in-person delivery, 41% preferred a virtual conference, and 50% preferred a hybrid conference.

*"Overall, I appreciated the emphasis that for things to change in a positive direction, students must be part of any discussion."*  
(Conference attendee)

*"I appreciated how diverse the presentations were in terms of the way they are approaching student mental health. It was a good opportunity to talk with other people who are thinking about some of these issues from different perspectives. I appreciated the opportunity to reach both other researchers and students and service providers. ... you could get a feel for nationally where the conversation is at on this topic."*  
(Conference presenter)

*"...The thing that resonated with me the most was the amount of amazing work and research being conducted and how important it is to create a venue and opportunity to embrace the conference them which is collaborating for change."*  
(Conference attendee)

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The Collaborations for Change conference created a unique space for a range of clinicians, researchers, students, student affairs professionals, and other professionals in the field to come together to exchange knowledge about student mental health emerging and best practices. Based on the conference participant feedback, this unique space created an opportunity for collective thinking and engagement to advance evidence-informed approaches and the potential for future collaborations. The conference highlighted current and emerging themes ranging from cross-sectional and longitudinal emerging adult research, health promotion practices, evidence-informed and evidence-based clinical practices, mental health strategies and frameworks, and mental health curriculum and teaching practices. While the conference received positive feedback, there were two key areas identified by participants for improvement: increased Indigenous and Francophone participation and enhanced technology.

As the conference was intended to bring together a national presence in post-secondary student mental health, future conferences will need focused attention on increasing the inclusion of Indigenous leaders, practitioners and researchers. At the time of the conference, the remains of Indigenous children were found in several former residential school locations. Grieving and reflecting on supporting Indigenous communities in the moment was the priority during the summer of 2021. Moving forward, the inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, advancing truth and reconciliation in Canadian post-secondary mental health supports, and learning about First Nations' principles of research, such as ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP), are critical for future conferences. Welcoming Indigenous collaborators and advisors early on in the conference planning is a recommended approach.

For the inaugural conference, materials were only available in English. Moving forward, actively promoting French-language content through the conference proposal process to presentations is recommended. Since the conference in August 2021, the Quebec Ministry of Education launched a five-year provincial post-secondary student mental health action plan<sup>60</sup> that includes benchmarking, enhancing the student voice and holistic approaches to student mental health, that all align with the conference goals.

The conference was an online event and for the most part, the technology was effective. However, there were a few technical glitches related to sharing videos, inconsistent quality of streaming, and presentation of conference schedules in different time zones. Online conferences are cost-effective and have the capacity to reach a broader audience than in-person events. Future conferences can look at offering lower bandwidth options and address the aforementioned technical issues to enhance accessibility.

Canadian post-secondary student mental health is evolving. The pandemic has created stressors for students and opportunities for Canadian campuses to explore new ways of supporting student mental health. As these shifts are occurring, using a collaborative and evidence-informed approach can serve as a catalyst for positive change. Based on trends and conference participant feedback, below are potential ideas for future conference themes:



### Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) practice

Across the country, PSIs are grappling with how to navigate EDI into their daily practices, from academic to clinical, and health promotion programs. EDI-related questions that emerged from conference participants varied in depth and breadth, for example:

- How do we adopt approaches to be inclusive of neurodiversity both classroom and clinical practices?
- How Indigeneity differs from EDI when creating practices?
- How do we address Intersectionality and create safe spaces for students?
- What is the impact of effective EDI practices on accessing care?

### Enhancing clinical effectiveness practices

Canadian PSIs have been implementing new and innovative programs over the last decade. Questions often arise about what is working, what is effective and what are the best practices in evaluation of clinical services. For example:

- What is the impact of the currently adopted single session intervention on overall service capacity and access to mental health care?
- What are effective health promotion programs and how do we measure impact?
- As Stepped Care is being adopted in health and wellness centres across Canadian PSIs, how do campuses evaluate its impact and effectiveness?
- How are crisis management practices evolving and being evaluated?

### Academic culture and mental health

PSIs are generally considered high performance academic cultures with an emphasis on excellence, rigour, innovation, and competition. A closer look at how academic culture can maintain excellence and rigour while promoting thriving learning communities that are caring for mental health and wellbeing has become an increasing area of focus:

- How do we create a caring PSI atmosphere?
- How can instructors effectively embed healthy pedagogy into their practices?
- What are effective policies that promote campus (student) mental health?
- What are effective supports for faculty and employee mental health and wellbeing?
- How are campuses embedding the National Standard?

### Technology and mental health

As PSIs expand service offerings to students, the use of new technologies plays an important role in student mental health. Online psychotherapy, wellness apps, CBT and ACT modules have successfully been implemented on Canadian campuses. With the rise in technological solutions, questions about privacy, confidentiality, and what is working are common among senior leaders and practitioners using these new tools. In addition, as campuses shift towards using external vendors for technological services, ethical considerations are becoming more prevalent. Questions such as, who owns the data, who uses the data and who can access it, raise important considerations about data governance for campuses to address.

As vendors and developers are promoting a wide range of new technological solutions, how to evaluate the effectiveness of these tools and their anticipated life span in a fast-paced technological environment

has become a daunting task. The need for new tools, policies, data governance and effective practices have emerged, along with the need for research on their effectiveness, such as meta-analytic studies.

#### Alignment of research with provincial frameworks and the National Standard

The National Standard was launched in the Fall of 2020. Since its release, over 150 campuses have received awards through the Bell Let's Talk Post-Secondary Mental Health funding grants. Inviting campus stakeholders to share practices and lessons learned about the Standard implementation is of interest. Questions remaining include:

- How does the Standard align with provincial or regional plans?
- What do effective student mental health policies have in common?
- What are the characteristics of a thriving learning campus culture?
- What are campuses' next steps to further implement the Standard?
- How are campuses leveraging the Campus Action Tracker?
- How can research on the implementation of the Standard assess its impact on student wellbeing?

#### A forum to establish national priorities

Although education and health care are funded at the provincial and territory level, the need for a forum to discuss national trends and priorities would advance excellence in student mental health care and future research. Knowledge exchange opportunities are key to establishing national priorities and Canadian PSIs capacity building.

As a next step, the conference seed grant competition will encourage cross disciplinary and collaborative projects led by institutions, students, faculty, and staff to enable evidence sharing across campuses that will serve to benefit PSIs in Canada more broadly. Applications embodied the conference themes ranging from mindfulness to equity, diversity and inclusion, to technology and resilience. Conference collaborators plan to continue the event on a biennial basis and already have support from national and philanthropic organizations. Our goal is to continue the conversation on student mental health and to facilitate collaboration across all stakeholders — students, practitioners, researchers, and student life professionals.

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## Appendix A: Conference Program

### Synchronous Conference Sessions

Thursday, August 12, 2021

9:00 AM - 10:30 AM

Conference Kick Off and Keynote Speaker: Dr. Shimi Kang

10:30 AM - 10:45 AM

Movement Fun

10:45 AM - 11:30 AM

*Anti-Oppressive Practice on Campus: An Interactive Conversation*

Presenter(s): Cecilia Amoakohene, Chris Pankewich, Taylah Harris-Mungo

*Co-creating Change for Students' Mental Health Through Listening, Learning and Inspiring*

Presenter(s): Julia Allworth, Johanna Pokorny, Kaitlyn Corlett

*Connecting Students to Mental Health Resources Using a Virtual Assistant*

Presenter(s): Meagan Lau, Sandy Chang

*Post-Secondary Peer Supports and Student Mental Health*

Presenter(s): Pauline Macpherson, Debbie Bruckner, Kevin Frieze

*The Okanagan Charter: A Systems Approach of Health Promotion on Campuses to Support Mental Health*

Presenter(s): Vicki Squires, Chad London

11:30 AM - 11:45 AM

Movement Fun

11:45 AM - 12:30 PM

*Beyond the Spectrum: Rethinking the Experience, Space, and Support of the Autistic Student*

Presenter(s): Jason Summers, Yvonne Hindes

*Empirically Supported Group-Based Programming During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Presenter(s): Kate Witheridge, Ashley Palandra, Sandra Yuen, Megan Davidson

*For Post-Secondary Students, Career Development Intervention is Mental Health Intervention*

Presenter(s): Dave Redekopp, Michael Huston

*Post-Secondary Student Mental Health In COVID-19: Perspectives of Student Affairs Professionals and Clinicians*

Presenter(s): Amy Fogarty, Tayyab Rashid, Lina Di Genova

*Research Is... A Collection of Stories About How Indigenous Research Cultivates Spaces for Healing, Relationships, Ceremony, and Transformative Resistance*

Presenter(s): Amber Bedard, Alexandra Kanter, Shayla Scott, Kimberly Van Patten

*Rock the Boat: Deploying a Research-Based Theatre Centered Resource at an Institutional Level to Improve Wellbeing Within Graduate Student Supervisory Relationships*

Presenter(s): Susan Cox, Michael Lee, Matthew Smithdeal, Tala Maragha

12:45 PM - 1:05 PM

*Teachers of Tomorrow: Advancing Wellbeing in BEd. Programs*

Presenter(s): Shelly Russell-Mayhew, Kerri Murray

12:45 PM - 1:30 PM

*Indigenous Post-Secondary Student Mental Health Research*

Presenter(s): Keeta Gladue

*Mindfulness Videos in the Classroom and Beyond*

Presenter(s): Monica Chi, Hayley Walsh, Ashley Bratty, Jessica Paterson

*Partnering for Change: An Evidence-Based Program to Enhance Students' Psychological Coping*

Presenter(s): Daniel Devoe, Jennifer Thannhauser, David Lindenbach

*University Student Mental Health Literacy: Evaluation of An Online Course in Terms of Knowledge, Stigma and Behavioural Change*

Presenter(s): Simone Cunningham, Anne Duffy

*Virtual Peer Support: Why, What, & How?*

Presenter(s): Pratik Nair, Mariana Paz-Soldan

*What Makes a Practice a Best Practice?*

Presenter(s): Sandra Yuen, Katie Bobra

1:05 PM - 1:25 PM

*A Student Wellbeing Initiative during COVID-19 and Online Learning at UCalgary*

Presenter(s): Melissa Boyce, Brittany Lindsay

1:45 PM - 2:30 PM

*An Integrated Care Pathway for Depression Using Measurement-Based Care in a Post-Secondary Setting*

Presenter(s): Zenita Alidina, Laura Zacharin, Sandra Yuen, Andrea Levinson, David Lowe

*Build Resilience at McGill's Student Wellness Hub and Using Implementation Science to Implement the Framework During COVID-19*

Presenter(s): Dana Carsley, Giovanni Arcuri, Kathleen Bateman, Vera Romano

*Campus Mental Health: How Stigma Affects Students' Approach to Resources*

Presenter(s): Julia Stamp

*Longitudinal Patterns of Depression and Anxiety in Undergraduate Students: Evidence from the U-Flourish Study*

Presenter(s): Gina Dimitropoulos, Daniel Devoe, Anne Duffy, Scott Patten

*On-Campus Physical Activity Programming for Post-Secondary Student Mental Health: Considerations for Research and Practice*

Presenter(s): Melissa DeJonge, Catherine Sabiston

*The Pardesi Project - Short Films Exploring the Mental Health of South Asian International Students*

Presenter(s): Maneet Chahal, Prerna Bajaj

2:30 PM - 2:45 PM

Movement Fun

2:45 PM - 3:15 PM

*Assessing Student Mental Health Barriers, Needs and Experience of Campus Wellness Services During COVID*

Presenter(s): Kirsten Neprily, Maryam Qureshi

*Evaluating Peer Versus Professional Video Outreach to Enhance Mental Health Resilience in University Students*

Presenter(s): Laurianne Bastien

2:45 PM - 3:30 PM

*Facilitating Success for Post-Secondary Transitions for People with Complex Medical Conditions and Chronic Pain: Universal Design for Learning and Lived Experience*

Presenter(s): Bruce Dick, Joanne Picard

*Process Evaluation of the University of Calgary's Campus Mental Health Strategy*

Presenter(s): Cristina Fernández Conde, David Nordstokke, Andrew Szeto

*Results from the Cross-Canada Release of the Post-secondary Student Stressors Index*

Presenter(s): Brooke Linden, Amy Ecclestone

3:30 PM - 4:00 PM

Networking & Collaboration

Friday, August 13, 2021

9:00 AM - 10:00 AM

*Building Momentum with the National Standard of Canada for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students Panel Discussion and Day 1 Recap*

Presenter(s): Andrew Szeto, Sandra Koppert, Sarah Mughal, Victoria Summer Pasyk, Ranabelle Stroh

10:00 AM - 10:15 AM

Movement Fun

10:15 AM - 10:45 AM

*An Occupation-Based Approach for Post-Secondary Student Mental Health: A Feasibility Study*

Presenter(s): Emily Nalder

*Assessing the Quality and Impact of the Student Wellness Services Mental Health Training Suite*

Presenter(s): Abby Oliver, Claudia Venevongsa



*Post-Secondary Students' Adherence to the Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Adults and Mental Health: Results from the First Deployment of the Canadian Campus Wellbeing Survey (CCWS)*  
Presenter(s): Guy Faulkner, Kelly Wunderlich

*Prescription Exercise at Queen's (PEQ) COVID Edition*  
Presenter(s): Beth Blackett

*The Zenstudies Project: A University-College Collaboration to Support Data Based Implementation of a Mental Health Prevention Program*  
Presenter(s): Diane Marcotte

*Undergraduate Student Mental Health Over the First Two Years of University: U-Flourish University Student Well-Being and Academic Success Longitudinal Study*  
Presenter(s): Nathan King

10:45 AM - 11:00 AM  
Movement Fun

11:00 AM - 11:45 AM  
*Better Together: How Intentional Partnerships Increase Our Capacity to Support Student Mental Health*  
Presenter(s): Cecilia Amoakohene

*Collaborative Care for Students with Bipolar Disorder and Psychosis*  
Presenter(s): Houyuan Luo, Soraya Mumtaz

*Graduate School and a Global Pandemic: An Evaluation of the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Ryerson University Graduate Students*  
Presenter(s): Annabel Sibalis, Katey Park

*Program Evaluation at a Health & Wellness Centre*  
Presenter(s): Sandra Yuen

*Running and Filling Groups: How We Went from Crickets to Crammed Even in a Pandemic!*  
Presenter(s): Rina Gupta, Jo-ann Ferreira

*The Stigma of Suicide on Postsecondary Campuses: The Influence of Media Articles and Acknowledging Student Suicide*  
Presenter(s): Brittany Lindsay

11:45 AM - 12:00 PM  
Movement Fun

12:00 PM - 1:00 PM  
Student Panel Discussion

## Asynchronous Conference Sessions

*A Sense of Mastery as a Protective Factor in First-Year Undergraduates Mental Health*

Presenter(s): David Nordstokke, Claire McGuinness

*Coping with Distal and Proximal Stressors: A Transactional Model of Stress Among First-Year Undergraduate Students*

Presenter(s): Julia C. Poole, Keith Dobson

*Empowering Campuses to Demonstrate their Commitment to Student Well-being*

Presenter(s): Maddie Borkenhagen

*From Plague to Panacea: Investigating the Impacts of Webcam Use on Social Connection in Virtual Learning Environments*

Presenter(s): Ashley Amson

*Health Promoting Universities: Why Collaboration Should Be the Focus of Campus Mental Health Change*

Presenter(s): Melissa Potwarka, Susan Hegge

*Impact of COVID-19 Related Stressors on Canadian Post-Secondary Students' Mental Health*

Presenter(s): Caitlin Monaghan, Sally Zheng, Jake Rose

*Investigating Life Satisfaction and Achievement in Students Transitioning to University: The Role of Personal Resources and Support*

Presenter(s): Gabrielle Wilcox, David Nordstokke

*Recommendation Evaluation of the University of Calgary's Campus Mental Health Strategy*

Presenter(s): David Nordstokke, Victoria Summer Pasyk, Madeline Moore

*Revealing and Healing on Social Media Platforms*

Presenter(s): Kiana Reddock, Clara Rebello, Lauren Hudak, Soraya Mumtaz

*Sound Performers Canada: Impact of an Online Learning Health Course for Post-Secondary Music Students*

Presenter(s): Teri Slade, Christine Guptill

*The Campus Assessment Tool: Lessons Learned from a Youth-Led Participatory Research Project*

Presenter(s): Natnaiel Dubale, Seyedeh-Samin Barakati, Chloe Boutros, Stuart McHenry

*University Students' Mental Health Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Presenter(s): Ameera Ali