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student experience

GRADUATE STUDENT SOCIETY
UBC VANCOUVER

Creating Healthy Campuses

A Mental Health and Well-being Policy for all

The Problem

“Many factors contribute to student mental health problems from academic workload and finance, to lifestyle and uncertainties about a future after graduation. It’s not enough to address the individual symptoms.

We need to think about things differently. We need a campus wide effort to give students the tools to manage their feelings and an environment to succeed. Today’s students are tomorrow’s engineers, doctors, business leaders and creatives, enabling them to feel confident in their mental wellness has great benefits for the Province as well as for individuals.”

-Gurjot Singh, VP External, UBC GSS

Mental Health in Canadian Students

Mental health is a persistent and serious problem for Canadian students. One in five Canadians will be affected by mental illness in their lifetime, with young adults between the ages of 17-25 at the highest risk probability to manifest mental health problems.

University students are even more likely than their non-university peers to report elevated mental distress (42% of Ontario students compared to 17% of Ontario adults aged 18-29)¹. In a 2013 survey of more than 34,000 students from post-secondary institutions across North America, **30% of respondents reported that they had been so badly affected by depression at least once in the prior year that it was hard for them to continue normal routine life.** Meanwhile, more than 40% experienced overwhelming anxiety at least once during the same period².

With almost 180,000 students enrolled at Post-Secondary institutions across BC³, campuses are an important setting to address mental wellness in this vulnerable group.

Currently a large tranche of the Provincial mental health budget is allocated toward efforts towards mitigating the direct costs of hospitalization and medicines for patients. There is therefore an opportunity cost in initiatives focused more towards creating a strategy of prevention than cure.

¹ Canadian Campus Survey, Adlaf 2005

² Reference Group Executive Summary Data Report, NCHA-II 2013

³ Student Full-Time Equivalent Enrollments at BC public post-secondary institutions, Government of British Columbia 2018

The Problem

The GSS Perspective

The results of the most recent GSS Graduate Student Survey illustrate the complex mental health problems students in BC face:

25% of students feel that they are physically unable to perform in classes.

33% of students indicated concerns regarding mental health, with respondents attributing this added stress to multiple factors including:

- academic workload (55%),
- preparation for life after graduation (50%)
- finances (40%)

60% of the respondents claim that they face unhealthy levels of stress, while a majority believe that this negatively effects their academic performance¹.

Post-Secondary Institutions have made strides in providing services to assist students who report mental health problems, **but this does not tackle the factors like finance, workload and loneliness that contribute to mental distress.**

¹ GSS Graduate Student Survey, Graduate Student Society UBC 2018

Taking Action

A Different Approach

The Graduate Student Society (GSS) of UBC calls on the Provincial government to work with Post-Secondary Institutions across the Province to develop comprehensive mental health frameworks.

These must involve faculty, staff and student leaders in ensuring student mental wellness by integrating mental health into all aspects of an institution to create the conditions for students to flourish.

Frameworks ensure policies are not only designed to resolve current student mental health issues but incorporate the general physical and mental well-being of students.

6 Steps to Create a Comprehensive Framework

- 1 A Mental Health and Well-being Policy for all:**
Developing clear policies and procedures that allow students to access services and support without fear of stigma and that approach mental health seriously and sensitively. Policies that support individual students experiencing mental health concerns, whether through accessibility and accommodation; medical leave and re-entry, or procedures for supporting a student in distress or crisis. Appropriate responses to “at-risk” behaviour.
- 2 Early Identification and Response:**
Multilevel response structure needs to be adapted by universities to address all types of mental health challenges, from foundational to intensive. Establishing initiatives such as internal communications communicating and reminding the available services and fighting the attached stigma, will encourage students to seek help at an earlier stage. Would also reinforce support for those who may be at higher risk.
- 3 Providing Direct Service and Support:**
Providing a range of mental health services that are accessible and inclusive, with more counsellors per student and inclusion of external community resources to meet full spectrum of health needs. Introduction of best practices which focus on developing psychological resilience, personal skill development, and de-stigmatizing mental health problems. Training that supports faculty, graduate supervisors, and teaching assistants to create learning environments that encourage students to seek help without fear of judgment or repercussions.

Taking Action

4 **Aligning institutional policies and procedures to support mental health services:**

Teaching and learning methods that foster a sense of community and reduce stress, this includes support for graduate students in their interactions with their supervisors. Curriculum and Teaching Committees in each faculty should initiate discussions about the relationship between student stress and course and curriculum design.

5 **Creating, a healthy, friendly campus environment:**

Fostering a healthy campus community and encouraging a sense of belonging. Develop mental health literacy strategy for students, staff and faculty to create a supportive and inclusive environment for the students and to reduce stigma associated with mental health issues. Peer support and mentorship programs which give an opting out or a deferral option to students suffering from problems.

6 **An inclusive and supportive communication strategy:**

Ensures students are informed of all services/programs offered at the campus. Creating an easy to follow mental-health road-map that would facilitate students navigation through the available services on-campus. This should be made compulsory to be introduced to students during orientation by all departments and continue through the academic year.
