

**Revising links between Student Support Services and Academe: A For-Credit
Mental Health Course for Students with Mental Health Challenges
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For youth experiencing mental health difficulties, challenges associated with adjusting to university may jeopardize academic achievement and fuel further psychological distress (Young & Calloway, 2015; National Alliance on Mental Illness [NAMI], 2012). Traditionally student services play a supportive role for these students either through academic counseling, personal counseling, access to accommodations or a myriad of other initiatives meant to support mental health on campus (e.g., peer supports, helplines, wellness centres). In an attempt to revise the relation between student support services and academia in a systemic response, Psychology 1400 Mental Health and Well-Being for-credit course was developed in partnership with Student Accessibility Services (Bruno Mancini, MSW), Student Life (Dr. Brenda Whiteside) and the Department of Psychology (Dr. Margaret Lumley). This seminar-style psychology course (maximum 30 students) was offered in Fall 2014 and Winter 2015. Mental health advisors working within the University of Guelph's Student Accessibility Services played a central role in course development, course registration, taught one of the seminars, and worked individually with students as needed to support their success in the course. This research article provides a brief overview of the course along with the key results of the program evaluation conducted to examine its impacts for student participants. This novel collaboration between student services and traditional academe represents a potentially effective additional way to revise how University campuses might further support students with mental health challenges.

Course Overview

Three central aims of the course were developed; including increased mental health/illness knowledge and understanding, increased academic self-efficacy in the context of mental health challenges, and awareness/practice at skills for improving well-being. An alternate grading scheme of pass/fail was selected to minimize competition between students and

maximize focus on the process of the learning. There were four major evaluative components, including weekly mock exam questions, weekly assignments, and individual well-being and learning plan and a mental health presentation/display¹. Distinguishing the course from a typical academic course, mental health advisors were integral to course development and support, revising the way the links between support services and academia have traditionally been conceptualized.

The overarching framework for the course was one of positive mental health, focused on the assets, strengths and coping resources students naturally possess or might cultivate in service of their academic self-efficacy and general wellbeing. Corey Keyes' (2002) Dual Continuum Model of mental health/illness was employed as an explanatory model for the course with a focus not only on student mental illness, but also their concurrent possibility of mental health. Further, Martin Seligman's PERMA model, highlighting several pathways to well-being, including positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment was a second guiding framework (Seligman, 2011).

Different from a typical academic course and like group interventions, the class *was* meant to cultivate a sense of belongingness, de-stigmatization and mutual positive encouragement and support. Similar to other academic courses, students were consistently provided with written and oral constructive feedback on their work, knew that work must be completed for a credit to be achieved and there was an emphasis on psycho-education and evaluation of scholarly and research material. In essence there was an evaluative component.

Target Population and Demographics

PSYC*1400 was aimed at students with an identified mental health concern registered with Student Accessibility Services. A total of 52 students completed the pilot version of this course. A total of 45 students agreed to participate in the program evaluation with ages ranging from 17-25 (as well as two mature students). 29 students identified as female, 11 identified as male, and the remaining 5 students did not specify their gender. Of the students in the program evaluation, 46% were in first year, 96% reported having a DSM diagnosis with 90% having taken psychoactive medication and 35% being hospitalized for their mental health concern.

Results

¹ A full course syllabus and other supportive materials can be secured from Dr. Margaret Lumley mlumley@uoguelph.ca

Descriptive statistics for all study variables measured at the start and then at the end of the course are displayed in Table 1. There were several statistically significant positive differences in key targeted variables associated with medium effect sizes.

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and effect size of changes in student's characteristics

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
Well-being				
Resilience	9.79	13.29	3.68*	.74
Life Satisfaction	1.29	3.63	1.74*	.36
Depression	3.72	9.35	1.99*	.40
Positive Schemas				
Self-efficacy	1.74	4.05	2.15*	.43
Success	.63	3.65	.87	.17
Interpersonal Trust	.46	3.03	.76	.15
Worthiness	1.27	2.47	2.52*	.51
Optimism	1.27	2.05	3.04*	.62
Coping Strategies				
Instrumental Support	.72	1.74	2.06*	.41
Positive Reframing	1.02	1.52	3.36*	.67
Humour	.68	1.77	1.92	.38
Stigma				
Alienation	.25	.64	1.92	.39
Discrimination	.14	.34	2.06*	.42
Social Withdrawal	.20	.50	1.98	.40
Internalized Stigma	.17	.37	2.25*	.46

Note. * indicates significant t-test at a significance level $p < .05$. Effect size was measured using Cohen's *d* (Cohen, 1988). An effect size of $d=.20-.49$; $d=.50-.79$; $> d=.80$ represents a small, medium, and large effect size respectively.

Student Well-being, Self-Knowledge, Resources and Coping Strategies

Overall, students displayed a significant decrease in depressive symptomatology and increased self-reported resilience from the first to the last class. There were significant improvements in positive schemas of student self-efficacy, worthiness and optimism. Coping strategies also

demonstrated improvement. Students reported using significantly more instrumental support, positive reframing, and humor as means of coping. Perhaps by learning and practicing various strategies in class, students were able to generalize these to coping with daily stressors related to their mental health and their learning context.

Reductions in Self-stigma

Students also reported experiencing a significant decrease in overall stigma from the start to the completion of the course including decreased alienation, discrimination, social withdrawal and internalized stigma. Improvement in these scores reflects the possibility that learning about mental health and well-being, particularly in the context of others' stories and experiences may have contributed to a decrease in self-stigma. The discussion-oriented nature of the course in which adaptive self-disclosure was consistently modeled may have validated student experience of mental illness and also enhanced their sense of belonging.

Qualitative Outcomes: Students' Voices

The questionnaires did provide a basis for standardized comparison of the group from the start to the end of the course. We also sought to understand more about individual students' actual experiences of the course through their responses to open-ended questions related to general impressions, achievement of course goals, course structure and course content.

General Impressions:

"Please keep offering it, especially to first year students – I wish I had taken it then."

"Would take this course again in a heartbeat!"

"I found the course to be both informative and practical"

"This course was phenomenal"

Overall, students reported this course to be a positive, and beneficial experience.

Achievement of Course Goals:

"This course made me feel more comfortable and it made my university experience more enjoyable. Especially since this is my first year, it made the transition more manageable."

"Personally, I feel this course has influenced me in the most positive and helpful way. It has allowed me to put more focus on my own personal mental health; which has not generally been the most positive"

"It has helped me dig deeper and challenge my learned helplessness and find ways of coping and facing rather than avoiding. It has helped me become more self-compassionate."

“Provided me with new ways to manage my mental illness, maintain positive mental health, and helped me see a different way to view my mental illness. It has helped me learn to handle the difficulties I have been experiencing in university, academically and socially. I also feel it has impacted my self-reflection of this semester, and what I can do to improve aspects of my life.”

Several students commented on specific course goals, including supporting the transition to university, improving coping skills, greater self-awareness and better knowledge of available supports on campus.

Course Structure:

“I appreciated the smaller size of the class and seminar as it was less intimidating, particularly given my personal experiences with mental health.”

“The fact that it isn’t graded relieves a lot of stress and anxiety and allows me to take in the content more effectively.”

“This took a lot of pressure off me. I was much more relaxed, I was able to absorb more info and what was relevant to me. I learned much more because I didn’t have to worry about irrelevant stuff I would be tested on what I learned and retained was relevant to me.”

“Fabulous class interaction. Learned a lot from classmates – in class and through online questions.”

“I was nervous about the “no mark” pass/fail option. However, this approach taught me more about how I learn (strengths/weaknesses) than any other university class.”

Students generally felt that the structure of the course was effective in promoting learning. In particular, the pass/fail structure was noted to allow students to focus on deeper personal learning, rather than the achievement of a grade.

Course Content:

“The content discussed was very helpful and easily relatable to everyday life.”

“Some of the projects really helped me understand myself, my needs and create more realistic goals. Projects also helped me recognize my strengths and taught me some cool, effective coping strategies.”

“Especially benefited from first hand experiences shared by class members which very much accentuated course material covered in lecture”

“Enjoyed focus on positive mental health”

Students reported the content of the course to be valuable, helpful and relevant to their needs and experiences.

In general, exploring the answers to open-ended questions revealed several themes reflecting the success of the program's overarching goals. Salient themes included sense of belonging, stigma reduction, academic self-efficacy, personal development, and improved coping strategies.

Conclusions

Despite a relatively small sample size, the effect sizes of the differences in several key indicators revealed meaningful and substantive positive changes in a whole host of factors related to mental illness, mental health, coping and self-concept from the start to the completion of the course.

Student comments reinforced these themes. Further research to investigate this type of initiative would benefit from further longitudinal evaluation to see whether these effects extend over a greater period of time and from similar data collected from a matched control group.

Nonetheless, experiences of course instructors, informal and formal feedback from students, their counsellors and mental health advisors were fairly uniform in the success and benefit of the course that revised how student support services and academia might co-create an environment to support students with mental health challenges. Since the Fall 14 and Winter 15 offerings of the course on which this article is based, the CIYMH fund contributed further funding for a third offering in Winter 2016. Going forward, the University of Guelph has made a commitment to maintain the offering on a permanent basis with money allocated within the budget to do so.

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