

STUDENT HEALTH AND WELLNESS

BACKGROUND

Based on principles that look to improve overall wellbeing amongst student populations, this policy on student health and wellness takes a broad look at a range of health concerns felt by Ontario's post-secondary students, as identified by the student membership of OUSA. These policy recommendations seek to bring greater attention to the current mental and physical health care needs amongst our students regardless of their current health or socio-economic standing, or physical and mental ability. With this policy, OUSA hopes that students will be provided with the resources and services they need to ensure their overall wellbeing and success.

THE PROBLEM

There are currently divides between physical and mental health care on-campus that are fuelling students' concerns for the quality of their care. On many campuses, medical services and counselling services are located in separate facilities. Stigmas surrounding mental health, mental illness, sexual violence, and trauma still deter students from addressing these issues. The 2013 National College Health Assessment found over half of Canadian students did not receive information from their post-secondary institution regarding important health topics including:

- How to help others in distress;
- Nutrition;
- Relationship difficulties;
- Sexual assault and violence prevention;
- Sleep difficulties; and,
- Suicide prevention.¹

Through this policy, OUSA seeks to alleviate barriers to care on university campuses through the promotion of a more holistic approach to student health. Students are looking for better integration of services and resources in order to improve communication and referral amongst wellness care providers, access to peer and community support networks, and improved quality of long-term care. Students ask for more flexibility in their care options as well as in academic accommodations for students who must suspend studies for extended lengths of time. Students require their campuses to commit to health promotion as well as ensure students are shielded from sexual violence, crime, and cultures that perpetuate hate and discrimination.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Promote Health and Wellness

Health and wellness should be promoted together, in a holistic manner, giving appropriate attention to lifestyle management, education, treatment, and triage. Health and wellness must be understood as interdependent. This attention should be directed towards students in transition,

particularly first year students. These attempts might then ease their transition into university by promoting healthy lifestyle choices and coping strategies. Students' recommendations for *health promotion* encourage:

- Universities to set aside funding to provide wellness programming and awareness campaigns throughout the academic year;
- The inclusion of wellness promotion that expands beyond issues that impact students in the classroom and consider lifestyle related health concerns;
- All of Ontario's universities to provide a reading break in their fall and winter semesters;
- The implementation of a set standard of health awareness training for all faculty and staff; and,
- Student assessments that are sensitive to and accommodate common health concerns.

Integrate Student Care Services

It is the responsibility of the Ontario government, working with universities, to ensure that every student has access to a minimum standard of health care services. This minimum standard must provide students with at least the same care they would receive through the public health system, at the same costs. Additionally, institutions must be equipped to adequately treat health concerns common to university students. We believe that students' health and wellness is best addressed through a centre where physical health services, counselling services, and accessibility services are integrated together—conceptually, the Campus Wellness Centre. Campus wellness centres must be staffed by integrated and multi-disciplinary student health teams, who are compensated using an alternative to the fee-for-service model. In regards to *Campus Wellness Centres*, students recommend:

- All university stakeholders work together to establish a comprehensive strategy for enhancing service provision;
- Mental and physical health care services share facilities in order to better facilitate an integrated care model and overall student wellness;
- The province and institutions provide dedicated funding for the integration of primary medical care and mental health services;
- The province consider alternatives to fee-for-service physician compensation models by incorporating practices used by Community Health Centres;
- Post-secondary students be exempt from outside-use deductions if they are enrolled in Family Health Teams; and,
- Campus wellness centres create assisted referral mechanisms, which maintain the fewest points of contact possible, to ensure students are well supported when seeking care off-campus.

Improve Mental Health Care

All students must have access to mental health care services. Students are particularly vulnerable to experience mental health issues and as such, there are significant demands for mental health care and counselling services on university campuses. Students must have access to support networks, appropriate information regarding mental health, and adequate mental health treatment. Mental health and mental illness, while related, must be conceptualized as two different contributors to overall wellness. This conception would also recognize the spectrum on which individuals may experience and manage mental health issues and mental illnesses.

It is important that institutional goals, policies, and practices reflect the importance of students' optimal mental health as a foundation for learning and wellbeing. To this end, institutions must develop initiatives that increase knowledge and understanding of the determinants, nature, impact, prevention, and management of mental health issues in attempts to create more inclusive campus environments. Mental health care delivery must be provided through a collaborative effort between multiple health care practitioners. At the same time, institutions must support the creation of peer support programs and resources as another facet of overall mental health treatment. To meet these *mental health* goals, it is recommended that:

- Continued investment be dedicated to frontline mental health supports;
- The province invest in system-wide initiatives to improve student mental health;
- OHIP coverage be extended to mental health services for youth aged 18 to 25;
- Campus wellness centres engage in awareness initiatives to encourage students to be proactive and accountable to their mental health care;
- Campus wellness centres ensure they are well integrated with off-campus health care providers;
- All campuses establish optimal counsellor-to-student ratios;
- Mandatory mental health and wellbeing education, training, and resources be provided to faculty and staff;
- Institutions support peer support programs and initiatives; and,
- Institutional policies, structures, and organization need to reflect the importance of student mental health and wellness.

Encourage Healthy Lifestyle Management

Moderate levels of physical activity yield substantial benefits for individuals, universities, and the public health system. The promotion of physical activity is one of many preventative measures that can repel some physical and mental health concerns. In this area, the primary goal of athletics and recreation departments should be the promotion of wellness through physical activity for all students. Students recommend the following efforts be lead by *athletics and recreation* departments:

- The promotion of recreational programs in ways that reinforce their value to the student body;
- Promotional efforts that reduce perceived barriers to access;
- Ensuring optional fees reflect the real costs of services;

- Inclusion of adaptive sports in intramural offerings accompanied by the allocation of funding towards the purchase of adaptive sports equipment; and,
- Establishment of women-only facility hours, spaces, or programming.

Similarly, positive eating habits and good nutrition are other preventative health care practices that can benefit all stakeholders. In this effort, campus food service providers can be engaged as partners in promoting healthy eating habits, nutritional knowledge, and better lifestyle management. The students make the following recommendations to improve their *nutrition*:

- Provision of dedicated government funding for the support of nutritional campaigns and healthy on-campus food options;
- Lower prices for nutritious food options;
- Making reduced portion sizes available at prices that reflect the reduction;
- Increased access to resources to increase nutritional knowledge (for example, registered dieticians);
- Better accommodation of dietary restrictions—achieved through offering more choice, ingredient information, and staff training;
- Nutritional information made available at the point-of-choice;
- Inclusion of student input and feedback in the choice of food service providers and food options available on campus; and,
- Guaranteed access to resources to improve students' nutritional knowledge.

Serve Diverse Populations

Effective campus wellness services will reflect the true diversity of the student population. Individuals from marginalized or minority groups may have divergent life experiences from other students on-campus. These students should have access to health care and counselling services that address their unique concerns and needs. This includes access to resources that adequately address the health, wellness, and safety concerns of all sexes, as well as resources and accommodations for students with persistent health concerns. In order to ensure *access to care for marginalized populations*, students recommend:

- Health care and counselling staff and services must reflect the diversity of the student population;
- Health care policies and services must meet the needs of marginalized populations;
- Government funding for training for wellness service providers on the needs of marginalized groups;
- Better availability and consistency for medical accommodations for students who need them;
- Institutions must better support the transitions of students who have suspended their studies;
- Improved access to expertise and resources for students involved in sex or gender reassignment processes; and,
- The government should provide additional resources to institutions for the improvement of long-term care.

Suppress Crisis and Violence

All students have the right to feel safe and secure on their campuses. This also means that the most vulnerable students must be protected. Post-secondary campuses must

be safe spaces, free from sexual violence, for all students. Survivors of sexual violence and misconduct must be assured of comprehensive, sensitive, and readily available support systems. To ensure *campus safety*, students recommend:

- Institutions accurately record and publicly report violent criminal activity that occurs on or around campus;
- Institutions take responsibility for providing all security and safety services on campus;
- Standardization of hiring processes and requirements for security personnel across institutions; and,
- Institutions provide funding for infrastructural improvements.

Students offer the following recommendations for addressing *sexual violence* on campus:

- Every institution should have a support centre for students who have experienced sexual violence;
- Better academic accommodation for students who have been traumatized by sexual violence;
- Government resources provided for long-term care for survivors of sexual violence;
- Institutions take proactive approaches in addressing sexual violence on campus; and,
- More consistent processes for communication, reporting, and recourse related to sexual violence on campus.

¹ “ACHA-NCHA II: Canadian Reference Group Data Report,” *American College Health Association* (2013).