

International Student Mental Health Support Toolkit for Program Planning

Many international students do not readily seek mental health supports, despite facing multiple challenges in their transition to a new country and educational system. Barriers to accessing supports include stigma of mental health issues, differing cultural perceptions of the definitions, causes, and handling of mental health, and a lack of awareness or comfort with supports offered on and off campus. Developing cross-campus collaborations, informal and student-led initiatives, and language-specific support groups and marketing strategies can expand the awareness and appeal of seeking support on campus. This toolkit is based on our experience in the Speaking Your Language project and will provide some considerations to assist you in developing initiatives customized for your campus.

Developing Campus Collaborations

Numerous opportunities exist across campuses to holistically support international students. International students are often more comfortable accessing academic or peer-led supports, compared to a formal counselling group, but both options should be provided. It may be helpful to think on a continuum of informal to formal, clinical, supports; for example, a student feeling anxiety about speaking up in class may benefit from a different type of support compared to a student feeling so anxious they are unable to leave their room. Below are some examples of opportunities for campus collaborations:

International Student Services (ISS) and Counselling

- Identify needs of students and staff, and opportunities to collaborate
- Designate counsellor(s) to act as point of contact for International Student Services (ISS)
- Find opportunities for students to informally interact with counsellors, and find out more about their services
- Schedule counsellors to present at student orientation to discuss:
 - How your institution defines mental wellness, and the importance of self-care
 - Resources available on and off campus
 - Confidentiality and health insurance coverage
 - Reasons to access service
- Invite counsellors to attend ongoing ISS social events
- Host information sessions about mental health support services later on in the term when students are likely to forget all the information they received during orientation
- Deliver open attendance (no registration or intake required) skills workshops or discussion groups to encourage greater attendance because of the non-stigmatizing nature of the terminology
- Provide information on the website for parents and friends, to assist their student to seek the supports they need

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Academic and English Language Support Services: Embed Mental Health Discussions

- Incorporate topics such as time management, academic stress, performance anxiety and self-care into existing workshops, or into English language conversation practice discussions
- Co-deliver workshops in collaboration with counselling, such as “Writing Stress Free”
- Co-deliver English conversation practice with ISS staff or peers, incorporating topics such as homesickness, Canadian cultural, cultural differences, making friends, check-ins regarding mood and issues, and when issues may require additional, formal support

International Student Services and Mentoring or Tutoring Program

- Utilize a buddy system in which newly arrived international students are paired with domestic or international students
- Train the peer supporters on Mental Health first aid training

Faculty and Departmental Partnerships

- Partner with faculties and students to create wellness curriculum, and host events and workshops, for example:
 - Nutrition: eating for mental health
 - Dance: monthly dance jam event
 - Psychology: building resiliency, understanding your brain under stress
 - Athletics: running for mental health
 - Image Arts: mental health focused photo exhibit

Language or Culturally Specific Supports on Campus, or through Community Partner

- Discuss whether there is need, interest, and opportunity to offer language-specific supports, either on campus or in collaboration with community partner. Some students may not want language or cultural-specific supports due to concerns of information “getting back home.”
- Survey student population on interest, need, and languages
- Determine capacity on campus, or whether to engage community partner
- Discuss logistics such as whether to hold open or closed group requiring intake and registration, language specific marketing strategies, intake procedures, location, catering, group format, and procedures in case of emergency
- Develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between institutions, through your legal department in conjunction with internal partners, to clarify liability,

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health information custodians, confidentiality forms, information security, marketing, intake, and responsibilities of each party. Your legal department may have a template you can customize. If using an external agency, clarify if the students will be the clients of the community partner, and where the group will be held (on campus if possible)

Multi-Campus Collaborations

- Explore opportunities to combine resources and student populations across nearby campuses to provide culturally or linguistically specific supports
- Develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between institutions, through your legal department in conjunction with internal partners, to clarify liability, health information custodians, confidentiality forms, information security, and responsibilities of each party. Your legal department may have a template you can customize.
- Identify key contacts and marketing channels at each campus

Student Engagement

In the Speaking Your Language project, student-hosted events planned by the Student Leadership Team were by far the best attended. In addition, the Student Leadership Team bonded to create a support network of their own.

Student Leadership Team

- Determine who is best-situated to guide this group. It may be an international educator, or health promotions staff. It is important that whoever is guiding this group of student leaders must have inter-cultural competency and global perspective
- **Based on your campus student population** assemble a team of international and domestic students to form a student leadership team, to lead peer-based outreach programs, events, or public education campaigns. Recruit facilitators and social/media marketing students
- Recruit international students through email lists and peer mentor programs; domestic students from health promotion placements, peer mentoring programs, tutoring programs, etc.
- Hold information sessions to let students know more about the initiative, and how they might be involved
- Plan introductory facilitation agenda, including icebreakers and brainstorming sessions
- Provide mental health literacy training for leadership group (see training section below)
- Encourage student ideas for student engagement and events
- Plan knowledge building events, i.e. focus groups, conversation cafes, cultural curiosity events

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- Allow student to develop awareness campaigns, videos, video blogging, blogging, journalism, and social media
- Outreach to student unions for ideas and partnerships

“Let’s Talk” Events

- Student led, student facilitated 1 – 2 hour events, weekly or per semester
- If possible, provide small budget for catering and decorations, i.e. soup and hot chocolate
- Student select topics, such as Let’s Talk Winter Health, or Let’s Talk Exams
- Student pre-prepare icebreaker, discussion topics, and questions (i.e. how do you handle the winter blues, what are common medical terms you should know, how do you prepare for exams, how do you handle test writing stress)
- Invite subject matter “experts,” such as learning strategist, health nurse, counsellor, academic integrity officer, and international educators to informally answer questions as necessary
- Students create physical and electronic marketing. Market through email lists, English upgrading or tutoring programs, housing, peer mentoring programs, academic supports, electronic posters on campus.
- Student leaders facilitate small group discussions, bring back summary to larger group, and ask “experts” any outstanding questions
- Student facilitators track numbers of attendance, and optionally gather student emails for future events
- Have student leaders create evaluations

Campus Outreach and Marketing

International students respond well to personal invitations and word-of-mouth marketing, so developing peer and staff networks is crucial. Marketing in multiple languages will also generate attention.

Create Advertising and Promotional Materials

- Engage students where possible to create online and print materials in multiple languages
- Promote
- Student led initiatives
- Importance, reasons, and benefits of seeking mental health supports
- Resources and groups available
- Language specific resources, or if campus counsellors can help find language specific community resources
- FAQs such as cost, confidentiality, and what to expect

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- Off-campus resources (such as Good2Talk or connexontario.ca), for anonymity or after-hours support
- Ensure mental health/counselling links and FAQs are on ISS website
- Promote on social media, through social media coordinator if available. Understand not all international students use FACEBOOK and Twitter. Discuss with student leadership team and identify the strategies to reach out to specific international student population using various social media channels

Utilize Peer Networks and Mentors

- Utilize peer mentors to promote mental health initiatives at peer-organized events
- Outreach to ISS advisors, student unions, student organizations regarding programming, FAQs, promotional materials
- Partner with students to create video testimonials
- Promote initiatives through various social media channels
- Engage Journalism or Media students to promote initiatives

Videos

- Create videos explaining how peer supporters define mental health and why it is important to discuss mental health issues with someone
- Create non-threatening and non-stigmatizing marketing material for counselling services (i.e. welcome from counsellors, or virtual tour of counselling center, and what to expect if you contact the counselling center)

Training Opportunities

International Student Information Sessions

- Provide information at orientation, as well as throughout the year on mental health basics and resources

Peer Mentor Training

- Locate training contacts for peer mentors, i.e. in campus mentoring programs, English language mentors, health promotion, international student services, housing
- Supplement existing peer supporter training with
 - mental health basics
 - issues and stressors specific to international students
 - Introduction to cultural competency, and diverse worldview on mental health
 - resources available
 - FAQs, such as cost, confidentiality, and how Counselling works
- Where possible, co-facilitate training with students

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- Invite a counsellor to speak to the group for the counselling resources and FAQs
- Train peers to check-in with international students on making friends, eating habits, how they are settling in throughout the year
- Consider a mental health intervention training such as Livingworks' ASIST or safeTALK programs, Mental Health First Aid, or QPR Triage Training (Question, Persuade, Refer)

Staff/Counsellor Training

- Train frontline staff to effectively support student with mental health challenges, such as a mental health intervention training such as Livingworks' ASIST or safeTALK programs, Mental Health First Aid, or QPR Triage Training (Question, Persuade, Refer)
- Partner with human resources to offer training regarding issues and resources specific to international students
- Provide cultural competency training to counsellors

Sources:

Mental Health Tools | Education Advisory Board. (n.d.). Retrieved January 7, 2015, from <http://www.eab.com/research-and-insights/student-affairs-forum/toolkits/2014/international-student-toolkit/mental-health-tools>

Consultations at Ryerson University, University of Toronto, and OCAD University

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