

Addressing the impact of culture on mental health

INTRODUCTION

As student populations on Ontario campuses become more diverse, approaches to supporting student mental health must be flexible and rooted in an understanding of how systems of oppression impact and intersect within diverse campus communities. The shift to include more equity, diversity and inclusion work on Ontario post-secondary campuses has opened doors to encourage clinicians, counsellors, and health care providers to draw from students' experiences, cultural knowledge, and personal expertise, to guide care plans and improve the effectiveness of mental health supports on campus.

DIVERSITY ON CAMPUS

When addressing diversity on Ontario campuses, we need to look at the range of experiences that exist within the student population. Based on a 2014 study, approximately 1 in 5 Canadian students were first generation post-secondary students, with only 56% completing and receiving post-secondary credentials. Campus diversity is also inclusive of the unique experiences of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized students, students with varying abilities, and members of other equity-deserving groups.

Furthermore, Ontario post-secondary institutions provide education to over 64,000 international students from more than 200 countries, each with their own experience of culture, support systems, and perceptions of mental health and wellness. Between 2018 and 2020, international students made up almost one third of Ontario college students, with the number of international enrolments in post-secondary increasing by 13%. Conversely, domestic enrolments into Canadian post-secondary education declined by 0.9% over the same period.

Social Location is one's position in society and is informed by intersecting identities, such as race, ability, gender, citizenship status and socio-economic status. Social location is an indicator of how one moves through the world based on areas of privilege, and often informs one's sense of self, beliefs about others, degree of social access, and areas of power in society.

CULTURAL COMPETENCY VS. CULTURAL HUMILITY

Cultural competency is the ability to understand and appreciate that a person's culture and beliefs may be different than your own. On the other hand, cultural humility requires self-reflection and an understanding of one's own social location in relation to others, as well as a commitment to working in concert with those from different social locations to facilitate a mutually beneficial outcome.



CULTURAL HUMILITY CAN INFORM MENTAL HEALTH CARE

Whether domestic or international, post-secondary students are coming to campus from different cultural, religious, and social backgrounds. Recognizing one's social location helps health care providers understand that culture can impact not only the ways students talk about mental health, but also the ways they seek support and communicate their needs.

Studies have shown that racialized Canadians are less likely to seek support for mental health concerns than white Canadians. Evidence also shows that culturally adapted mental health interventions and programs can have a positive impact for racial and ethnic minorities seeking care.

The current landscape of mental health care can deter racialized students from accessing care. The centering of the mental health experiences of white people as a default model can serve to devalue the impact of race as a major factor in experiences of mental health and stigma. On-campus services may lack an awareness of community needs or issues, as well as the community relationships required to refer students to culturally informed services. Though many campuses advertise larger community mental health services with remote support options like text lines and crisis support apps, a lack of culturally relevant resources and outreach strategies can still limit access to supports for racialized students.

Racialized people are also underrepresented in health professions. Though it is not always possible for care providers to reflect the identities of those receiving care, it is imperative that those in mental health support roles reflect on the established standards of knowledge, as well as the privilege and power that inform them. This reflection is important to shift the culture of mental health and the ways we respond to better support those who are most marginalized by current practices.



SHIFTING THE CULTURE

Though there has been an increase in diversity hiring to boost representation among post-secondary staff and faculty, these gains will continue to be hindered without systemic changes on campus.

One way that some post-secondary institutions are promoting culture shifts on their campuses is through cluster hiring. Cluster hiring involves not only the recruitment of diverse candidates for on-campus positions, but also the commitment of the institution to a vision of equity and a willingness to act. Not only can hiring in this way reflect representation back at the student body, but it can also be beneficial to staff and faculty as well. Cluster hiring allows for diversity in representation within disciplines and areas of expertise and can serve to promote community and solidarity among staff and faculty members from equity-deserving populations who may feel isolated on campus.



Another way one may consider shifting the cultural landscape in service delivery is through co-creation. Often involving multiple stakeholders in the collaborative development of new ideas and solutions, co-creation combines the established clinical knowledge of service providers with the cultural experiences and personal expertise of those receiving care. Not only can this help to bridge gaps in understanding but including diverse perspectives can enhance creative innovation in the development of culturally appropriate responses



There are programs run by both campuses and community agencies that are working to provide equitable responses to the mental health needs of diverse populations. Through listening to community issues and understanding their own capacity, these entities and initiatives have managed to develop methods to provide culturally appropriate supports to equity-deserving groups. On the following page there are a few we want to highlight.

IN THE COMMUNITY

Women's Health in Women's Hands (WHIWH)*

WHIWH is a community health centre based in Toronto that provides primary health care and mental health care to women and trans* members of South Asian, Black, and Latin American diasporic communities in Toronto and the surrounding area. They work from an anti-oppressive, feminist, and multilingual participatory framework to better combat inaccessibility in health care.

Across Boundaries

Across Boundaries is an organization that provides mental health and addiction supports to racialized folks in Toronto. Through collaborative research and community feedback, they have been influencing the development of mental health services to meet the needs of racialized communities. Their work acknowledges the intersecting nature of racism, oppression, and mental health, and in doing so have established ways to put their organizational values into practice by recognizing and responding to community concerns through their service delivery.



ON CAMPUS

L'Université de Hearst

L'Université de Hearst has been bridging gaps in understanding mental health and stigma among international students to increase informed access to mental health care. Through their peer mentorship program, they pair new international students with peers who have attended Hearst for at least two years to help them bridge cultural gaps, recognize signs of distress, and familiarize themselves with on-campus life. They have also been bridging gaps in the cultural understandings of mental health service providers. Through collaborating with psychologists and other service providers, L'Université de Hearst has created avenues to promote stigma reduction and help increase access to culturally aware mental health care.

The Wabnode Centre for Indigenous Services - Cambrian College

The Wabnode Centre for Indigenous Services provides on-campus support to First Nations, Inuit and Métis students through programs and services that take into consideration the cultural and spiritual needs of Indigenous students on campus. By providing students with access to on-site Elders, space for ceremonies, and through building community partnerships with agencies devoted to health and wellness of Indigenous communities, Wabnode is building a culture of community care at Cambrian. In addition to the supports available to Indigenous students, they also provide a space for non-Indigenous staff and students to participate in cultural exchange, learn about the history of residential schools, and the process of truth and reconciliation.



TIPS FOR FACILITATING A CULTURE SHIFT ON CAMPUS

Incorporate cultural humility into professional development training provided to mental health support staff

- Center students as the most knowledgeable about their situations and work together with them to share professional expertise and to develop personalized care plans.
- [Centering Black Youth Wellbeing – YouthREX](#)
- [San'yas Anti-Racism Indigenous Cultural Safety Training Program](#)

Reflect on how cultural humility can be incorporated into policies, procedures, and practices

- Review the messaging of on-campus mental health services to ensure that there are culturally relevant adaptations.

Consider the possibility of cluster hiring and the impact that a similar initiative may have on the campus community

Develop and maintain relationships with community mental health organizations and services that have the knowledge and expertise to provide culturally specific care

Increase the capacity of on-campus supports to provide culturally relevant care to equity-deserving communities

- Incorporate intersectional understandings as critical components of mental health care planning.
- Develop peer-support programs that pair students with similar backgrounds.
- Ensure that peer supporters are made aware of on campus resources and have the tools to support students to recognize and respond to crisis among their peers.

Introduce co-creation into service delivery models

- As mentioned above, co-creation is considered a vital tool in enhancing innovation and improving the relevance and effectiveness of ideas and services.
- Link to webinar on Engagement and Co-creation – webinar will be happening on April 14th – will then be accessible in the archived webinars tab on our website.*

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