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Leveraging Kindness in Canadian Post-Secondary Education: A Conceptual Paper

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ABSTRACT
Positive academic climates are critical to helping students thrive, and kindness innovations might enhance these climates. This conceptual paper's purpose is to share insights from a consensus building event focused on fostering relationships and knowledge-sharing among an international group of multidisciplinary students, faculty, and staff who explored ways to bring a kindness framework into post-secondary education. Participants underscored kindness as critical for students' experiences and university culture, and identified several levels of influence requiring intervention focus. Ideas and strategies emerging from the event might serve to encourage student-led kindness initiatives and prompt university personnel to integrate kindness into post-secondary institutions.

KEYWORDS
Behavior; Canada; Kindness; post-secondary education; students

Post-secondary students experience substantial pressures to succeed academically (American College Health Association 2016). Such pressure can strain their social-emotional wellbeing, and negatively influence the student experience (Davis 2014), which in turn impacts students' academic success (Kaplan et al. 2016). Finding ways to promote positive academic climates and social-emotional wellbeing among students is critical to helping them thrive in these complex and challenging times. In the competitive world of post-secondary education, instilling or practicing kindness might be one substantive, overt innovation that could positively influence students' academic success. According to the *American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology* American Psychological Association (2018), kindness is a "benevolent and helpful action intentionally directed toward another person. Kindness is often considered to be motivated by the desire to help another, not to gain explicit reward or to avoid explicit punishment" (para. 1). As a focus of research, kindness recently has gained traction as an important and productive program of inquiry (Layous et al. 2012; Paviglianiti and Irwin 2017; Trew and Alden 2015). Specifically, Curry et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis wherein they investigated the evidence that kindness interventions can improve subjective wellbeing. The authors concluded that performing acts of kindness improves the wellbeing of the actor and that human beings possess an innate motivation to help others, while simultaneously benefitting from doing so; positing that kindness interventions are an effective way to boost one's wellbeing (Curry et al. 2018). In the context of educational settings, Layous et al. (2012) conducted a longitudinal study where 19 classes in British Columbia, Canada (aged 9–11) were asked to engage in three acts of kindness per week for four weeks. The authors concluded that students experienced increased peer acceptance and improved wellbeing (Layous et al. 2012). Similarly, Pressman, Kraft, and Cross (2015) explored the impact of a pay it forward intervention among 83 undergraduate students who were asked to perform kind acts for an hour and a half at one time. The authors found that the pay it forward intervention resulted in greater positive affect and lower negative affect, as well as increased optimism, gratitude, life satisfaction, and joviality (Pressman, Kraft, and Cross 2015).

Additionally, Shillington et al. (2021) conducted a randomized controlled trial, wherein they assessed the impact of a deliberate acts of kindness intervention plus access to a stress management booklet, compared to the booklet alone on the resilience, social interaction anxiety, affect, and mood of undergraduate and graduate students. The authors concluded that participants who performed the acts of kindness reported improved resilience, and decreased social anxiety and negative affect (Shillington et al. 2021). Further, intervention group participants qualitatively described improved mental health, a fostered sense of purpose, enhanced social connection, enjoyment, and positive empathy, to name a few (Shillington et al. 2021). Therefore, it is evident that engaging in kind acts has both psychological and physical benefits that include improvements in social-emotional wellbeing and more positive school climates, which are essential for students' educational success (Curry et al. 2018; Kaplan et al. 2016; Lyubomirsky, Tkach, and Sheldon 2004; Post 2005; Pressman, Kraft, and Cross 2015; Shillington et al. 2021).

Kindness falls into the category of prosocial behavior, that is, behavior through which people benefit others via a wide range of actions such as helping, sharing, comforting, and cooperating (Eisenberg, VanSchyndel, and Spinrad 2016). The project from which this conceptual paper arose was a three, half-day virtual consensus building event held November 2nd–4th 2021 and designed to build relationships and facilitate knowledge-sharing among an international group of multidisciplinary students, faculty, and staff. A consensus building approach allows groups to reach an overwhelming agreement among relevant stakeholders and maximize possible gains to everyone (Harvard Law School 2022). The underlying rationale for this initiative was to share ideas, practices, and concepts regarding ways and means to raise kindness behaviors into mainstream post-secondary educational institutions' explicit values and actions. In short, the vision was to promote the idea and practice of kindness in an environment that typically overlooks prosocial behaviors relative to the attention paid to priority health behaviors (e.g., physical activity, alcohol consumption, smoking behavior, nutrition, general safety, etc.; Von Ah et al. 2004).

The specific purpose of this conceptual paper is to share insights from a consensus building event focused on fostering relationships and knowledge-sharing among an international group of multidisciplinary students, faculty, and staff who explored ways to bring a kindness framework into post-secondary education. Through sharing insights from the Leveraging Kindness (LK) event, our hope is that this paper will offer stimuli for the future development and implementation of kindness initiatives by others wishing to progress this type of programming. We created a (LK) leadership team composed of 3 professors (one of which had expertise in educational development), 3 graduate students, and 3 undergraduate students, all of whom had an expressed interest in the project and/or various levels of expertise with research and practices related to diffusing kindness as an important educational construct. The LK team sought and was successful in obtaining a Connection grant through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council with a pre-Covid plan to host and fund a LK conference at our home institution. The pandemic forced a shift toward the eventual virtual (Zoom platform) consensus building event that took place in the Fall of 2021.

Fundamental to the project was the creation of an easy-to-access online learning management system; we selected OWL, our home institution's customized version of Sakai, the open-source learning management system by Apereo. Access to the secure Leveraging Kindness OWL Site could be provided readily to all participants and it served multiple, important purposes. For example, the LK event agenda was placed on the site and updated on a regular basis and a resource area was created to serve as an ongoing repository regarding kindness information, research, and applications. The site also served as a place for everyone to learn about the LK team and their initiatives. Finally, perceived global research experts (i.e., in the field of kindness and/or higher education) were contacted and invited to be interviewed virtually as well as attend the consensus building event; those nine interview sessions were recorded and the resultant interview transcriptions were made available along with individual bios with permission to do so, for all participants to read on the OWL site. An interview guide was created with the purpose of gleaning interviewees' background/research interests, their definition and understanding of kindness, and how kindness might be integrated into the university experience from their perspective. Additionally, student representatives were invited to participate in a group discussion. Two group discussions were held: one with undergraduate students ($n = 3$) and a second with graduate students ($n = 4$). These students were from six different institutions across Canada and represented six different academic disciplines. A group discussion guide was created with a view toward determining students' experiences of kindness in post-secondary school

and how they would like to see kindness integrated into their and other students' academic experience. Following the interviews and group discussions, the recordings were transcribed and uploaded to the project OWL site. The interviews/group discussions served to preface or frame the event in that all event attendees were asked to review the recordings/transcripts prior to the event. Thus, the website served as both a structural and functional container and nexus for the LK event complete with a welcoming message from one of the Principal Investigators, Dr. Jennifer Irwin.

For some 10 months prior to the 2021 event, the LK team met virtually on a regular basis to provide updates on participant recruitment and to create and refine the workshop days' agenda and formats. To accommodate participants in different time zones and/or countries to the best extent, the virtual workshop was held from 12:00 to 4:00 PM, Eastern Standard Time on each of the 3 successive weekdays in early November. The password protected Zoom link was sent to all participants well in advance of the event dates. The LK team was definitive in establishing both the kindness working definition, "*a benevolent and helpful action intentionally directed toward another person*" and the event purpose, *a collaboration to identify efficacious ways to bring kindness into the fabric of post-secondary education* as the pivotal or centripetal points for the discursive event. Each day's structural format was identical with a full group, moderated session to greet everyone; provide brief introductions; create an inclusive environment; and remind participants about the purpose of the 3-day event. Then the full group meeting was followed by an explicit statement of each day's thematic question with subsequent dispersion into 'breakout' rooms for small group, facilitated discussion using open-ended questions to probe and guide the conversations. Each room had a

note-taker assigned to record the group's deliberations. Each day's thematic question with some sample discursive questions are provided below:

Typically, the small group discussions lasted for 75–90 minutes and were followed by a refreshment break and then a moderated full group sharing – with note-taking – of the small groups' deliberations and major points. The LK team then provided a summary of the day's learnings with a brief summary of the discussions related to, *what do we know now that we did not know at the start of the day*? The moderator then pointed toward the next day's thematic question and invited any feedback that participants wanted to provide. Finally, the LK team met immediately following each day's workshop to discuss what went well, what might need to be changed or recalibrated for the next day/s, and to generally review the day's events. Following the team debrief, one LK team member (Katie Shillington) worked in the evening to summarize the insights/ideas that came out of the day in the form of an infographic, which she then shared with the group prior to the next day's events starting. The only format alteration that occurred was for Day 3 when the LK team determined that no small group discussion groups were needed; instead, the full group was utilized for the thematic discussion. The event ended with a summary of perceived learnings over the 3 days along with a brief discussion of next steps that might stem from the event initiative and findings.

The 3-day event resulted in fruitful and thoughtful discussions. What emerged were rich concepts and ideas that provide substantive and efficacious ways to leverage kindness within the fabric of post-secondary educational institutions. These concepts and ideas are presented in a conceptual format in this document, *Leveraging Kindness to Enhance Post-secondary Students' Academic Success: A Transdisciplinary Synthesis*, see Figure 1 (a–c) below. The document is

| Event Day	Thematic Question	Probes
Day 1	What skills, knowledge, and/or attitudes [kindness elements] do we want students (and others) to develop as a result of any kindness innovations (desired outcomes)?	*Where have these elements been developed? What models or prototypes, if any, already exist to assist us?* *If these elements were developed, what would they look like? What evidence do we have currently to support their development?*
Day 2	What kindness-related activities will enable the achievement of the outcomes (learning experiences)?	*What other activities (not kindness-related) are known to have enable outcomes' achievement?* *What structures are in place to facilitate enabling the outcomes?* *What activities have worked in other institutions or in the past? Examples?*
Day 3	What are the necessary mechanisms for the efficacious implementation of these activities, including required resources and avenues to address potential barriers?	*What mechanisms are already known re efficacious implementation of any innovation?* *How might we leverage those mechanisms (question above) to suit our purpose?* *What resources already exist for efficacious implementation?* *What other/new resources do we need to make implementation successful?* *What do we need to measure success re implementation?* *What elements need to be in place to ensure the longevity of bringing and instilling kindness into the fabric of post-secondary education?*

(a)

(b)

(c)
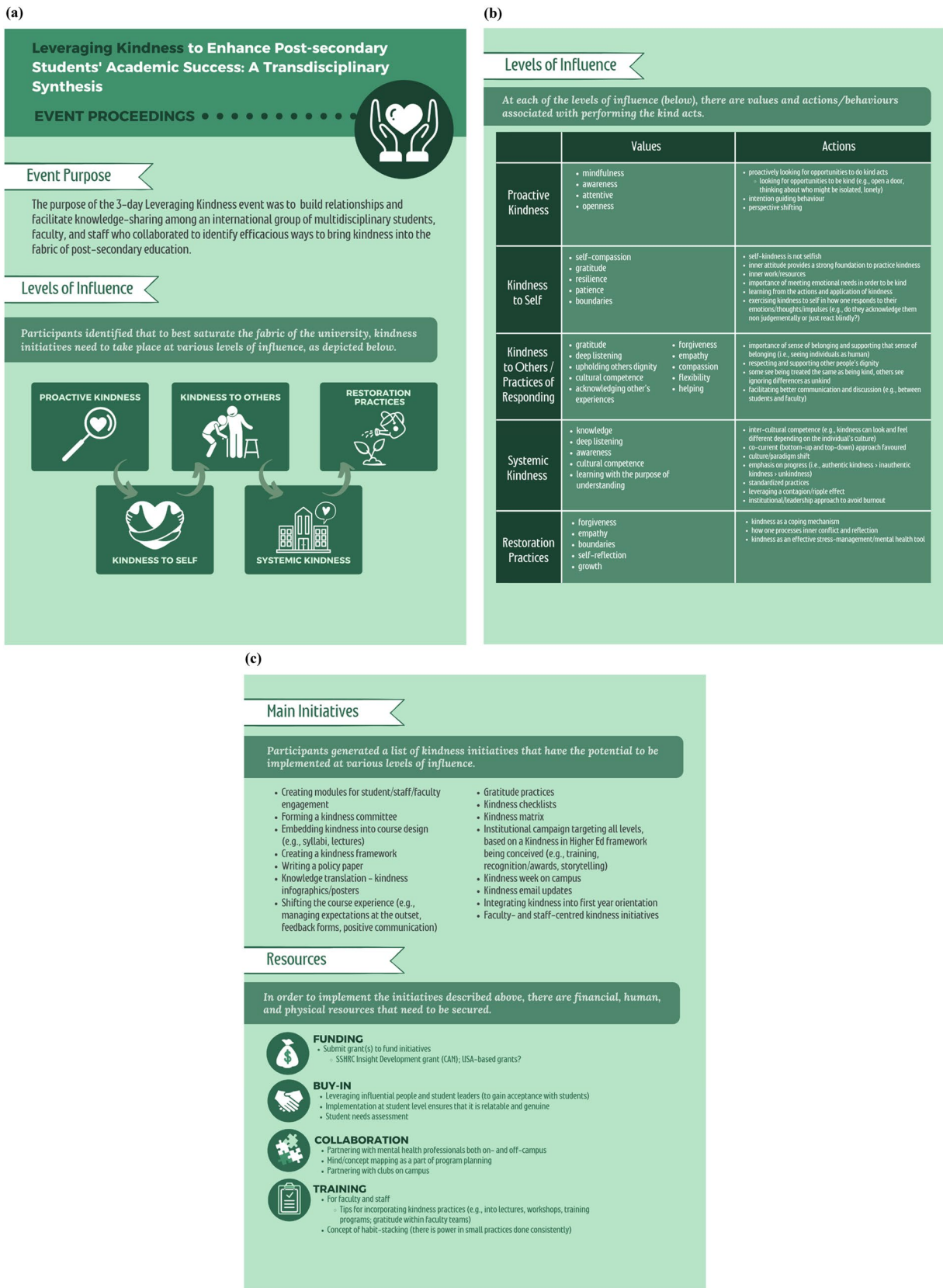
Figure 1. (a–c) Leveraging kindness to enhance post-secondary students' academic success: a transdisciplinary synthesis.

not exhaustive in either content or ideas; rather, it is intended to provide a concrete starting point for strategies on how kindness behaviors can be infused into the culture of mainstream post- secondary institutions. In essence, the LK team distilled, collated, and organized all levels of input – those from the student groups, the expert interviews, and the event proceedings – into a grid or chart that categorizes intended kindness behaviors into five levels of influence: proactive kindness; kindness to others; restoration practices; kindness to self; and systemic kindness (Figure 1(a)). Briefly, each level distinguishes areas of foci or directions for kindness-related initiatives, and, in turn, each level is grounded in core values that inform intended kindness actions, see Figure 1(b). For example, in Figure 1(b) 'Kindness to Self' includes the following values: self-compassion; gratitude; resilience; patience; and boundaries. These values serve as engagement anchors in the practice of kindness toward the self. Actions in this category involve recognizing that self-kindness is not selfish; understanding that one's inner attitude provides a strong foundation to extend kindness toward others; and emphasizing meeting one's basic human needs in order to be kind. Kindness toward others can take many different forms, inclusive of respecting and supporting other people's dignity, perspective taking, placing an emphasis on communication, and fostering a sense of belonging, to name a few. The aforementioned values are required in order for one to extend kindness toward others. Kindness toward others can take many different forms, inclusive of respecting and supporting other people's dignity; placing an emphasis on communication; and fostering a sense of belonging, to name a few. While not an exhaustive list, the values and related actions provided the foundation from which the main initiatives stemmed (Figure 1(c)). Examples of main initiatives included: embedding kindness into course design (e.g., syllabi, lectures); promoting kindness via infographics/posters to be shared around campus; engaging in gratitude practices; creating a kindness checklist for faculty to implement in their classes/with students; and developing and piloting an institutional kindness campaign. In order to implement the proposed kindness initiatives, perceived financial, human, and physical resources would need to be secured (e.g., funding, individual and institutional buy-in, collaboration, and training). Please note, the intention of this paper has been to provide stimuli for the future development and implementation of kindness initiatives by others wishing to advance this type of programming. Additional work is needed to identify intervention-specific details necessary for the successful integration of kindness initiatives in university settings.

Instrumental to the implementation of the kindness initiatives, our event participants identified the need for a fundamental cultural shift in the perception and enactment of kind behaviors within higher education. In other words, the infusion of kindness in university settings has the potential to propagate prosocial kindness behaviors and meet basic human needs for inclusion, belonging, caring and compassion. This is in line with the work conducted by Weng et al. (2013), who proposed that individuals can strengthen their capacity to be kind which can lead to emotional regulation. As such, we perceived this shift as needing to happen at three levels: (1) the individual; (2) the classroom; and (3) the larger institution itself. Figure 2 outlines what this shift might look like at each level. Specifically, to implement kindness practices at the individual level, it might involve integrating lived experiences and providing space for individual voices to be heard. Additionally, at the individual level there is an emphasis on intentionality behind the kind acts and evaluating one's emotions to ensure individual needs are met prior to extending kindness toward others. At the classroom level, it is imperative that faculty members take a leadership role to create an environment wherein students feel that they belong. This might involve faculty modeling kindness themselves, demonstrating open communication, empathy, and mutual respect in the classroom, and/or valuing flexibility and transparency with students. At the institutional level a larger cultural paradigm shift is needed in order to implement kindness initiatives. This might involve dismantling colonial practices and re-framing institutional values. Across all levels, addressing implicit biases that cause discrimination and making kindness enjoyable in order to create a contagion/ripple effect, were deemed critical.

Finally, to cement the implementation of the selected kindness initiative(s), we believe that evaluation must occur (see Figure 3) at the formative, process, and summative stages of implementation. Formative evaluation would occur during the development of the initiative in order to ensure that the initiative is feasible prior to implementation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d2013.; McKenzie, Neiger, and Thackeray 2017). Formative and process evaluation would occur at the beginning/during implementation and would be used to monitor the ongoing effectiveness of the initiative (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d2017.; McKenzie, Neiger, and Thackeray 2017). Impact evaluation would occur immediately following the
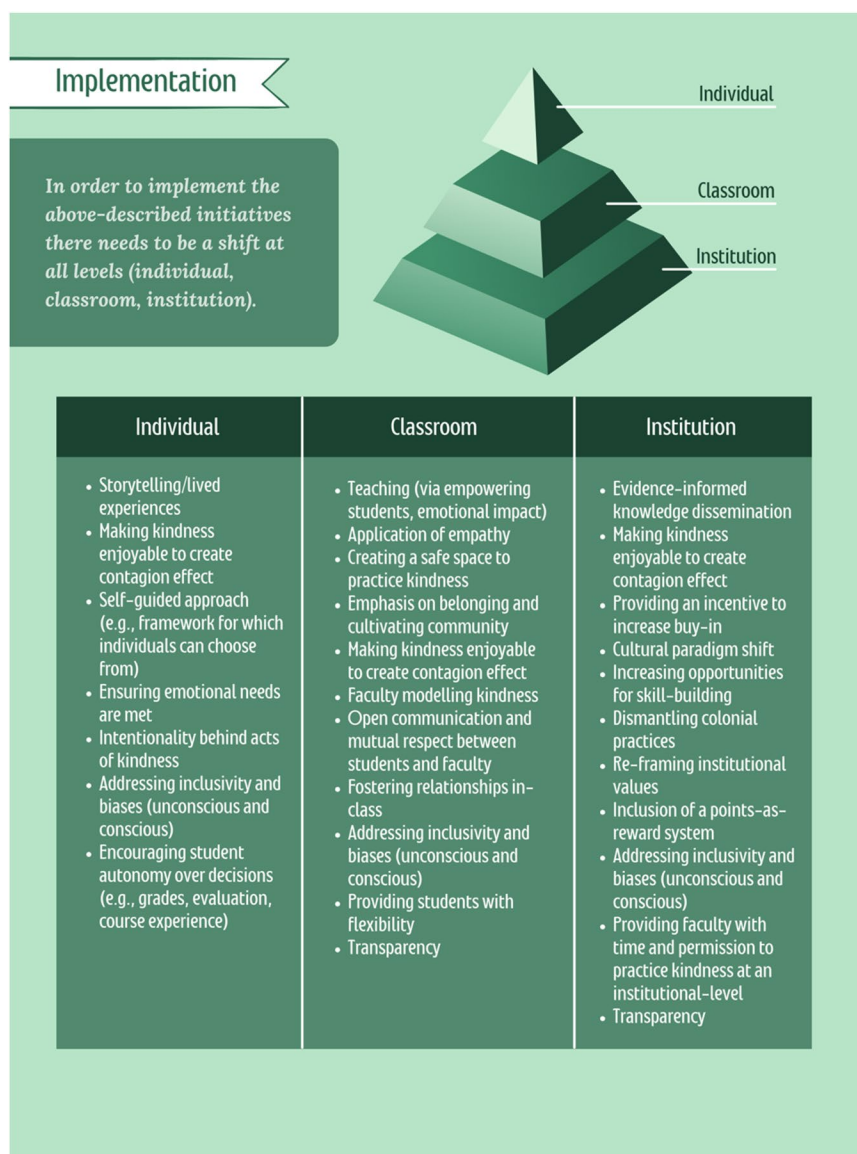
Figure 2. Implementation of kindness initiatives: a 3-level shift in practices.

conclusion of the initiative, such that we would be able to capture the immediate observable effects of the initiative (McKenzie, Neiger, and Thackeray 2017). Lastly, summative evaluation would be used to assess the impact, outcome, and benefits of the kindness initiative and would determine whether the results met the stated goals (McKenzie, Neiger, and Thackeray 2017).

In summary, this descriptive, conceptual paper was formulated in order to collect and disseminate ideas that were generated from a Leveraging Kindness project and event. Specifically, the LK event served as a platform within which an international group of multidisciplinary students, faculty, and staff came together to discuss ways to bring kindness into the fabric of post-secondary education. Event participants were clear that kindness is not only warranted but

is a critical component in student experience and university culture as a whole. Broadly, it was emphasized that kindness should be proactively integrated at individual, classroom, and institutional levels. Several initiatives were suggested, including but not limited to: embedding kindness into course design; promoting kindness via infographics/posters; engaging in gratitude practices; creating a kindness checklist; and developing and piloting an institutional kindness campaign. In moving forward from the LK event and our conceptual description emanating from discussions therein, our intent is to determine the initiative that is most feasible and sustainable for implementation in post-secondary institutions; we will then pilot this initiative at the host institution and evaluate its effectiveness and impact. Our considered opinion at this juncture is that the most

Evaluation

To ensure that we are meeting the goals of the initiative(s), evaluation needs to occur before (formative), during (process), and after (impact, summative) implementation.

FORMATIVE EVALUATION
- During the development of initiative
- Help assess the feasibility of initiative implementation

PROCESS EVALUATION
- When initiative implementation begins/during initiative
- Used to monitor initiative implementation
- Identify key components of initiative that are effective

IMPACT EVALUATION
- Quantitative measures (e.g., scales to assess kindness?)
- At end of initiative
- Immediate observable effects of initiative
- Intermediate or long-term changes in behavioural impact

SUMMATIVE EVALUATION
- Determine whether results have met stated goals
- Assess impact, outcome, and benefits

No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.

Centre for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). Types of Evaluation. https://www.cdc.gov/std/program/pupestd/types%20of%20evaluation.pdf

McKenzie, J.F., Neiger, B.L. & Thackeray, R. (2017). Planning, Implementing and Evaluating Health Promotion Programs, 7th edition. Toronto: Pearson.

Figure 3. Formative, process, and summative evaluation needs.

promising initiative may well be to design, implement, and evaluate the feasibility of a kindness checklist tailored for faculty to use within course offerings at the host institution. Foremost in our aspirations for leveraging kindness into the fabric of post-secondary institutions is that the findings and ideas stemming from the LK event might serve to stimulate and encourage student-led kindness initiatives and prompt university personnel to find efficacious ways and means to integrate kindness into post-secondary institutions from both a bottom-up and top-down approaches.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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