



Supporting post-secondary student learning and mental health: seven key components of a Canadian guide

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Context

In recent years, post-secondary student mental health has attracted attention from many countries around the world. More and more often, university and college employees raise their concerns on the high number of students struggling with mental health problems, their situation proving to be increasingly complex.¹ Consequently, guides or guidelines were developed mainly in Europe and North America to support post-secondary institutions in analyzing, planning and taking action to promote student mental health. Thanks to this perspective, a recent Canadian initiative entitled "Post-secondary Student Mental Health: Guide to a Systemic Approach"² emerged. As a result of the collaboration between the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services and the Canadian Mental Health Association, this guide offers Canadian colleges and universities a strategy to improve student mental health and education using seven key elements, which both Canadian and international literature agree on. A brief summary on these elements are presented here.

The guide's underlying premises

The guide's key elements are based on the following broad general principles:

- Students' academic success cannot be addressed without considering mental health: these two factors are interrelated.
- Supporting students in taking control of their own well-being has short- and long-term benefits.
- Environmental factors have a significant influence on students' well-being and education.
- All campus stakeholders play a role in maintaining and improving student mental health. This is a shared and collective responsibility that does not only belong to psychological services.
- A campus favourable to mental health and learning is based on equality and justice, and promotes the development of all students. Awareness of inequality and discrimination and taking action to diminish them are essential measures to consider when it comes to students' well-being.

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The seven key components

The difficulties students experience may have an impact on their learning and mental health.

1. **“Institutional Structure: Organization, Planning and Policy”**. The learning institution’s overall organizational context, through its structure, strategic direction, policies and practices has a significant impact on student mental health and learning.
2. **“Supportive, Inclusive Campus Climate and Environment”**. Conditions promoting meaningful participation of all students to life on campus have a positive impact on their mental health, contributing to strengthening their sense of belonging, learning and overall development.
3. **“Mental Health Awareness”**. Awareness measures help support student mental health by improving their knowledge about symptoms, management and the impact of mental health problems. These measures also help fight against the prejudices and stigma associated with mental health problems.
4. **“Community Capacity to Respond to Early Indications of Student Concern”**. The difficulties students experience may have an impact on their learning and mental health; therefore, persistent difficulties may aggravate the situation. Some stakeholders, such as those who deal with students on a daily basis, are more apt to detecting the first signs of these difficulties. Early detection involves improving students’ and some employees’ skills that will help them better recognize the early signs of a difficult situation as well as signs of greater distress.
5. **“Self-Management Competencies and Coping Skills”**. Improving coping and self-management skills helps students deal with the multiple demands of their student and personal life. It also and helps reduce the risk of onset depression and anxiety.
6. **“Accessible Mental Health Services”**. Accessible services for students experiencing mental health problems have a positive impact on their future academic career. In addition to accessible services, their nature, connections with other external or internal services and their ongoing evaluation are other factors that help effectively support students experiencing difficulties.
7. **“Crisis Management”**. An exceptional situation, such as a major display of distress, violence or suicide can affect the entire campus. Therefore, crisis management protocols are essential so campus employees are ready to respond adequately.

Conclusion

This guide falls in line with two major guidance documents on mental health in Canada, “Toward Recovery and Well-being”³ and “Changing Directions, Changing Lives”⁴, by offering a comprehensive approach to maintaining and improving mental health, that is adapted to the post-secondary context. With examples and questions for each key element, Quebec post-secondary institutions can certainly use this guide that is a highly relevant reference tool as part of a process of reflection and action in favour of student mental health.

Bibliography

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