Royal Roads University Student Mental Health Framework:

Vision, Principles and Core Elements

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Drafted by working group members: Donna van Akker, Dranna Andrews-Brown,

Asma-na-hi Antoine, Gwen Campden, Sarah Chettleburgh, May Doerksen,

Kyla McLeod, Todd Thexton and Michael Young

Royal Roads University acknowledges that the university campus is on the traditional lands of the Xwsepsum (Esquimalt) and Lkwungen (Songhees) ancestors and families who have lived here for thousands of years.

It is with gratitude that we now learn and work here, where the past, present and future of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, faculty and staff come together.

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Royal Roads Student Mental Health Vision Statement

At Royal Roads we strive to support student mental health and wellbeing so that students can thrive in their academic pursuits. We aim for a state in which every student can successfully navigate the normal stresses of being a student, can realize their own academic potential, and can work productively towards fulfilling their own human potential, and achieving their life-changing educational goals.

Introduction

Post-secondary student mental health has been a rising concern for over a decade, and continues to be a significant issue for most Canadian post-secondary institutions. Post-secondary students across the country consistently disclose high levels of stress, anxiety and depression (MacKean, 2011; Stanton, Zandvliet, Dhaliwal, & Black, 2016) and post-secondary institutions have been called upon to provide a response (Giamos, Lee, Suleiman, Stuart, & Chen, 2017). This framework document describes why addressing student mental health is a priority at Royal Roads and provides clarity for how student mental health can be supported through a holistic institution-wide approach; one which recognizes and facilitates whole person education. This document was drafted by a working group comprised of Royal Roads faculty, program and student services staff, and in consultation with the broader Royal Roads community and external partners.

Background and Rationale for a Student Mental Health Framework at Royal Roads

Student mental health is a relevant factor in meeting institutional goals in teaching, learning, and student academic achievement. The experience of studying at the post-secondary level, both undergraduate and graduate, has been known to introduce levels of stress that can negatively affect student mental health and create barriers that interfere with the achievement of learning outcomes (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2012; Hyun et. al., 2006; MacKean, 2011; Stanton et. al., 2016). For students who have a diagnosed mental health condition prior to starting post-secondary, this new stress can trigger a condition or impede recovery; unfortunately, the stigma that is often still associated with having a mental health condition may also reduce a student's likeliness to seek timely support (Martin, 2010; Reavly & Jorm, 2010). The foundational work of Nevil Sanford (1968) reminds us that some stress is necessary to facilitate optimal conditions for growth and development, but this stress must also be balanced with support. Too much stress, or too much support, can stunt student learning. Building institutional awareness for how student mental health is linked to student learning, and successful outcomes, and developing institutional capacity for supporting student mental health will help Royal Roads in meeting its goals of student academic achievement.

Attending to student mental health has implications beyond institutional goals for student academic achievement. By nature, post-secondary institutions share and create knowledge that influences and shapes our communities. Health promotion efforts within the institution therefore have the potential to facilitate positive effects beyond the institution. In recent years, post-secondary education has been asked to accept greater responsibility for this type of health promotion. In 2015, multiple educators from across Canada and the world came together to draft

the Okanagan Charter, which identifies post-secondary education as having a unique and significant role in contributing to positive health outcomes within and beyond the post-secondary setting (International Conference on Health Promoting Universities & Colleges, 2015).

In light of this trend towards recognizing the importance of student mental health, recent publications invite post-secondary institutions to consider a comprehensive approach to student mental health and to develop institutional plans which involve a shared responsibility among students, faculty, administrators and community partners (Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, 2017; Eisenberg et. al., 2012; Giamos et. al., 2017; Stanton et. al., 2016). This means that student mental health can no longer be the sole responsibility of a select service unit or counselling office. Instead, the care for student mental health becomes a shared responsibility among all members of the community, and is reflected throughout policy and practice.

The Canadian Association for College and University Student Services (CACUSS) and the Canadian Mental Health Association have collaborated to develop a framework and conceptual diagram (see figure 1) that guides post-secondary institutions in their approach to supporting student mental health (Washburn, Teo, Knodel, & Morris, 2013).
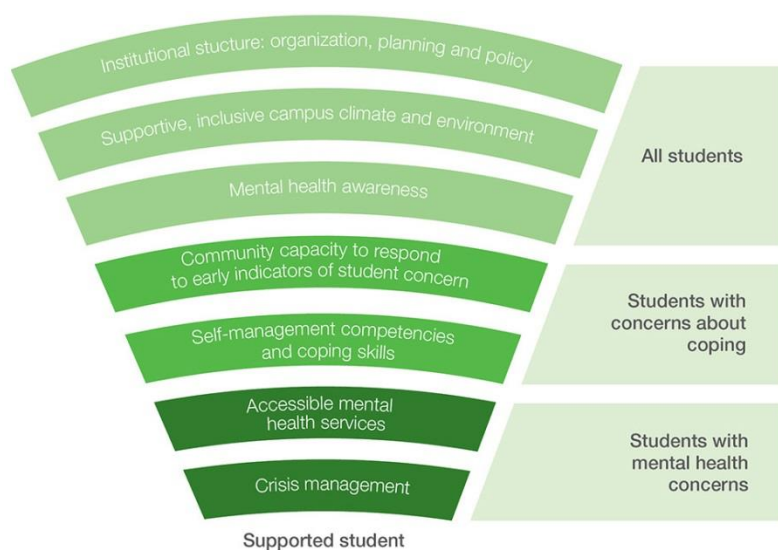
Fig.1. a Systemic Approach to postsecondary student mental health, from *Campus Mental Health: Community of Practice*, Web; 11 October 2018.

This conceptual diagram illustrates how student wellbeing can be broadly promoted to the general student community through shared institutional engagement while more focused services, and systems for proactive intervention, can be offered to those who require more acute support. This coordinated and holistic approach to supporting mental health can help facilitate positive effects, including a decrease in the stigma associated with mental health and a potential decrease in the overall levels of stress that contribute to mental health challenges.

Understanding the Context of Royal Roads

The majority of Royal Roads students are working professionals in blended learning programs, many of whom balance fulltime jobs with multiple academic and personal priorities. There is also a smaller student population in on-campus accelerated programs who are both drawn to, and challenged by, the compressed nature and intensity of the accelerated delivery model. Our student body is diverse in many ways, including but not limited to: age, academic and professional experience, cultural identity and national identity. Though many students have a well-established personal support network, some do not and instead rely on the university for this support. Like most Canadian institutions, student mental health is a relevant concern at RRU; demand for counselling services has increased by 86% between 2012 and 2018, while enrollment increased by 41%.

The unique elements of the Royal Roads Learning, Teaching, and Research Model presents both challenges and opportunities in the area of student mental health. The authentic learning component of the model requires students to bring their whole selves into the learning experience, which can make students feel somewhat vulnerable. However, the intentional

facilitation of learning communities, both physical and digital, creates an opportunity for mental health and wellbeing to be part of learning conversations within the classroom environment. The experiential, participatory and co-creative components of the learning model allows students to take ownership in shaping their academic journey; however, these relatively young approaches to teaching and learning can initially be intimidating for students who are accustomed to more traditional methods of instruction. The use of team-based learning can also trigger feelings of apprehension or stress; however, learning in teams can help foster a culture of connection, accountability and care for one another. It is also important to remember that program and course content, which often addresses challenging human issues and social dilemmas, can elicit unexpected responses of emotion and stress.

Royal Roads is well positioned to deliver learning experiences that balance challenge and support. The university's personalized approach to student learning and engagement through schools and program offices provides a forum for developing healthy and open learning communities. Learning resources and services are designed to support the overall learning and teaching model, and accessible to students through multiple modes of delivery (face-to-face, phone, Skype, Collaborate and email). Specific services, including Student Counselling Services, Learning Strategist Support, Indigenous Student Services and Team Coaching provide specialized service in the area of mental health and wellbeing.

Royal Roads Mental Health Framework: Principles and Core Elements

Royal Roads institutional values promote a learning community that is caring, creative, and accountable. These values have guided this framework's principles and core elements. The principles serve a foundation to engage in this work. The core elements provide a focus for action by describing *what* work is necessary. The principles and core elements are all distinct, but also connected.

Principles

1. Student mental health is a shared responsibility between individual students and the university; all students, faculty members, associate faculty, staff, and members of the broader Royal Roads community should therefore be able to see themselves reflected in this framework.

2. Respect for diversity, inclusivity and wellness will be at the forefront of all student mental health initiatives.

3. Respect for, and inclusion of, local Indigenous protocols will be at the forefront of all student mental health initiatives, as well as the recognition of the diversity of our Indigenous students from across Canada.

4. Initiatives that support student mental health will consider any relevant attributes of the Royal Roads' Learning, Teaching, and Research Model, so that the support structure will be intentionally designed to align with the student academic experience.

Mental Health Framework Core Elements

There are four elements to this framework that demonstrate Royal Roads' commitment to student mental health. The first two elements engage the broader Royal Roads community in the work of health promotion. The third and fourth elements enlist specific services to deliver focused initiatives for mental health support and service referral.

1. ***Plan for healthy learning.***

Student mental health is not the sole responsibility of one policy, administrative system or service; it is a shared responsibility that must be reflected in the student learning environment as well as in all policies, systems and services that support or facilitate the student experience. This element of the framework involves bringing awareness of student mental wellbeing into the early design or re-designs of all courses, services, policies and administrative practices.

We therefore support a healthy learning journey by:

- Designing learning experiences that offer an intentional balance of challenge and support in order to avoid undue stress on student mental health;

- Maintaining student policies and procedures that are specific to supporting student access to mental health resources and related accommodations;

- Coordinating the principles of clarity, flexibility, equity, and dignity into the design and review of all student regulations, policies and procedures;

- Applying concepts of universal design for learning into courses, services and activities.

2. ***Develop a culture of care.***

Student mental health benefits from a supportive university community and a culture of care. This element of the framework involves promoting a culture where all members of the community (students, faculty, staff, and broader community members) are made to feel

purposeful and included. By focusing on the development of respectful relationships, authentic connections, empathy and intercultural understanding, we can engage in dialogue and exchange that will facilitate a deeper awareness for how all community members contribute to mental health and wellbeing.

We therefore help establish a culture of care by:

- Developing curricular and co-curricular opportunities for respectful engagement among students, faculty, associate faculty, and staff;

- Providing curricular and co-curricular opportunities for students, faculty, associate faculty, and staff to develop intercultural competence;

- Delivering programs and initiatives that bring awareness to student mental health as a shared responsibility among all members of the university community;

- Developing programs and initiatives that help students to engage in self-care through proactive health management.

3. *Deliver effective support services.*

This element of the framework is specific to Royal Roads service units that are designed to support student mental health. Mental health prevention and support services must be proactive and timely, culturally competent, technology-enabled, and focus on the achievement of academic success. This includes, but is not limited to: education campaigns, workshops, activities, and individual and group counselling services for both online and on-campus students.

We therefore respond by delivering outreach and short-term, solutions-focused counselling services that:

- Are culturally competent and accessible to all students;

- Include coordinated outreach and health education campaigns;

- Build and maintain relationships with external service providers (physicians, psychologists, therapists, hospitals, police etc.);

- Reflect a deep understanding of the Royal Roads Learning, Teaching, and Research Model.

4. ***Create a state of awareness and responsiveness.***

This element calls on the university to build institutional capacity for early recognition of student mental health distress and referral to appropriate services. This includes the coordination and maintenance of an institutional approach for identifying and supporting vulnerable and at-risk students through risk assessment and case management. It also includes building capacity within members of the community to recognize signs of mental health distress and to respond with confidence and compassion.

We therefore contribute to proactive response by:

- Maintaining an organized and trained Collaborative Assessment Referral and Education Team (CARE Team) to coordinate an integrated institutional response to students who have been identified as demonstrating emotional distress or exhibiting behaviour of concern;

- Coordinating ongoing education and training for students, faculty, associate faculty and staff related to mental health response and referral;

- Providing clear pathways to Royal Roads resources for students experiencing mental health difficulties;

- Coordinating appropriate referrals to services and resources external to Royal Roads.

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