

Outcomes Report

Atlantic Canadian Conference on Student Mental Health: “From Survive to Thrive”

Presented by the Association of Atlantic Universities
&
Medavie Health Foundation



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The [Atlantic Canadian Conference on Student Mental Health “From Survive to Thrive”](#) attracted 90 participants from across the region to Mount Allison University (MtA) on October 4, 2017. Participants included senior university and community college administrators and faculty; front-line counsellors; student leaders and community health officials.

The conference was organized by the Association of Atlantic Universities (AAU) in conjunction with host institution MtA and with the strong support of key partner, the Medavie Health Foundation.

The hiring of Dr. Elizabeth Cawley as the Medavie AAU Regional Mental Health Coordinator provided the opportunity for the AAU and Medavie to build on the momentum created by the AAU’s Regional Student Mental Health working group over the past five years and, to promote an open discussion about its five-year strategic vision for post-secondary student mental health across the region.

Dr. Robert Campbell, President, MtA and Past National Co-Chair of Universities Canada Presidents Working Group on Campus Mental Health and, Dr. Gary Kachanoski, President of Memorial University and AAU executive committee student mental health liaison, brought Executive Head perspectives to the critical issue of student mental health on campus.

Dr. Campbell spoke of the changes that have occurred over the past five years among Canadian universities in philosophy, urgency, and attention paid to student mental health issues. He also noted the ongoing importance of this issue at all levels of university governance and applauded the ongoing work of front line staff in meeting the ever-growing needs of students.

Dr. Kachanoski highlighted the importance of the [Okanagan Charter](#) noting that Memorial University is now a signatory to the Charter and, he encouraged his colleagues to consider signing on.

Perspectives on **The Current State of Student Mental Health** were presented by a diverse panel comprised of: Robert Burroughs, Executive Director, New Brunswick Student Alliance; James Sanford, Executive Director, Student Services, Acadia University; Dr. Peter Cornish, Associate Professor, Memorial University and Director of Memorial Counselling and Wellness Centre and, Debbie Phillips, Coordinator, Stay Connected Mental Health Project, Nova Scotia Health Authority.

Each panelist shared their respective vantage point on this subject. Mr. Burroughs advocated for more campus support for student mental health, citing a perception of insufficient mental health professional staff. He also called for greater government investment in mental health to better meet the needs of students. Dr. Cornish and Mr. Sanford spoke of the important roles that faculty and senior administrators respectively play in heightening awareness of this issue and supporting campus initiatives. However, Dr. Cornish also noted that faculty members often feel unprepared or unequipped to assist students in distress. He also advocated the adoption of the [Stepped Care 2.0 model](#). Ms. Philips praised the effectiveness of on-campus peer-support programs and, the critical importance of institutional connection to local hospital systems to facilitate better care and emergency services for students in need.

Medavie Health Foundation Regional Student Mental Health Coordinator

Erik Sande, President, Medavie Health Services announced his organization's commitment to student mental health in the form of a [\\$180,000 investment in the Regional Mental Health Coordinator for post-secondary education in Atlantic Canada](#).

Dr. Elizabeth Cawley was appointed as Regional Coordinator in April 2017 and is contracted to support the work of the AAU's regional student mental health working group over the next three years.

Dr. Cawley noted that, “this conference is titled “From Survive to Thrive” because we are no longer looking at the issue of student mental health from a siloed or purely reactionary perspective. In 2012 the UN adopted a resolution recognizing the importance of happiness and well-being as universal goals and aspirations in the lives of human beings around the world and the importance of their recognition in public policy objectives. Today, we recognize that while post-secondary institutions cannot directly increase each students’ well-being, we can exert influence by creating the conditions for each student to flourish. We know that strength based resiliency, proactive solutions, and holistic care are no longer the future, they are our present.”

AAU Five-year Student Mental Health Strategy

Dr. Cawley presented the AAU’s Student Mental Health Strategy for the next five years and the AAU’s student mental health mission to “create an environment where students possess the skills and resources necessary to flourish.”

The AAU strategy focuses on three primary areas: institutional commitment, resiliency and coping skills, and decreasing unmet mental health needs through innovation and technology.



Student Strengths-Based Resilience

Keynote speakers, Dr. Tayyab Rashid, Clinical Researcher, University of Toronto, and Verity Turpin, Assistant Vice-Provost Student Affairs, Dalhousie University, focused on student resiliency as key to positive mental health and, the importance of assessment and measurement for program effectiveness.

Dr. Rashid shared data from his research project [Flourish](#), which has demonstrated that those students who flourish are more likely to graduate from their program and less likely to access university support services.

Ms. Turpin spoke to [measurement and the importance of assessment to ensure that resources are being used appropriately](#). She noted her responsibility as a senior university administrator to look for “evidence-based solutions that create measurable impact on students’ wellness” and to ensure that her university is “taking a holistic, campus-wide approach to wellness” as opposed to a purely reactionary one.

What’s Next?

Since its initial student mental health conference in 2012 where the objective was to develop a region-wide protocol for providing care to students dealing with mental health problems, the region’s post-secondary education sector is now well into the action and implementation phases.

To facilitate implementation of the [AAU’s Five-year Strategic Plan](#), Dr. Cawley will visit every university and community college campus in the region, meeting with students and administrators to adapt the AAU Strategic Plan to the unique needs of each school.

Presentations and the agenda from the AAU and Medavie Health Foundation conference can be found at www.atlanticuniversities.ca.

If you have questions or require further information about the AAU’s Five-year Strategic Plan, please contact:

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