

Student Mental Health & Well-Being Strategy



Portage College is committed to creating an inclusive environment that supports the diverse mental health and well-being needs of our students. We will embed student mental health and well-being into our institutional conversation, creating opportunities for students to engage with and access resources and supports while periodically evaluating our approach in its effectiveness as a foundation for student success.

Founded in the institutional values of collaboration, inclusion, success and accountability, Portage College has long recognized the importance of student well-being as a contributor to academic success. By extension, various wellness services and supports have been made available to students throughout our history such as recreational activities, counselling services, Indigenous supports, and crisis intervention.

In adopting a Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, we demonstrate our commitment to Student Wellness and establish criteria to inform and guide our future efforts. In doing so, we join many Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions who also recognize its importance as a practical way to increase student retention, performance, and program completion rates.

This strategy is both a recognition of our previous efforts, a look at our current landscape, and an aspiration to where we seek to be. It will continue to be evaluated and amended as necessary to ensure that it continues to meet our needs and contribute to the overall health of our Institution and student success.

Background

The Portage College Student Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy has been developed with consideration for the current, relevant research and practices addressing post-secondary student mental health recommended by the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), and the Mental Health Commission of Canada. Additionally, Portage College's participation with the Healthy Campus Alberta community of practice provides insight and accountability with provincial best practices in student mental health.

In 2017, the Government of Alberta provided financial resources to post-secondary institutions with the goal of improving mental health supports for students through grant funded allocations. To inform and

Our goal is to foster an environment that promotes and supports the mental health and well-being, and therefore the academic success, of Portage College students.

guide our grant application process, Portage College solicited feedback from college stakeholders including students, staff, and community members. A literature review, environmental scan, and interviews with members of our Portage College community also informed our understanding and approach of the mental health and well-being landscape and its effect on student well-being, engagement, and academic performance. This process and continued feedback on resulting programs, services and supports inclusive of the National College Health Assessment Survey conducted at Portage College in 2019, has informed the approach and development of this strategy.

Needs and Recommendations

Portage College strives to empower learners to transform and make a difference through the successful completion of their post-secondary experience. As evidenced throughout a consultative process and interviews with our Portage College community, it is widely accepted that mental health not only impacts a student's engagement and overall academic performance but presents as an issue that intersects with the whole campus community.

Based on data collected on the most recent National College Health Assessment Survey (2019) completed by Portage College, students self-reported that stress, anxiety, and sleep were the top 3 factors impacting their academic performance in the previous 12 months. This is consistent across our Indigenous and Non-Indigenous student groups, demonstrating a significant area of concern and opportunity for investment and improvement.

Additionally, 68.9% of Portage Students have found at least three of the following areas traumatic or very difficult to handle; these include: academics, career, death of a family member/friend, family problems, relationships, finances, health problems, personal appearance, health and/or sleep. The prevalence of such issues being traumatic or very difficult to handle increases to 80.9% within the Indigenous student population at Portage College.

Students report that stress, anxiety, and sleep were the top 3 factors affecting their academic performance.

There has been a noted increase in students self-identifying and self-referring to Counselling Services with mental health issues. Front-line staff report that along with the increase in students accessing supports, the complexity and concurrence of multiple presenting issues is increasing. This can be attributed to several factors, including but not limited to increased awareness of available resources and decreasing of help-seeking stigma, the high rates of intergenerational trauma related to the residential school system in our region, the low socio-economic status of students, barriers to accessing mental health resources in rural Northern communities, and the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the student experience.

Accordingly, it is recommended that the Student Mental Health and Wellness Strategy address these significant areas of concern, while maintaining its focus on how these presenting issues affect student retention and performance. Recognition of the individual's lived experience of mental health and wellness on a dual continuum of mental health and well-being intersecting with the presence/absence of mental illness symptoms (Figure 1) is also key to developing appropriate programs, services and supports within Portage College.

Figure 1: Dual Continuum Model of Mental Health and Mental Illness



Mackean, 2011. Adapted from: The Health Communication Unit at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto and Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario; based on the conceptual work of Corey Keyes

Priority Areas

To address the strengths, challenges, and gaps in the current student well-being and to adequately address the mental health and wellness needs of our students, all initiatives within the Student Mental Health and Wellness Strategy should address the following:

- **Collaboration – Interconnected and student-centered**

Interconnectedness of programs and services to enhance mental health and wellness programming development, provision, coordination and promotion within Counselling Services and other program areas will be recognized and valued. Additionally, all aspects of the Student Mental Health and Wellness Strategy will be student-centered wherein students will be considered as valued partners with vital expertise to be included in the process of developing, implementing, and evaluating the framework. Partnership with the Students' Association is critical to success.

- **Sustainability – Responsible and collaborative**

To ensure that the goals and objectives of the Mental Health and Wellness Strategy are achieved in a responsible manner, all programs, services and supports will be as high impact as possible while efficiently utilizing staff and financial resources. Priority will also be placed on collaborating with external agencies, services, and resources to provide bridges to sustainable care for Portage College students.

- **Accessibility - Equitable, diverse, and inclusive**

The diversity of Portage College's student population will be respected, celebrated, and promoted, inclusive. This includes ensuring that policies, programs, services, and environments are inclusive, accessible, adaptive, and anti-oppressive and culturally safe. Consideration will be given to the Portage College student life cycle, and the unique needs of Indigenous and International Student needs, when developing and implementing initiatives to ensure that all students be given the opportunity to engage with and contribute to their lasting success.

Wellness Framework

Portage College's approach to Student Wellness reflects a holistic approach to well-being wherein it is recognized that a person is comprised of interdependent elements: mind, body, and spirit. The Mind, Body & Spirit approach supports the whole-student through recognition of their comprehensive life experience and how it informs and supports an individual's wellness journey.

In offering student-centered services, it is our intention to meet student need and provide supportive services to continue their personal development leading to self-sufficiency and personal success. In doing so, we recognize that students reporting high measures of personal wellness are more likely to find academic success and continue their lifelong learning journey.



Portage College's strategic areas of support in its approach to student wellness is categorized into three areas:

1. Promotion: Ensuring a supportive foundation, fostering a healthy culture and environment, raising awareness, and maintaining healthy behaviors
2. Prevention: Identifying risk and responding early, developing resilience and self-management competencies
3. Intervention: Providing Services, Training and Critical Support

Consideration for each strategic area of support will be given along every stage of wellness as Counselling Services implements the Student Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy in identifying and responding to student need. In doing so it is also acknowledged that while intervention may be necessary, the core focus of our strategic initiatives will shift towards promotion and prevention as sustainable means to support the well-being and success of Portage students.

Strategy Initiatives

1. Ensure a Supportive Foundation for Student Wellness
 - a. Define and formalize wellness roles and responsibilities for members of staff inclusive of committee participation, wellness ambassadorship, and organizational influence.
 - b. Identify and improve areas of college life, services, and policy within the scope of the Portage College experience where prejudice, inequality, or risk exist.
 - c. Obtain financial support in the form of grants, fundraising, or other means to ensure the sustainability of student wellness as a strategic priority.
 - d. Identify and invest in strategic success within Portage College's Counselling Services to maximize effectiveness of the department's current compliment of resources and supports.
2. Foster a Culture of Well-being
 - a. Develop and maintain awareness stations throughout campus locations that offer self-help resources and information about Counselling Services.
 - b. Formalize a Student Wellness Advisory Group that includes representation from staff, faculty, and students as a feedback mechanism to guide and evaluate wellness programs, services, and support initiatives.
 - c. Partner with the Student Association to establish a Wellness Ambassador role that will promote a culture of wellness from within and serve as an established feedback mechanism for Counselling Services.
3. Develop Resilience and Self-Management Competencies
 - a. Encourage participation in programs and supports that teach students how to manage their own mental health and well-being inclusive of resiliency, coping skills, and self-management principles.
 - b. Decrease stigma for help-seeking by highlighting the available resources to access self-help or care from appropriate services.
 - c. Offer an orientation to new students that empowers students to consider their mental health and well-being as foundational to their academic success, while raising awareness of practical prevention-based strategies.
4. Provide Intervention Services, Training and Critical Support
 - a. Provide students with accessible, confidential, and culturally safe counselling services.
 - b. Provide training to staff and faculty in how to identify students in need and/or crisis, and how to respond in a timely and effective manner.
 - c. Identify and collaborate with community-based services to create barrier-free pathways for students in accessing specialized sustainable support.

Implementation and Evaluation

The maintenance, execution, and evaluation of the Portage College Student Mental Health and Strategy is the primary responsibility of Counselling Services. Initiatives identified within the strategy will be implemented with the support, feedback, and collaboration of the Students' Association and other Portage College stakeholders. As new information, best practices and emerging needs are identified, Portage College commits to further refinement of this strategy with feedback and partnership from all stakeholders.