

## Topic Overview

# Addressing Student Mental Health Needs at McMaster University

## Student-led Stakeholder Dialogue 10 April 2013

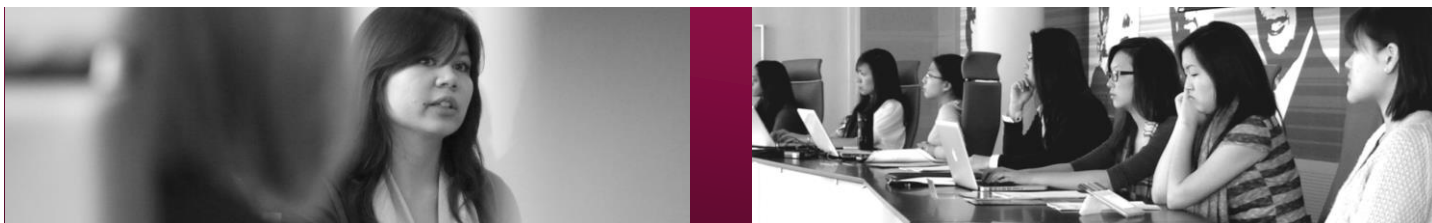
The McMaster Health Forum convened a stakeholder dialogue on the subject of addressing student mental health needs at McMaster University. With the support of the *Forward with Integrity* (President's Fund at McMaster University), the McMaster Centre for Scholarship in the Public Interest, the McMaster School of Graduate Studies, the McMaster Undergraduate Student Initiative Fund, the Office of the Associate Vice President, Academic, Faculty of Health Sciences, McMaster University, the office of the Provost, McMaster University, and the McMaster Health Forum, the dialogue brought together 17 participants – seven academic and student leaders, five mental health service providers, two students and family members, one researcher and two leaders from other universities – to examine the problem, options for addressing it, and key implementation considerations.

### Deliberation about the problem

Dialogue participants generally agreed that the need for mental health services on campus is growing at a rate that mental health service providers are finding difficult to address with existing resources. Participants felt that the need was growing due to a number of factors, the most prevalent being that more students were arriving on campus with mental illness and that the de-stigmatization of mental health issues has encouraged more students to self-identify as living with such issues and to seek help. Several dialogue participants identified reasons for the increased number of students experiencing mental health issues, including higher expectations and demands placed on students by themselves, their families and the University, the increasing digitalization of personal communications and interactions (and its paradoxical impact on social isolation), and the precarious nature of the post-recession employment landscape for today's young adults.



*The views expressed in the issue brief and dialogue summary are the views of the authors and should not be taken to represent the views of the funders.*





Participants drawn from the University and student leadership, and from front-line programs and services, gather during a McMaster Health Forum event on 10 April 2013

## Deliberation about an approach

Participants generally agreed that the three options described in the issue brief were important components of a comprehensive approach to addressing student mental health needs at the University. Most dialogue participants initially prioritized option 2 (strategic advertising to reduce stigma and promote early detection), but with a greater emphasis on supporting initiatives that have a strong contact-based/relational component, and option 3 (coordinating mental health resources on campus). Many dialogue participants noted that option 1 (a one-stop access portal for information about mental health services) would be a natural stepping stone to and on-going output of option 3. They also identified a fourth cross-cutting priority: to create a mental health strategy specific to the University that is informed by a gap analysis of the existing programs and services, and that informs where future investments should be made, where University policies need to be changed or developed, and where student and University lobbying need to be directed.

## Deliberation about next steps

Dialogue participants had different views about next steps. University leaders tended to argue for the development, appropriate resourcing and implementation of a strategic plan, and they noted that the timing was ideal given newly appointed (or soon-to-be appointed) administrators at the University would be likely to embrace a coherent, long-term vision. Some front-line health professionals argued for more resources while also understanding the need to identify creative ways to meet demands with existing resources. Student leaders were less focused on a strategic plan and more focused on taking concrete steps in the short- to medium-term, such as better engaging many different types of front-line workers, like residence community advisors and peer supporters, to help normalize mental health issues that inevitably arise during the transition period to university and stressful episodes during this period. Several student leaders also argued for drawing on the immense lobbying power of students to facilitate change.

## Dialogue deliverables

To learn more about this topic, consult the [issue brief](#) that was presented to participants before the dialogue, the [summary](#) of the dialogue, and [view](#) or [listen](#) to the [interviews](#) with dialogue participants. For an electronic copy of the issue brief or dialogue summary, or to view or listen to the interviews, visit our website [www.mcmasterhealthforum.com](http://www.mcmasterhealthforum.com) and click on 'Products' along the sidebar, or for direct access to our YouTube and iTunes U channels, simply click on the icons below.



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