

Study points to postsecondary mental health

October 7 2016, by Adela Talbot

A recent Ontario University and College Health Association (OUCHA) report isn't news to those working to improve student mental-health services at postsecondary institutions. But it is a catalyst to improving mental-health supports for university students across the province, said Jana Luker, Associate Vice-Provost (Student Experience) at Western.

Late last month, OUCHA, a body that represents health-care professionals working in health and counselling centres in postsecondary institutions, released a report indicating a significant increase in student [mental-health](#) concerns such as anxiety and depression.

The report indicated that:

- 65 per cent of students reported experiencing overwhelming anxiety in the previous year (up from 57 per cent);
- 46 per cent of students reported feeling so depressed in the previous year it was difficult to function (up from 40 per cent);
- 13 per cent of students had seriously considered suicide in the previous year (up from 10 per cent); and
- 2.2 per cent of students (or 558 students) reported a suicide attempt within the previous year (up from 1.5 per cent). An additional 2, 245 students indicated that had attempted suicide, but not in the previous year.

Data was gathered from the Ontario Reference Group of the National College Health Assessment 2016, in which more than 25,000 students from 20 Ontario institutions participated. It is the second time the survey

was administered at postsecondary institutions in Ontario – the first was in 2013.

The survey results will give the government "the impetus to move forward with what we've known for a long time. We (at Western) have prioritized mental health for years," Luker said.

"We're very aware of increased needs for support. And we've figured out a different model in our evolution that ensures our students don't have a wait time in accessing support," she continued, noting the array of supports available to students at Western, including single session therapy.

The single-session therapy initiative was piloted on campus two years ago under Psychological Services. The program brings a specially trained therapist that offers a different, single-session treatment modality and over the last two years, it has been very successful. As a result, there are currently no wait times in Psychological Services.

"The students we are dealing with are reflecting the needs of the community. This (OUCHA information) just illustrates there is a need. The positive side is that it brings more attention to this increased needs of support for students across the postsecondary sector. And that's a good thing," Luker said.

"We need to have the government aware of the mental-health challenges the postsecondary sector is facing. Regional strategies with postsecondary partners need to be fully developed. But I'm keen on seeing them bring forward hope for new funding models, and when this trickles down to our schools, we will all see the benefit," she continued.

Luker noted there have been efforts in recent past to develop a pan-university strategy to address mental health on university campuses, and

Western is currently in the process of drafting a mental health strategic plan, as well.

"This (OUCHA information) is what we already knew. It wasn't a surprise whatsoever, but it needs to be brought to the forefront for the government and the provincial sectors. It is showing the government what our lived experience has been like, every day," she said.

"We want to ensure our students have the best supports. We are on the leading edge of doing this with our colleagues in Ontario and we want to continue that and evolve, to continue providing these supports so all [students](#) know and are educated where they can access supports and where they are available."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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