

Work In-Progress: Mental Health Initiatives and TAO at the University of Windsor

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Introduction

The University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada is a public, comprehensive and research university with 12,000 undergraduate students. The Faculty of Engineering has a cohort of 1500 full- and part-time undergraduate students, of which 20% are female and 25% are international. Resources that focus on supporting the first-year cohort include the University's Mental Health Strategy [1] and the Post-Secondary Student Mental Health Guide [2]. These two agreements support the student experience as described in the University's Strategic Mandate Agreement with the Government of Ontario (SMA) [3].

Literature supports the concept that services are required to address and prevent mental health concerns and that the role of our educational institutions is to drive a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being for all students [4]. The Canadian Federation of Engineering students' (CFES) mental health report [4] of 3936 students at 44 of Canada's accredited engineering schools outlines how engineering students confront negative mental health outcomes at rates that exceed the general student population. Engineering students ranked second highest in their institutions for mental distress, after medical students, and were found to be one of the least likely groups to seek help.

The University of Waterloo analyzed the mental health of engineering students [5]. The survey included gender, year of study, hours of class and homework per week, relationship situation, and hours of extra-curricular activities per week. The second part of the study asked students to communicate about their ability to enjoy life, resiliency, balance, emotional flexibility, and self-actualization. The results concluded that first-year students had the worst overall mental health scores. When comparing branches of engineering, electrical students had the lowest scores due to increased competitiveness within the cohort. In first- through fourth-year, women in engineering had the lowest mental health scores when compared to men of the same cohort. The aforementioned studies suggest that active strategies are required to support the student population at all our universities.

Project Approach

At the University of Windsor, mental-health initiatives have been implemented campus-wide, focusing on skill-building as the main target. Clinical therapists offer additional support services to both the student and faculty environment and mental health counsellors speak at orientations and welcome week, provide course materials for incoming students, and offer a safe space for everyone. Fridays with Winnie, a therapy dog (Winter 2021) is a service for engineering students to informally discuss their challenges and access resources, and for the therapist to identify students in need of further assistance. Faculty are equipped with information regarding suicide prevention, sensitivity training for diverse groups (African American and minority groups such as LGBTQ+, indigenous and international students), and identifying students in distress. Wellness workshops and week-long mental health initiatives are also held

each semester. Furthermore, the main campus' Student Counselling Centre offers immediate access to mental health care with walk-in, single sessions, and after-hours care during exams. The My Student Support Program (MySSP) [6], which provides live text chats and telephone counselling in over 30 languages, also increases accessibility for students. Therapy Assistance Online (TAO) has been expanded to allow students to engage independently and develop their resiliency. The following will provide more details about integrating TAO into the first-year engineering curriculum.

Providing Support to First-Year Engineering Students

The Faculty of Engineering has elected to approach the provision of student supports in two ways: integrated within their courses and outside the classroom. In order to expose students to TAO, an assignment within the second-semester Technical Communications course asks students to complete four of five modules within the Communication and Interpersonal Relationships pathway. The five modules are Managing Anger, Communication Strategies, Communication Styles, Problem Solving, and Relationships (this module is available to students, but they are not required to complete it). “This pathway [helps students] understand how to improve [their] relationships by building communication skills, learning to recognize unhealthy relationship behaviours, and finding ways to manage anger. [Students] also learn how to respond more effectively to others [7].”

This assignment was introduced in the Winter 2019 offering of the course and has been assigned to Summer 2019 and Winter 2020. While enrolled in the Technical Communications course, students work in teams to complete a design project that requires teamwork and effective communication amongst teammates; thus, the modules within the Communication and Interpersonal Relationships pathway are relevant to the course. The course instructor did not receive any negative feedback regarding the *content* of the modules, instead, negative feedback was focused on the ways in which students needed to provide proof of the module completion. A recommendation for future offerings would be for the instructor to be granted administrative access for the Technical Communications course that is set up within TAO so that students are not frustrated by the fact that they have completed the module but have difficulty in submitting the proof of completion. It is recommended that students be able to see the other pathways that are available to them - Let Go and Be Well, Improving Your Mood, Pain Management, Calming Your Worry, Leave Your Blues Behind, Evaluating My Alcohol and Drug Use, Recovery Skills and Topics – not just Communication and Interpersonal Relationships. Perhaps the modules could be recommended to them with the aid of a flyer such as the one listed in TAO resources [8]. A final recommendation is to implement an alternative pathway into coursework such as Let Go and Be Well in the first-semester, Engineering and the Profession course and Calming Your Worry in the third-semester, Engineering and the Environment course.

The Engineering Student Support Services Centre (ESSSC) was opened in Fall 2019 to provide centralized support to first-year engineering students outside the classroom. The ESSSC is a new physical space within the Ed Lumley Centre for Engineering Innovation that houses the WINONE Office for First-Year Engineering, an embedded registered psychotherapist, an international student advisor, the faculty's outreach coordinator, and spaces for co-operative education, engineering technical communications, advising appointments, as well as first-year peer tutoring sessions. Specifically, the WINONE Office for First-Year Engineering is the home

department for all students in first-year engineering; the office coordinates and delivers recruiting and outreach programming for the faculty as well as mentoring initiatives. The ESSSC provides a “one-stop-shop” for services to provide the mental health and academic tools to ensure the success of our students in their individual life paths.

Future Programming

Subsequent to rolling out TAO modules in additional first- and second-year courses, the TAO wellness survey can be taken before each module segment to assess student stress levels and mental preparedness. The addition of this metric can be correlated with the existing American College Health Association Survey (ACHA) and the National Student Engagement Survey (2019) to determine per annum effectiveness and inform curriculum modifications. Currently, there are efforts to extract the ACHA data by cohort to assess the mental health characteristics of first-year engineering students. The above, along with [4] and [5] found in the literature serve as resources for developing future student and faculty surveys and expanding the experiential knowledge pool. Additional mentoring and leadership programs are also under development.

References

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