

# Institutional Academic Wellness from the Perspectives of Instructors



# PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report seeks to explore the integration of mental wellness and mental health resources in undergraduate classrooms to inform future strategies for advocacy. The Student Society of McGill University (SSMU) developed a Strategic Plan for Academic Wellness in 2022 (The Strategic Plan), which outlined the direction for the organisation’s advocacy for the implementation of policies targeting mental wellness in the academic context. One of the key themes of this strategic plan was to ensure that academic rigour and wellness were treated as co-constitutive rather than diametrically opposed forces.

SSMU suggested doing this by recommending and advocating for policies and initiatives according to three strategic pathways drawn directly from McGill University’s Mission Statement. For the purposes of this report, the relevant strategic pathway is McGill University’s mission to offer the best possible education. SSMU suggests that “equipping teaching staff with resources to address mental health in the classroom” is integral to offering the best quality of education<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, mental wellness should be integrated into the design, pedagogy and instruction of courses. SSMU’s suggestion is in line with the Canadian Association of College & University Student Services (CACUSS) and Canadian Mental Health Association’s (CMHA) guide to systemic approaches to post-secondary student mental health<sup>2</sup>. That guide encourages universities to provide educators with resources to ensure their curricula “do not perpetuate mental health stigma, prejudice, and discrimination” by incorporating universal design

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<sup>1</sup> Guidote, J., Yang, K., Caddy, J., Courtney, M. R., Kira Smith, & Khamis, A. (2022). (rep.). (I. Wleugel, Ed.) *McGill University Strategic Plan For Academic Wellness 2022-2026*, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Association of College & University Student Services and Canadian Mental Health Association. (2013). *Post-Secondary Student Mental Health: Guide to a Systemic Approach*. Vancouver, BC

concepts and providing resources to develop curricula that enhance student mental health, recovery and well-being<sup>3</sup>.

To create this learning environment, SSMU suggested short-term, medium-term and long-term initiatives that could lead to a system-wide re-orientation of the implementation of mental wellness practices in the classroom. These included short-term initiatives like “designating faculty champions to accelerate and centralise the development of academic wellness”<sup>4</sup>; medium-term initiatives like developing and executing a communication plan to ensure all teaching staff are aware of existing mental wellness training, tools and resources; and long-term initiatives like creating a hub for teacher-oriented mental wellness resources similar to that of Queen’s University<sup>5</sup>. SSMU envisions mental wellness being incorporated into the best practices of curriculum design throughout the university and part of the evaluation of teaching staff<sup>6</sup>.

This report seeks to explore the viability of such initiatives and the potential challenges to implementation due to the current structure and culture of the undergraduate faculties.

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<sup>3</sup> Canadian Association of College & University Student Services and Canadian Mental Health Association. (2013). *Post-Secondary Student Mental Health: Guide to a Systemic Approach*. Vancouver, BC, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Guidote, J., Yang, K., Caddy, J., Courtney, M. R., Kira Smith, & Khamis, A. (2022). (rep.). (I. Wleugel, Ed.) *McGill University Strategic Plan For Academic Wellness 2022-2026*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Teaching toolkit*. Centre for Teaching and Learning. (n.d.). Retrieved April 26, 2023, from <https://www.queensu.ca/ctl/resources/teaching-toolkit>.

<sup>6</sup> Guidote, J., Yang, K., Caddy, J., Courtney, M. R., Kira Smith, & Khamis, A. (2022). (rep.). (I. Wleugel, Ed.) *McGill University Strategic Plan For Academic Wellness 2022-2026*, p. 8.

# METHODOLOGY

This report seeks to explore the current use of mental health tools, or mental health-informed syllabus design tools, in undergraduate classrooms and teaching staff's perception of such initiatives. To achieve this aim, seven undergraduate faculties were identified and targeted for information collection. These faculties include the Faculty of Arts; the Faculty of Science; the Desautels Faculty of Management; the Faculty of Engineering; the Faculty of Education; the Faculty of Music; and the Faculty of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences.

An explanatory presentation to explain the purpose, context and goals of the report was sent to each faculty. Attached to the presentation was a 5-minute survey, hosted on Block Survey, which collected professors' impressions on the current mental health strategies available for use in classrooms. A request was made to each faculty to present the project to their teaching staff and distribute the survey amongst them.

Though each undergraduate faculty listed was contacted, not all consented to participate in the study. The Faculty of Music and the Faculty of Engineering both declined to participate but gave a general description of the orientation of the faculty regarding the topic. The Faculty of Music has identified the integration of mental wellness into their syllabi as a key area of focus, and are currently working on internal reports to orient this course of action<sup>7</sup>. The Faculty of Engineering, on the other hand, due to

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<sup>7</sup> *Strategic directions*. Music. (2020, February 24). Retrieved April 26, 2023, from <https://www.mcgill.ca/music/about-us/schulichs-strategic-plan/strategic-directions>.

the decentralised structure of the faculty and a recent change in personnel, felt they would be unable to accurately portray the experience in the faculty at the time of inquiry<sup>8</sup>.

The explanatory presentation was presented at the faculty council meetings of the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Science. These faculties, as well as the faculties of Management and Agriculture, distributed the presentation and survey to their professors. Members of leadership at the Faculty of Arts also consented to a semi-structured interview, which was an opportunity offered to all faculties.

The majority of responses came from the Faculty of Arts (57.1% of responses) (see Appendix A for full survey responses) and the Faculty of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (33.3% of responses). Therefore this survey is in no way representative of the feelings of all or most professors, it acts as an introduction to the range of impressions of such initiatives amongst undergraduate professors and can help inform future action and advocacy on the part of SSMU.

## INTRODUCTION

### Professor perception of the current situation

When asked to clarify the culture surrounding mental wellness within their faculties, professors indicated the mental health issues related to academic life, reporting that students were more “overwhelmed, worried, and distressed...since covid [19]” due to what one professor referred to as the “productivity-based competitive culture” of academia. 38.1% of respondents reported a general

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<sup>8</sup> (2023, February 8). Re: Special Research Project.

regard for mental health and wellness among students, commenting that students were “more savvy and experienced about mental health. 52.5% of respondents, however, disagreed or strongly disagreed that mental health and wellness were key principles to the ethos of their faculty. The reasons for this were diffuse. Professors who elaborated indicated a multitude of reasons for the lack of focus on mental wellness in their faculty. This suggests though professors perceive students to have a high regard for mental wellness, they do not perceive their faculties having a similarly high regard.

The general impression of faculty-specific support for mental wellness in the classroom was mixed. There was significant variation in reports of whether the faculties were doing enough to support students' mental wellness. Only a third of respondents agreed that their faculty provided adequate support and 28.26% were neutral. 42.9% of respondents were neutral on whether the faculty gave enough support for professors to create a culture that values mental health and wellness within their classrooms. These lukewarm responses indicated a lack of clear consensus on the provision of resources. While some professors reported resources being made available, other professors indicated that the resources available to students were “not always sufficient” and reported obstructions to departmental attempts to implement mental health initiatives.

More definitive, however, was the concern regarding the offloading of mental health and wellness support onto professors. 57.1% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that too much pressure was put on professors to support the mental health and mental wellness of students. Professors expressed confusion that mental wellness would be a topic of consideration in relation to teaching and felt that due to their existing workload, mental health and wellness were not “anything anyone is willing to

prioritise”. Though it was reported that concern was high, there was disdain for the “blame [being] shifted to programs and faculty.”

Overall, professors expressed concern for the mental health of students and were not united in their opinions about how their respective faculties fared in supporting mental health and wellness initiatives. Where they were united, however, was their impression that mental wellness was not a key focus of their faculty and too much pressure was being put on professors to address mental health concerns. This makes for a fraught environment for the implementation of additional initiatives as proposed by SSMU.

## Logistics

To provide context for the current institutional framework for the integration of mental health tools in classrooms, professors were asked about their respective experiences with mental health accommodations and all other faculty-provided mental health resources. Though the professors came from a multitude of undergraduate faculties, the professors’ responses revealed similarities between them.

Accommodations were separated from other mental health tools to ensure the difference between these two categories of tools was maintained. A separate report is being developed about mental health accommodations. The majority of professors (66.7%) had encountered accommodations offered by the Student Accessibility and Achievement (SAA) office. They listed accommodations including: recorded lectures, assignment extensions, and extra writing time for exams. The majority of professors characterised the frequency of the use of these accommodations as ‘sometimes’ (57.1%),

however, there were many anecdotal remarks from some professors claiming that the frequency of accommodation requests had increased. Based on this information it is difficult to get a gauge of the usage of these accommodations. 42.9% of professors reported that the accommodations were applied ‘sometimes’ and 38.1% reported the accommodations were applied ‘frequently’. This reflects a relatively consistent fulfilment of accommodation requests, due to the legal requirement to fulfil disability-related requests<sup>9</sup>. Though most professors had relatively frequent experience with accommodations, their evaluation of their effectiveness was less resolute. The majority of respondents only found that the accommodations were ‘somewhat effective’ (52.4%).

Professors were less clear about mental health tools outside of the framework of accommodations provided by the SAA office. When asked to name the mental health tools available to use in the classroom, the respondents gave a variety of answers ranging from identifying workshops and awareness campaigns; discussing an influx of resources being provided during Covid-19; referencing websites provided by the faculty; and finally a declaration of a complete lack of resources at all. The latter was the most common response, 61.9% of respondents found that mental health tools were made accessible to professors rarely or never.

Professors’ impressions of this state of affairs were similarly varied. Some professors felt that a lack of resources was not a problem because “mental health does not belong in the classroom”, while others lamented the outdated technology in their buildings made it more difficult to be accommodating for students. Though the use of the terminology, “mental health tools’ was purposely vague to allow the different forms such tools took in different faculties to be captured,

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<sup>9</sup> *Frequently asked questions*. Student Accessibility & Achievement. (2023, April 28). <https://www.mcgill.ca/access-achieve/contact-us/faq>



this terminology was a source of confusion for many respondents. Within the Arts faculty for example, there were professors who identified support for LGBTQ+ and BIPOC students, others identified a list of resources distributed by faculty leadership, whilst others in the same faculty reported no resources to speak of. The general confusion about the definition, existence and appropriateness of mental health tools in the classroom was reflected in the responses to the question: *Have you used any of the resources provided to enable professors to implement the current mental health tools in your classroom?*

42.9% answered no and 42.9% answered not applicable. Therefore 85.80% of respondents did not use mental health tools due to a lack of faculty support or actively decided not to.

Most professors referenced that mental health support in the classroom consisted of sharing a list of websites and internal resources developed and distributed by the faculty, to students. Professors suggested, however, that this list was very simplistic and the links could be difficult to find.

## Case study: Faculty of Arts

The Faculty of Arts was the only undergraduate faculty whose leadership consented to be interviewed. The more nuanced information gleaned from these interviews provided deeper insight into the integration of mental health tools in the classroom and could provide valuable lessons that can be applied to other faculties.

## Reference-based system

When discussing the reference-based system for providing mental health resources at the Faculty of Arts, the members of faculty leadership interviewed described a single-page document developed in 2022 that was sent to all professors (See Appendices B & C for interviews). They clarified that the document provided a guide to the different mental health issues professors may encounter in the classroom and possible resources they could point students to. They also identified OASIS, the online hub for academic advising for Arts students, as having information about mental health resources students could access. These repositories for resources are communicated by spreading the message throughout the faculty. One interview explained that these messages were communicated through “regular meetings of chairs and directors of departments” who would be asked to disseminate the information (See Appendix C for full transcript). These resources would then be spread through work groups and committees (See Appendix B for full interview notes) like the Committee on Student Affairs, which in turn communicates the information to instructors and advisors.

Despite the efforts to disseminate these resources, the interviewees identified that both the substance and communication of the resources needed improvement. Currently, efforts are being made to pinpoint the level of detail necessary on the resource-sheet to ensure that the mental health issues are explained at a level of granularity necessary for the resources to be applied correctly. Moreover, due to the changing resources and relatively high turnaround of staff, the information often on the resource-sheet needs to be repeated to the intended audience. Currently, the leadership at the Faculty of Arts are working with OASIS to change and improve how communications will be operated considering the dynamism of the resource-sheet.

Importantly, as indicated by professors who have reported that many of the resources are difficult to navigate and access, the Faculty of Arts leadership is currently developing a framework for directing students to the correct resources and institutionalising methods of providing care from multiple resources simultaneously when necessary. The areas of improvement identified by the leadership of the Faculty of Arts does reflect the anecdotal experiences of professors who referenced this list of references describing them as a “list of links” and lamented the difficulty of navigating the resources listed on it.

## Syllabus design

The recommendation forwarded by CACUSS & CMHA to incorporate universal design concepts and provide resources to develop curricula that enhance student mental health, recovery and well-being is not fully integrated into the Faculty of Arts, according to the testimonials of the interviewed members of leadership. One of the interviewees explained that the substance of new courses and programs is not generally considered during the proposal process. Therefore, there is less room to encourage the integration of universal design concepts. Instead, new courses and programs are vetted on the basis of their logistical manageability in reference to the other courses offered in the program. Unlike other faculties, like the Faculty of Science, a syllabus is not required from professors when proposing a new course or program. The interviewee described the Faculty of Arts as hands-off, preferring to defer to the expertise of professors due to the diversity of programs within the faculty. Outside of university-mandated statements in syllabi, there are currently no formal mechanisms to guide syllabus design. The interviewee clarified that the faculty relied on informal encouragement and referring professors to the resource-sheet to incorporate mental wellness into the design and teaching of courses.

Though this is the current process of the Faculty of Arts, other interviewees in the leadership did express interest in improving mechanisms for helping to guide syllabus design. These mechanisms would work to encourage professors to address possible issues with their syllabi pre-emptively. The interviewee explained a proposal to develop an internal office of teaching guidance for the Faculty of Arts, modelled after similar bodies in the Faculties of Science and Management. This body would provide more institutional teaching support and teaching guidance for instructors. Moreover, the Faculty of Arts is working with relevant local units of Teaching and Learning Services (TLS) to help manage the development of syllabi. Some suggestions to integrate mental wellness into syllabi include more flexibility on attendance in relevant cases and the addition of flexible assessment schemes. For instance, allowing students to determine the weight of assignments they turn in within reason. These suggested institutional and substantive improvements show a desire to begin to address some of these issues.

There remain, however, many challenges which complicate the ability to integrate these improvements. As a complex and diverse faculty with a multitude of departments, different subjects have different needs. Therefore, the Faculty of Arts has accordingly adopted a more hands-off approach to ensure the correct subject-matter experts have autonomy over best practices within the context of syllabi in their department. This would require that syllabi design policies aimed at improving mental health support be department-specific and managed at the departmental level to be effective. Moreover, these policies, if mandated, could cause undue interference with academic integrity and the autonomy of professors. Currently, the Faculty of Arts only enforces legally-mandated accommodations and otherwise backs up instructors' discretion whether or not to provide

accommodations beyond legal expectations, within reason. Increasing the expectations for professors when designing their syllabi could erode this discretion and lead to a lack of trust between professors and administrative members of their faculty.

## Professor Perception of Professors being engaged

There was some skepticism from respondents regarding the term “academic wellness” and the appropriateness of bringing mental health and mental wellness into the classroom. Though the interrelation between academics and mental wellness was acknowledged and accepted, there was apprehension about professors being asked to perform tasks related to mental wellness that they are not qualified nor comfortable performing. In interviews and in survey responses, many professors echoed skepticism about the expectation that professors would be equipped to introduce mental health tools in the classroom. Professors noted that they are not “qualified” to handle mental health issues and are not “mental health professionals,” which could lead to dangerous outcomes for students.

Professors also expressed that this could be a labour issue. According to Article 2087 of the Civil Code of Québec, an employer is bound to allow the employee to perform the work agreed upon, which is established through the definition of expectations in the work contract<sup>10</sup>. Many professors noted that they were not hired nor “paid to be psychiatrists, social workers or mental health counsellors.” It would therefore be unfair to expand their duties in this way. Though SSMU suggested professors be provided with training to make them qualified, professors suggested they would not have the time nor

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<sup>10</sup> Art. 2087 CCQ

energy to properly apply mental health tools in the classroom, and these new responsibilities would distract from their job as instructors.

Though professors indicated that they felt students “deserve to have proper care from qualified experts and medical professionals who know what they are doing,” they did not feel that professors were the best situated to provide such care in the classroom setting. As a member of the leadership in the Faculty of Arts noted, there is no one individual with the expertise necessary to address all the facets of student life. Students necessarily have to interact with different people to deal with different issues, and thus the existing resource framework could be leveraged to help students and professors navigate these resources effectively and efficiently.

It is interesting to note that many of the professors characterised possible mental wellness and mental health issues as static issues that students would have to recover from in a finite amount of time. Likening mental health issues to a “broken leg” and suggesting,

“If [a] student is so unwell in their mental health that they cannot function in the classroom, then they should not be in the classroom. They should be receiving medical care until they are better.”

The threshold for mental wellness acknowledged by these professors seemed to be: diagnosable issues; or a complete lack of functioning in the classroom setting. This reflects a narrow perception of mental wellness and mental health, which supports their claims of being unqualified and untrained in mental health awareness, but also could stall further advocacy efforts.

## Challenges for uptake

Each faculty has unique challenges for the integration of mental health tools in their classrooms in order to effectively address their particular needs. Though low responsiveness to the survey makes it difficult to accurately reflect the exact challenges of each faculty, certain faculties, like the Faculties of Engineering and Arts, shed light on their specific potential challenges. For the former, each department within the Faculty of Engineering has robust internal management akin to an independent faculty. There is less centralised faculty-wide management in comparison to the Faculty of Arts, which is similarly diverse but has a central faculty council which centralises communication throughout the Faculty. This means that communication of new strategies within the Faculty of Engineering would likely have to be applied at a department-by-department level. The Faculty of Arts, which also houses a diverse array of departments, does have a central faculty council, which facilitates more efficient communication with third parties. Its hands-off approach and deference to subject-matter experts, however, would require personalised policies. Currently, the Faculty of Arts does not have many central policies and instead attempts to institutionalise local best practices at the department level.

A central challenge that interviewees from the Faculty of Arts identified when discussing the possibility of more consistently integrating mental health and wellness tools into classrooms was determining the scope of the role the university, and by extension professors, should play in the mental health of their students. There are limits to the capacity of the university and its professors. Students are adults, as noted by an interviewee, therefore, how does that conceptually limit the duty of the university to their students? Each faculty will have a different answer to the proposed scope of their duty to students in regards to mental health and wellness. Once this scope is identified, the implementation of

programs and policies that fulfil that duty must also contend with financial constraints, personnel constraints, the maintenance of academic standards, and balancing the size of the faculty with the institutional capacity to address individual needs of students. In large faculties like Arts and Engineering, there is also resistance to creating centralised policies to address these goals.

Getting professors to implement mental health tools in their classrooms, whether by providing resources to their students or redesigning their syllabi, it will require clear and consistent communication of the relevant policies. Currently, many faculties do not have a clear centralised place to find information about mental health resources. The interviewees at the Faculty of Arts explained that their faculty did not currently have the infrastructure for centralised communication of policies. There was no communication schedule or schedule for updating the faculty website. This leads to the information being in a bit of a “muddle”. An interviewee conceded that a more streamlined method could be useful, particularly in the context of large faculties with multiple departments. The increasing level of demand and increased complexity of students’ requests makes it difficult to dynamically communicate with professors about how best to help students.

Even if each faculty committed to creating clear systems of communication for their policies, there needs to be financial resources to support these efforts. One of the interviewees from the Faculty of Arts noted that there are current issues surrounding fundraising, and efforts of this nature would require financial support from the university and donors. This is also intimately related to the labour aspect of this initiative. Since mental health support isn’t currently part of the mandate of professors, does this require that all professors be paid accordingly to justify the extra work? In the context of syllabi that are designed with flexibility for turning in assignments, for example, grading becomes a



more time-consuming and logistically-difficult endeavour. The interviewees suggested that within a 600-student class, 5% to 15% of students may require accommodations, and the management of this could amount to 100 extra hours of work for the instructor. Though these numbers are not proven, it demonstrates the perception of the amount of extra work these programs would require of professors.

## CONCLUSION

The interviewees from the Faculty of Arts assured that nearly all the instructors they encountered want to help students, but in the face of the “black hole” of demand from students for mental health accommodations, the demand will always outweigh the supply. Currently, the majority of professors consulted expressed doubt about the ability to convince professors to change their syllabi to adhere to universal design concepts or to personally apply mental health tools in the classroom. Many felt that this created an unfair burden for professors. The solution suggested was to improve the design and communication of the framework of resources professors can direct students to. This would require administrative scaffolding and financial backing to support these efforts and address the concerns of professors and students.

Appendix A

[Faculty Engagement with Mental Health and Wellness](#)

## Appendix B

[Anonymous Interview #1](#)

## Appendix C

[Anonymous Interview #2](#)