

Campus Wellness Strategy
Designing a Resilient and Healthy Community

Executive Summary

As reflected in its values of openness (“we embrace diversity and inclusivity in culture, identity, and perspective”) and community (“we build relationships based on trust and accountability; we are connected to one another’s success and wellness”), Alberta University of the Arts is committed to establishing principles and practices that promote mental health and wellbeing for its students and employees (Alberta University of the Arts, n.d.). As post-secondary institutions are places where solutions to important problems are created, explored, and tested, campuses are increasingly being recognized as places to promote health and wellbeing not only for those who learn and work there, but also for the broader communities to which they belong (Okanagan Charter, 2015). At the same time, there are inherent stressors at post-secondary institutions: students face issues related to financial strain, transition to independence, and pressure to succeed. Faculty and staff face demand for high levels of performance, sometimes within highly competitive environments, yet often must do more with less, as the institutions themselves often grapple with increasing operating costs out of step with revenue.

In any given year, 1 in 5 people in Canada will experience a mental health problem or illness requiring treatment, and the 18 – 25 age range (the age range of the majority of AUArts students) is when many mental illnesses first become evident (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2018). More importantly, just as with physical wellbeing, we all have a level of mental wellbeing that influences our capacity to realize our potential, cope with everyday stresses, and contribute to our communities.

In 2019, AUArts students were invited to participate in a comprehensive survey regarding factors and determinants of health and wellbeing (NCHA, 2019; see Table 2). Almost two-thirds of students reported having seen a professional counsellor during their lifetime; 97% reported feeling overwhelmed within the past year; 78% felt very lonely; 85%, very sad; and 81% very anxious. Sadly, a quarter of students identified serious suicidal ideation within the previous year and there is evidence that the mental health of students is worsening (see Table 2). Students reported that mental health issues have a significant impact on their academic success (i.e., often more than skill/ability level) and depression in particular has been shown to be a strong predictor of lower GPA and attrition (Hanlon, 2012; MacKean, 2011). Similarly, for employees, about 30% of short- and long-term disability claims in Canada are attributed to mental health problems, and in Canada, these issues exert a considerable cost to employers due to lost productivity from absenteeism, presenteeism, and turnover (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012).

Alberta University of the Arts is meeting these challenges by innovating solutions aimed at growth, strength, and resilience. Several years ago, AUArts recognized that responding to mental health issues of those in need was insufficient alone and instead, promotion of health and wellbeing for everyone was essential to its vitality. In 2013, a Campus Wellness Task Force was struck. Its mandate was to develop a comprehensive set of recommendations that would help to improve the wellbeing of the entire AUArts community. Using a healthy settings approach (Doherty & Dooris, 2006), the Task Force examined whether and how the institution was positioned to support the mental health and wellbeing of AUArts community members. This approach recognizes that the institution’s policies, structure, processes, and culture influence its ability to cultivate an inclusive and supportive environment. It encourages development of sustainable initiatives that promote health and wellbeing at the population level while also bolstering support services for those who find themselves in a place of need. Finally, the Task Force examined the extent to which AUArts is equipped to anticipate and respond to more serious issues that affect the entire campus community.

Although the work of the Task Force (and subsequent Committee) was invaluable, it became clear that it was inhibited by a dearth of resources. Recommendations were generated and initiatives were undertaken; however, an integrated strategy was lacking. The result was a piecemeal approach that lacked a mechanism through which recommendations could be actioned and evaluated. In the summer of 2017, the Government of Alberta announced funding for post-secondary institutions to support mental wellness and build more resilient campus communities (Government of Alberta, 2017). The establishment of a position dedicated to promoting mental health and wellbeing allowed AUArts to undertake a more careful approach to the work begun by the Task Force. This document presents the results of these efforts, formalizing the university's Campus Wellness Strategy, and will lead AUArts further towards the goal of establishing a flourishing community of students, faculty, and staff.

To develop the strategy, a review of literature, best practices, and the current state of mental health / wellbeing at AUArts was undertaken. Broad consultation (focus groups, interviews, surveys) with various stakeholder groups (students, staff, faculty, administration, and external partners, including Indigenous Elders) examined what AUArts is doing well and where it can better meet the needs of its community members.

Alberta University of the Arts' Campus Wellness Strategy is comprehensive and visionary. Aligning with the institution's Academic and Strategic Plans (Alberta University of the Arts, n.d.), which focus on enhancing student experience, strengthening connections, and inclusivity as fundamental values, the vision is to establish AUArts as an institution in which community members feel supported, connected, and engaged; are able to talk about mental health and wellbeing openly; and have access care when needed. When implemented, the Strategy will support everyone at AUArts to further realize their potential.

The Strategy consists of six interrelated areas:

- Institutional Policies, Processes, and Procedures
- Campus Environment: Physical, Social, and Virtual Spaces
- Awareness, De-stigmatization, and Promotion of Wellbeing
- Coping and Resilience
- Services for Individuals in Need of Support
- Crisis Diversion, Management, and Response

Within these six areas, 11 recommendations have been generated.

- AUArts should engage in ongoing review of policies, procedures, processes, and structures with the aim of ensuring that they positively influence wellbeing;
- AUArts should continue to enhance feelings of security, accessibility, inclusion, and wayfinding within the physical campus environment;
- AUArts should explore ways to increase opportunities for informal social engagement amongst community members and undertake renovation in the built environment in order to instill a greater sense of belonging;
- AUArts should consider further improvements to website and social media/engagement reach and platforms;
- AUArts should expand educational offerings regarding mental health/wellbeing and mental illness and the responsibility of all community members in promoting wellbeing, regardless of role;
- AUArts should expand programming that promotes resilience and coping so that predictable strains and transitions in the "life cycle" of community members are less likely to impair functioning;

- AUArts should provide a broad range of services and programming that reflects the entire continuum of mental health;
- Support services should focus on fostering wellbeing and resilience as well as treatment of problems with mental health;
- Services should be flexible and accessible, enabling individuals to access support before problems worsen;
- AUArts should ensure strong links with community resources for individuals with more complex or long-term needs;
- AUArts should increase its capacity to avert, manage, and respond to crisis.

The Strategy

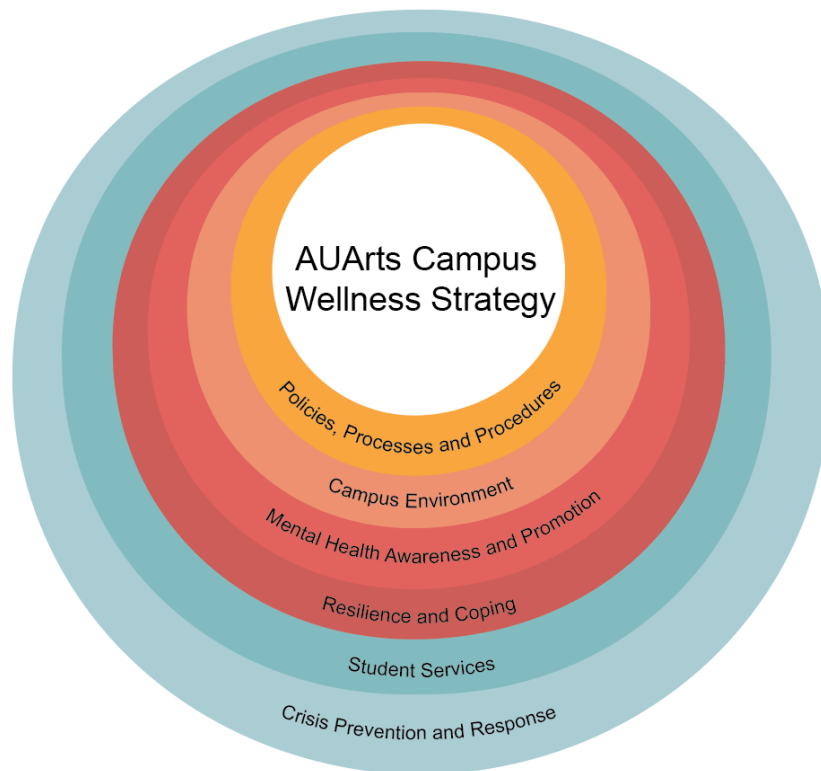


Figure 3. AUArts Campus Wellness Framework

Alberta University of the Arts' Campus Wellness Strategy is based on evidence gathered directly from AUArts community members but is also grounded in best practice literature. It provides a roadmap for initiatives but is also dynamic enough to respond to changing needs or new information. Before outlining the recommendations, it is vital to recognize that improved mental health is not a problem that is solved. A state of wellness is not something that can be attained and forgotten about; rather, it is a process of maintenance sustained through ongoing commitment. Thus, in its pursuit of campus wellness, AUArts will engage in an ongoing and iterative process of implementing, evaluating, and continually redeveloping strategies that lead it toward conditions that better and better support the wellbeing of the entire community.

AREA: Policies, Procedures, and Processes

Recommendation: It is recommended that AUArts engage in ongoing review of policies, procedures, processes, and structures with the aim of ensuring that they positively influence wellbeing

Rationale: It is widely accepted that the broader organizational context has an impact on the wellness of those within it. Institutional structure and policies contribute to its culture by reinforcing certain values, beliefs, and behaviors; and discouraging others. How a postsecondary institution is structured and its strategic goals, policies, and practices, therefore, impact student mental health, which in turn, impacts student learning. Addressing this area requires assessment of the degree to which these organizational elements support student mental health and engage the whole student in the learning process. (CACUSS, 2013)

AREA: Campus Environment - Physical Space

Recommendation: It is recommended that AUArts explore ways to further enhance feelings of security, accessibility, inclusion, and wayfinding within the physical campus environment

Rationale: The role of physical school environment on student health and education is becoming better understood. A growing body of literature indicates that improved physical environments in schools (e.g., indoor air quality, lighting, and acoustic conditions) can enhance student health outcomes (Okcu, Ryherd, & Bayer, 2011). In parallel, the green building movement centers around designing buildings, including schools, that are more sustainable to decrease energy consumption, minimize environmental impact, and create healthier spaces for occupants (Okcu, et al., 2011).

AREA: Campus Environment - Social Space

Recommendation: It is recommended that AUArts explore ways to increase opportunities for informal social engagement amongst community members and undertake renovation in the built environment in order to instill a greater sense of belonging

Rationale: A supportive campus climate and environment encourages student engagement and has been found to have a positive impact on both academic performance and mental health (Strange & Banning, 2001). By creating conditions for meaningful participation in the University community, including the fluid and authentic exchange of ideas, such an environment helps students feel connected and facilitates holistic, integrated learning and development (CACUSS, 2013). Furthermore, research has shown that loneliness and isolation are significant risk factors for mental health problems and/or suicidal behaviour (Olds & Schwartz, 2000). Therefore, supportive social relationships and feeling connected to campus, family and friends are protective factors that can help lower risk.

AREA: Campus Environment - Virtual Space

Recommendation: It is recommended that AUArts consider further improvements to website and social media/engagement reach and platforms

Rationale: It is important to keep the information on auarts.ca comprehensive and current. This is essential to ensure that AUArts is presented in the best light to prospective students who are browsing alternatives and to current students and employees using the website for their day-to-day tasks.

AREA: Mental Health Awareness, De-stigmatization, and Promotion of Wellbeing

Recommendation: It is recommended that AUArts expand educational offerings regarding mental health/wellbeing and mental illness and the responsibility of all community members in promoting wellbeing, regardless of role

Rationale: Education and training are essential elements of a mental health framework that supports campus community members so that they can effectively and compassionately respond to others in distress. Best practices in mental health education and training foster a community that is aware, knowledgeable, and skilled, building the community's capacity to respond in a consistent manner. Effective mental health education and training supports anti-stigma efforts. A supportive campus environment requires all community members to recognize their responsibility to others as well as themselves. Raising mental health awareness and literacy helps encourage community members' commitment to take action to promote mental health at the campus level as well as to care for themselves and others. (CACUSS, 2013)

AREA: Self-management, Coping, and Resiliency

Recommendation: It is recommended that AUArts expand programming that promotes resilience and coping so that predictable strains and transitions in the "life cycle" of community members are less likely to impair functioning

Rationale: Wellbeing and resilience are important in preventing the onset of mental health problems as well as potentially lessening the severity of existing mental health problems. Wellbeing and resilience are vital to developing efficient problem-solving skills, building and maintaining interpersonal relationships and realistic goal setting, all of which greatly enhance an individual's ability to perform and contribute meaningfully in daily life (Reach Out Australia, 2018).

AREA: Student Services

Recommendations:

- AUArts should provide a broad range of services and programming that reflects the entire continuum of mental health.
- Support services should focus on fostering wellbeing and resilience as well as treatment of problems with mental health.
- Services should be flexible and accessible, enabling individuals to access support before problems worsen.
- AUArts should ensure strong links with community resources for individuals with more complex or long-term needs.

Rationale:

Supportive programs and services must be easily accessed by students and other campus community members. This includes a commitment to providing programs and services that are responsive, safe, and timely to meet the needs of diverse users. Reducing barriers to access has been identified as an important priority area.

AREA: Early Identification, Crisis Management (diversion) and Response

Recommendation: It is recommended that AUArts increase its capacity to avert, manage, and respond to crisis

Rationale: It is important that community members recognize and respond to early signs of distress. Those who interact with students, faculty, and staff in the course of their day are in the best position to notice early indications of concern.

Next Steps and Acknowledgements

The Campus Wellness Strategy has been vetted by representatives from the student body, Indigenous Elders, staff, and administration. The Strategy is intended to serve as a foundational document that will guide AUArts through planning, implementing, evaluating, and sustaining wellness initiatives for the next two years and beyond.

Alberta University of the Arts acknowledges the contributions of a dedicated team in developing and supporting the Campus Wellness Strategy. In particular, the writers would like to acknowledge the contributions of the students, staff, faculty, technicians, and administrators who participated in the creation of this report. Without their input, this work would not be possible.

The goal for implementation of this strategy is to ensure a highly coordinated and strategic use of resources related to mental health and wellbeing. Furthermore, it will be important for AUArts to effectively measure the impact of initiatives undertaken. To this end, we will continually evaluate our performance using rigorous metrics that are aligned with emerging national standards.

A communications plan will be included to ensure the engagement of the campus community and collaboration with external partners. Finally, a review of the Strategy will be provided to the campus community annually.