

Joint Submission to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia
Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services
SUPPORTS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

October 10, 2017

INTRODUCTION

Last year, the presidents of British Columbia's 25 public post-secondary institutions, represented by the Research Universities' Council of BC, the BC Association of Institutes and Universities and BC Colleges, came together to present to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services a proposal to address issues that are central to the success of British Columbians who access post-secondary education in the province. This year, presidents from across the system have come together again to bring to the attention of the Committee the continuing pressures facing students and also facing institutions in providing new services for students while ensuring high standards are maintained.

Post-secondary education has become significantly more complex than twenty years ago. Issues facing students in areas such as mental health and sexual violence are more predominant, requiring substantive new services. Other supports, such as work-integrated learning, are key to students and to prospective employers as relevant experience for transition into employment. Consistent with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's *Calls to Action*, BC's post-secondary institutions are committed to improving supports for Indigenous learners to increase their levels of participation and success. All these supports are vital in providing high quality post-secondary education that will allow students to successfully pursue personal and career goals and provide the resource of talent necessary for the prosperity of the province.

STUDENT SUCCESS

Supports for Indigenous Students

The presidents welcome the Government of BC's recent commitment to implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's *Calls to Action*. This commitment requires a post-secondary system that is relevant and effective for Indigenous learners based on programs and initiatives developed with Indigenous partners; increasing the number of Indigenous, faculty and staff; and, improving and indigenizing student supports. Many new initiatives have been introduced and education and employment outcomes have improved. However, more needs to be done. Indigenous learners continue to face challenges in accessing and completing post-secondary education, particularly in relation to undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

Examples of Innovative Supports for Indigenous Students

One post-secondary institution has established an Indigenous Support Centre, which is working with the institution's Academic Success Centre to offer Indigenous designated tutors for Indigenous students on a drop-in basis.

Another institution offers an Academy of Indigenous Scholars program, which is a holistic multi-dimensional support program that focuses on enhancing first year transitions with a goal to increase grade averages, retention, and self-confidence.

Another is offering mentorship opportunities for prospective, new and returning Indigenous students, connecting Indigenous university students with prospective students in local high schools to share their personal education journeys and offer those high school students an opportunity to explore their educational goals.

Additional support for Indigenous students could include enhancing Elders programs to provide the connection to culture and community; engaging Indigenous counsellors to work with students experiencing mental health issues, inter-generational trauma, or the effects of residential school experiences; and, creating more opportunities for dialogue among post-secondary institutions and Indigenous communities.

Additional student services could include access to Indigenous student advisors knowledgeable about Indigenous funding practices and policies and who could advocate for and advise Indigenous students on programs and education plans; or, the provision of emergency funds to support Indigenous students in the event of an unforeseen emergency or circumstance, which could include assistance to return to their home community.

Mental Health Supports for Students

As previously noted, the role of institutions in providing high-quality education to students has become substantially more complex. Apart from their academic requirements, supporting the individual needs of students as they pursue post-secondary education is essential. Such supports are resource intensive, with the demands for them increasing year over year.

According to a 2013 survey by the American College Health Association (ACHA) of 34,000 students at 32 Canadian post-secondary institutions, 20 percent of students reported being diagnosed or treated for a mental health condition. In a 2016 follow-up survey of 43,000 students at 41 Canadian institutions, the number of students with a mental health condition increased to 26 percent, an increase of 30 percent. Documented conditions include anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders.

Personal counselling for students at one medium-sized institution has increased by 56 percent from 2012 to 2015 (as measured by counselling hours). Counsellors at this institution are now carrying workloads of 1,000 students each with growth not only in volume but also in the complexities of the disorders that students are presenting with. Another BC institution reports that approximately 10 percent of those seeking counselling are assessed as high risk for suicide, while another institution reported that 29 percent of students who sought counselling considered withdrawing from programs due to their condition.

While some of these students are able to address these concerns as they emerge, others continue to struggle. Close to 40 percent of students captured in the ACHA survey reported that within the last 12 months, either anxiety or stress attributed to a negative impact, along with the potential stigma associated with mental health disabilities. There are also financial implications for students who take longer to complete their education, including students who take multiple breaks in study which may jeopardize continued access to student loan funding.

By providing students with the skills and capacity to cope with stress and other mental and social challenges, institutions contribute significantly to a student's success and advancement. Further initiatives in mental health services could include employing additional counsellors with specific experience in trauma, disability and humanistic approaches to supporting students struggling with mental health. This would reduce wait times for meeting with a counsellor and also increase the knowledge base for appropriate care to be provided. On-site psychiatric nurses could also support broader health promotion and extend early intervention initiatives, as would the broader implementation of 'Early Alert' systems for identifying and responding to students who present performance and attendance issues in the classroom. Another resource could include student well-being health promotion specialist units which would focus on addressing mental health using a public health model.

Students are more likely to remain healthy on the wellness continuum with the help of professionals who focus on establishing upstream resilience skills and healthy campus environments. The number of students becoming mentally ill and requiring medical intervention and/or suffering adverse personal and academic impacts would be reduced.

Examples of Innovative Mental Health Supports for Students

One post-secondary institution has opened a Peer Resource Leadership Centre through which student leaders help their peers with information in areas such as mental health and sexual violence, identifying resources available to them and providing peer support and mentorship in a safe and inclusive space.

Another institution has established an on-campus health and wellness centre with a Nurse Practitioner providing primary care. Approximately 60% of the 800 students who sought treatment from the NP were assessed with a mental health diagnosis. In some months, this number is closer to 80%.

Another has established a Case Management Team to collaboratively respond to significant student issues. Many students present with profiles that strongly suggest an undiagnosed mental health disorder and raise concerns as their behaviour in and out of class brings them into conflict with Instructors, staff and fellow students.

Other institutions have established behaviour intervention response teams, which serve as coordinating hubs for existing resources for prevention as well as early intervention for students who may be experiencing distress or who are perceived to pose a threat to their own safety and/or the safety of other students, faculty, and staff. A secondary purpose is to arrange education and training for students, faculty and staff to recognize and report potential behavioral risks to the Team.

Supports for Students for Issues of Sexual Violence

Personal safety is critical to a student's success and overall well-being. BC's post-secondary institutions are committed to making their campuses respectful environments where students can study and live free from such concerns. The institutions will not tolerate sexual assault or any other acts of sexual violence or aggression, and are fully committed and responsive to the needs of victims.

One of the challenges institutions face in providing sexual violence supports for students is a lack of staffing to deal with increased demand. These shortages include staff in health, counselling and legal affairs. The complexity of cases is manifold with increasing requirements for third party investigations, and staff need to balance the needs of the victim/survivor with the rights of the accused. Jurisdictional issues are also a significant problem. In addition, the scope of educational responsibility is expanding to include major community services. There are expectations that institutions can duplicate all community services on campus (counselling, clinics, judicial) to address these matters comprehensively.

BC's post-secondary institutions have been undertaking consultations and strategies to improve policies and practices that address sexual assault and sexual harassment. These strategies have provided clear direction and a more coordinated approach on programs and resources to educate campus communities on the prevention of sexual assault, and on resources and options available to those affected.

Examples of Sexual Violence Supports Adopted by BC Post-Secondary Institutions

One post-secondary institution is developing and implementing a comprehensive Bystander Intervention Training Program to help students identify and interrupt sexualized and other forms of violence, with a goal to train over 1,000 students in bystander intervention in the first year.

Another institution is convening a regional Sexual Violence Task Force in partnership with RCMP, the regional Health Authority, First Nations Health Authority, Corrections, Ending Violence Association of BC and other community agencies engaged in sexual violence support work.

Another will be offering bystander training, third party reporting and training for receiving disclosures of sexual assault for front-line staff and students.

Counselling staff specifically trained to work with sexual assault survivors is critical to a survivor-centered response. Additional initiatives in sexual violence services could include specific disclosure response/support training for counselling staff. Also, student residences present a risk factor for sexualized violence on campus and providing specific disclosure response training for residence staff is an important mitigation strategy.

Institutions continue to work on sexual violence education and prevention initiatives, with the goals of increasing safety and security, making reporting easier, increasing understanding of consent, dispelling misinformation, informing how to support victims and promoting a culture that does not tolerate sexual violence.

Work-Integrated Learning

Work-integrated learning experiences, including co-op, internships, apprenticeships, practicums and clinical placements, community service, mentorship programs, research assistantships and work study, are increasingly important learning tools for students. The application of classroom concepts to workplace scenarios provides relevant experience for transition into the workforce and longer placements, such as co-op, can also be a valuable source of income for students.

For employers, these programs provide an opportunity to evaluate potential employees while equipping students with the skills needed in a particular industry or profession. They also strengthen the relationships between industry and post-secondary institutions.

The trend in the number of co-op placements in BC institutions has moved upward from approximately 10,000 student placements per year in 2010/11 to approximately 14,000 in 2015/16, a 39.6 percent increase. Growth has been concentrated in engineering, computer science, business, and science with offerings in other programs such as humanities/social science and hospitality/tourism. Other institutions offer forms of work-integrated learning in keeping with their specialized mandates and, while some smaller institutions have found it challenging to offer co-op programs due to the lack of availability of employers and resources, all offer some component of experiential learning.

Examples of Innovative Work Integrated Learning Initiatives for Students

One post-secondary institution offers a Construction Craft Worker Indigenous Bridging Program, which is a hands-on program designed to benefit students with limited construction experience or those looking to refresh or enhance their skills. The program includes work boots, bus passes, group study sessions, cultural activities, volunteer work experience and job search skills.

Two institutions jointly participate in a Silicon Valley Co-op Strategy, through which a San Francisco based co-op coordinator markets their co-op programs to businesses, organizations, industry groups and the community within the Silicon Valley/San Francisco area.

Another institution has established a President's Excellence Fund for Student Mobility to support travel funding for co-op students undertaking several types of experiential learning, including co-op work terms or internships in the Asia Pacific region, in other provinces of Canada or with Indigenous business, communities or community groups.

Another plans to establish an Innovation Acceleration Co-op Program for students with

Although work-integrated learning is recognized for its contribution to the success of student and employer outcomes, institutions have reached a threshold where they are constrained by a demand from students that is outstripping the supply of placements. New measures are needed to encourage placements across disciplines and address barriers that employers face, particularly for small and medium sized enterprises and not-for-profit organizations. Expanded outreach to employers to secure placements would increase the inventory of opportunities. New approaches could include grants or vouchers for employers for costs associated with placements and mentorship, and financial assistance to support student mobility to travel for placements.

Creating more WIL opportunities would be particularly beneficial for persons with disabilities. Research shows that post-secondary graduates with a disability have higher unemployment rates than graduates without a disability. Approximately half of British Columbians with disabilities aged 15 to 64 years are employed, compared to 73 percent of persons without disabilities. Participation in WIL opportunities will help increase labour force attachment among persons with disabilities and reduce their relatively high unemployment rates.

GOING FORWARD

It is evident that post-secondary education in BC is the path to individual and economic success for British Columbians. For students to succeed personally and move into employment opportunities, a high quality post-secondary education system with support services responsive to their increasingly complex needs is essential.

Last year post-secondary institutions proposed that the \$50 million reduction in funding to the post-secondary system over the years 2013/14 to 2015/16 be re-invested, specifically in areas of greatest student need. This year we ask the Committee to consider again recommending investment in our students as part of their report to the Legislative Assembly. Post-secondary education benefits all British Columbians and the leadership of BC's public post-secondary institutions are committed to working together with the provincial government to offer high quality post-secondary education to British Columbians.