

# Administrative Response to the Final Report of the Presidential and Provostial Task Force on Student Mental Health

January 15, 2020

## 1. Introduction

Students are at the heart of the University of Toronto's mission of higher education and advanced research. Just as we are truly proud of our students as they cross the stage in triumph in Convocation Hall, we are also sincerely concerned when we hear that one of them is struggling along the way. We are determined to ensure that we are supporting all of our students as effectively as possible.

We have been listening intently to the University-wide discussion that has arisen on the issue of student well-being and mental health, a discussion in which our students have shown great leadership. In March 2019, we announced a [four-point plan of action](#), including a [Task Force on Student Mental Health](#) mandated to review the mental health supports and services we provide.

The Task Force has now completed its work and submitted its [Final Report](#). Its comprehensive and thoughtful recommendations are the product of a very thorough and extensive process of consultation with students and other members of the U of T community.

**We have reviewed the Final Report of the Task Force carefully, and we accept all of its recommendations wholeheartedly.** Section 2 below provides highlights of the actions we have taken since the launch of the Task Force, responding to some of the immediate needs identified in the consultation process. Section 3 describes the steps we will take, now and over the medium and longer term, to act fully on all of the Task Force's recommendations. Members of the community are invited to check the [Provost's website](#) for updates on our progress going forward.

In everything we have done and will do, we are mindful of the fact that student mental health is a shared responsibility. Some actions we can take on our own, and others require collaboration with partners in the health-care system, in government and in society as a whole. We are strongly committed to doing our part and to showing leadership in addressing this vital issue.

## 2. Actions We Have Taken Since March 2019

We have invested new resources in student mental health as part of our initial actions. [We have introduced](#) same-day counselling services on the St. George Campus, similar to those already offered at U of T Mississauga and U of T Scarborough. In addition, during the final examination periods in spring and fall 2019, we provided library-based drop-in counselling, seven days a week including evenings and

weekends. This new initiative has been very well received, and as a result, we will expand this offering beginning with the spring 2020 examination period.<sup>a</sup>

We have expanded the 24/7 multilingual counselling service provided through the [My SSP](#) app (My Student Support Program). As a result, all of our students, international as well as domestic, now have access to counselling by phone or text in 146 languages, at any time day or night.<sup>b</sup> Efforts are underway to raise awareness among our students of this major expansion of services.

In addition, we have intensified our efforts to convince our government partners to provide greater resources for post-secondary student mental health services. We have written to and met with provincial ministers on multiple occasions, to build on our advocacy efforts over the past few years in collaboration with students and sector partners such as the Council of Ontario Universities. We have also supported the [motion passed by Toronto City Council](#), calling on the federal government to provide new resources for mental health and addiction services.

### 3. Actions We Will Take Now and Going Forward

#### 3.1. Service Delivery and Coordination of Supports

The Task Force heard consistently that we need to improve the ways we provide mental health services to students, in order to streamline and simplify the pathways to care. Accordingly, we have created a Mental Health Services Redesign Team (hereafter, 'Redesign Team') to conduct a process redesign of student mental health services at U of T.<sup>c</sup>

The Redesign Team will convene immediately, though its work will take time, given the scope of the project and the size, complexity and diversity of the University. That said, it will initiate individual changes as expeditiously as possible, without waiting until all aspects of the redesign are ready. It will be mandated to focus on implementation, deploying recognized best practices in mental health service delivery.

The Redesign Team will be led by Professor Joseph Desloges, former Principal of Woodsworth College, and will include two experts from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), Dr. Alexia Jaouich, Director of Implementation and Innovation, Provincial System Support Program, and Dr. Sean Kidd, Senior Scientist and Division Chief, Psychology.

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<sup>a</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 4**

<sup>b</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 4**

<sup>c</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 1**

The redesign will establish a clearer ‘stepped model of care’, refocus services as necessary, and harmonize services across all three campuses and all seven colleges.<sup>d</sup> The ultimate goal will be to create an integrated tri-campus system with one Clinical Director,<sup>e</sup> one website, one consistent approach to way-finding, one online booking system, one electronic records system, and one institutional letter for accessibility services.

In developing this more efficient and accessible system, we will take care to respect local cultures and priorities across the University’s campuses and divisions. We will be mindful of the diversity of our students and their particular needs, and we will expand the diversity of our services, our service providers and our partnerships accordingly.<sup>f</sup> We will also support the efforts of autonomous student organizations at the University to extend and coordinate health insurance plans and enhance communication of benefits available to their members.<sup>g</sup>

The Redesign Team will consult thoroughly with students and our expert staff in planning this transformation. In addition, to provide advice and ensure our continued progress in improving mental health services and supports, the Office of the Vice-Provost Students and the School of Graduate Studies will collaborate with students in establishing an advisory board on mental health and wellness.<sup>h</sup> Details on the composition and terms of reference of this new advisory board will be announced shortly.

We will also implement new measures to support all members of the U of T community in facilitating early access to mental health services for students in need.<sup>i</sup> To that end, we will enhance our engagement with faculty and staff on this issue and provide them with additional resources and professional development opportunities.<sup>j</sup>

### 3.2. Partnerships

We will collaborate with our partners in the Toronto Academic Health Science Network to help achieve the goals identified by the Task Force.<sup>k</sup>

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<sup>d</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 7**

<sup>e</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 8**

<sup>f</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 5**

<sup>g</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 17**

<sup>h</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 20**

<sup>i</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 9**

<sup>j</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 3**

<sup>k</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 10**

As a key immediate step, we will establish a new partnership with [CAMH](#).<sup>1</sup> CAMH is a world leader in the research and treatment of mental illness. It is committed to a collaborative approach to youth mental health through its [Youth Engagement Initiative](#). It also has an Ontario-wide mandate, and is eager to help us address mental health needs on all three of our campuses.

Our new partnership with CAMH will consist of four elements:

- Helping to **transform our system of campus-based services**, through the participation of CAMH experts Dr. Sean Kidd and Dr. Alexia Jaouich in the work of the Redesign Team, as noted in Section 3.1 above.<sup>m</sup>
- Creating **integrated care pathways** between campus-based services and CAMH – and other hospitals and agencies in the Toronto region – including crisis management services,<sup>n</sup> with the assistance of Dr. Vicky Stergiopoulos, Physician-in-Chief, CAMH, and Professor Lynn Wilson, Acting Vice-Provost, Relations with Health Care Institutions.
- Providing **enhanced clinical education programs in student mental health for U of T trainees in the health professions**, as well as ongoing professional development opportunities for staff and students. Through curriculum innovation, internships and group supervision, this will strengthen our contributions in training the mental health clinicians of tomorrow.<sup>o</sup> This element of the partnership will be led by Dr. Sanjeev Sockalingam, Vice-President, Education, CAMH, Professor Salvatore Spadafora, Acting Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, and Professor Linda Johnston, Dean of the Lawrence S. Bloomberg Faculty of Nursing and Chair of the Council of Health Sciences at U of T.
- Creating a new initiative focused on **research excellence in youth and student mental health**, to provide research-informed, evidence-based solutions to the challenges identified by the Task Force.<sup>p</sup> Professor Christine Allen, Associate Vice-President and Vice-Provost, Strategic Initiatives, has organized a workshop of academic and clinical experts at U of T and CAMH to begin discussions on the structure and mandate of this very exciting new venture.

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<sup>1</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 10**

<sup>m</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendations 1 and 11**

<sup>n</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendations 12 and 6**

<sup>o</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 11**

<sup>p</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 21**

This new partnership between U of T and CAMH will harness the expertise within our two world-leading institutions to address one of the most pressing challenges in higher education today. It will enable us to become a model for other universities in meeting this challenge across Canada and beyond.

### 3.3. Physical Spaces

The Task Force Final Report underscored that some of the spaces and facilities through which we provide student mental health services are not well suited to their purposes and do not reflect the high importance we place upon student mental health. We will review these spaces and facilities across UTM, UTSC and the St. George Campus, in consultation with students and service providers, and we will make improvements accordingly.<sup>q</sup> We will also continue to fund the creation of new non-academic communal spaces for students in existing and future buildings, through the [Student Space Enhancement Fund](#).<sup>r</sup>

Planning is already underway to modernize the Health and Wellness Centre in the Koffler building on the St. George Campus, to keep pace with demand and to provide space better suited to the delivery of services.<sup>s</sup> We have struck a project planning committee for this purpose and engaged the participation of Professor Stephen Verderber, Director of the Centre for Design and Health Innovation in the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design. With the additional support of a professional health-care planning consultant, the committee will soon embark on consultations with students and service providers on the design for the new facilities.

### 3.4. A Culture of Caring and Excellence

The Task Force heard concerns about whether U of T's culture of excellence, and the competitiveness such a culture can foster, may impact negatively on student mental health in some cases. The Task Force also heard that our students are proud of our high academic standards and of our national and global leadership across the disciplines and professions, and that they are drawn to U of T for precisely these qualities.

We are committed to changing specific practices or policies that may be counter-productive. We also believe that ultimately there is no conflict between a culture of academic excellence and a culture of caring. These values go hand-in-hand, just as equity, diversity and inclusion are integral to our academic mission.

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<sup>q</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 13**

<sup>r</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 14**

<sup>s</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 13**

We will do everything we can to help our students feel a sense of community, which is a critical component of mental wellness. This is something we have been working on steadily for many years, as reflected in the University's long-term strategic plan, [Towards 2030](#) and the [Three Priorities](#) framework. But we agree that more is needed.

The following initiatives related to undergraduate and graduate student experience will help to foster a culture of caring at U of T.

As part of the four-point plan we announced in March 2019, we asked the [Expert Panel on Undergraduate Student Educational Experience](#) (USEE) to include in its deliberations some of the issues that have been raised in the University-wide discussion on student mental health. The Panel, led by Professor Greg Evans, has now completed its work, and the Provost's Office is developing an implementation strategy in response. This will include engaging with those responsible for the development and revision of academic programs on best practices in assessment, academic support services and mental health accommodations.<sup>†</sup> The strategy will also address concerns about institutional policies and systems that can sometimes elevate student stress unnecessarily, or act as barriers to undergraduate student wellness and success.<sup>‡</sup>

Beyond this, we will work to strengthen our communications with students and other members of the University community. We will collaborate with leaders at UTM, UTSC, Student Life on the St. George campus, and U of T Communications to raise awareness of programming designed to foster student mental health and wellness, and to promote mental health literacy.<sup>§</sup>

We will work to improve understanding of the *University-Mandated Leave of Absence Policy*, and we will ensure that the Policy is reviewed robustly through the means provided in its section on Annual Reporting and Periodic Review.<sup>¶</sup> Our efforts will emphasize the compassionate intent of the Policy, clarify its scope and processes, and address common misconceptions about its implementation, while reiterating the University's strict adherence to legislation on privacy and the protection of personal health information. Shortly, we will also make public our approach to communications in the event of the death of a U of T student.<sup>∗</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 15**

<sup>‡</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 16**

<sup>§</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendations 2, 3**

<sup>¶</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 18**

<sup>∗</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 19**

Regarding graduate student experience, Professor Joshua Barker, Dean of the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) and Vice-Provost, Graduate Research and Education, recently announced the appointment of Professor Reinhart Reithmeier as Special Advisor on the [Healthy Labs Initiative](#).<sup>y</sup> The Initiative was undertaken in response to a recommendation by the University Ombudsperson, Professor Emeritus Ellen Hodnett, in her [annual report](#) to Governing Council.

SGS will also launch a new Centre for Graduate Mentorship and Supervision in the coming year.<sup>z</sup> The Centre will promote healthy, supportive and productive mentoring relationships to improve student experience, enhance mental wellness, and positively impact academic and career outcomes for graduate students, post-doctoral fellows and faculty members alike. It will be staffed by a full-time director, and draw on other existing staff resources to deliver workshops and training, provide advice, collect data, and communicate on best practices and other findings.

In addition, Dean Barker will establish a standing advisory body on graduate student mental health to address relevant academic policies and processes,<sup>aa</sup> and to help promote a supportive community for graduate students.

### 3.5. Financial Resources

Student mental health is already a fundraising priority, University-wide and in many of our academic divisions. We will work closely with the Division of University Advancement to seek additional support for student mental health and wellness services, programming and facilities across our three campuses, and research, and we will define this as a priority in our near-term philanthropic fundraising plans.

We will also make student mental health and wellness a priority in University Fund allocations in the 2020-21 Budget, to be finalized this spring. Our objective will be to expand our service offerings to students, in line with the advice of the Task Force and the Redesign Team.

In addition, at the request of Professor Vivek Goel, Vice-President, Research and Innovation and Strategic Initiatives, and in line with the Task Force recommendation to leverage our own research expertise in mental health, the Connaught Fund has identified youth and student mental health as a priority area for support through the [Connaught Global Challenge Awards](#) in 2020.<sup>bb</sup>

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<sup>y</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 15**

<sup>z</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 15**

<sup>aa</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 16**

<sup>bb</sup> In response to **Task Force Final Report, Recommendation 21**

## 4. Conclusion

Youth and student mental health is a shared responsibility. It is the responsibility of individuals, families, civil society and our government partners, especially through Ontario's universal public health-care system. We will continue to advocate for greater support from our government partners, as part of the post-secondary sector and on our own initiative, to help meet the mental health care needs of our students.

Student mental health is also our responsibility within the U of T community – each of us, administrators, faculty, staff and students. We are committed to ensuring that members of our community receive the care and support that they need and should expect to find on our campuses.

We are also strongly committed to building a culture of caring across our three campuses and in every division. We are a community – we are united by our academic mission and the values that sustain and inspire it. Moreover, education and research are both collaborative endeavours by their very nature. It is essential, therefore, that we relate to each other with respect, care and compassion.

In closing, we would like to thank Professor Trevor Young, Chair of the Task Force, Senior Assessors Professor Sandy Welsh and Professor Joshua Barker, and all the members of the Task Force. You have done a great service to the University community in your consultations and deliberations and in your Final Report. We are also grateful to Dr. Catherine Zahn, President and CEO of CAMH, and her colleagues – thank you for your enthusiastic and creative response to the idea of a new collaboration.

We also wish to acknowledge the thousands of staff and faculty members across our three campuses who support our students on a daily basis. We thank especially all those engaged directly in providing health and wellness and accessibility services. You make a vital contribution to the achievement of our academic mission, and you are recognized as national leaders in your fields. Your professional expertise and personal dedication are deeply appreciated.

Above all, we are grateful to the students of the University of Toronto – thank you for the leadership, courage and care that you have shown in advancing the cause of student mental health. You have inspired us to reach for even greater excellence as an academic community. And in this service, you will benefit those who will come after you, for many years to come.

*Meric S. Gertler, President*

*Cheryl Regehr, Vice-President and Provost*