



Healthy Campuses for Successful Futures

COLLEGE STUDENT ALLIANCE

2018 PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION

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College Student Alliance (CSA) is a member-driven advocacy organization proudly serving Ontario's college students since 1975. CSA currently represents 13 student associations throughout the province.

We thank the Minister of Finance for the opportunity to provide commentary in the development of the forthcoming provincial budget. The following submission contains CSA's recommendations for reform that require the most action. The implementation of these recommendations will strengthen Ontario's post-secondary education (PSE) system for the benefit of the province's economy and society. CSA shares the view of the government that by investing in education, we are investing in our future.

Our Advocacy Wins

Our advocacy efforts in previous years led to millions of dollars in savings and increased accessibility for thousands of students seeking an education. Last year, CSA advocated for the post-secondary student support program (PSSSP) to be exempt from OSAP assessments for Indigenous students. Aligned with provincial and federal initiatives, the exemption eliminates the financial penalization placed on Indigenous students seeking post-secondary education.

CSA also advocated for an open textbooks policy to reduce the financial burden on students. As a result, the province invested in Ontario's first open textbook website, through eCampus Ontario, for students to receive necessary learning materials for their education without incurring additional costs. Student savings exceeded \$190,000 for September 2017 alone.

Students rely on colleges to provide the necessary materials and learning environment for them to succeed. CSA works closely with student associations to determine how students can increase their success in and outside of college. Member student associations indicated food security and mental health were priorities in meeting everyday expectations as a student while establishing independence during and after college. To ensure the successful facilitation and execution of college education, CSA is advocating for resources and supports that will not only assist students during their post-secondary careers, but can also assist their transitions into the workplace and the community at large.

FOOD SECURITY

Over 600,000 Ontario households struggle with food security every year¹. Food insecurity can greatly impact overall health, as well as aggravate the severity of physical and mental illnesses, such as asthma and depression^{2,3}. Colleges need a stable funding source, complementary to fundraising efforts, to support the creation of food security programming for students.

Almost a quarter of college applicants reported a household income of \$30,000 or less⁴. Across Canada, food insecurity rates for post-secondary students are estimated to be nearly 40%⁵. Through informal research, CSA found that most Ontario publicly-funded colleges have food banks or vouchers available as emergency provisions for those in need. Though instrumental in resolving immediate concerns, these services do not address the root causes of food insecurity.

Nutritional deficits are evident when analyzing fruit and vegetable consumption in students. Dieticians and nutritionists recommend at least five servings of fruits and vegetables daily⁶ to assist in the prevention cardiovascular disease and some cancers⁷. Less than 1 in 10 students meet that criteria:



- **25%** of Ontarians 18 – 34 met or exceeded recommendations, which is statistically lower than Canadians the same age⁸
- **8.6%** of students surveyed in the 2016 National College Health Assessment (NCHA) ate the recommended portions; **just under 6% of students did not eat fruits or vegetables⁹**

Dieting behaviours continuous of this pattern will lead to damaging mental and physical health consequences. Treatable illness may be intensified by food insecurity and can cost the public health care system double the amount of food secure populations¹⁰

In addressing food insecurity, prevention is key. Active food security programs, such as the Student Nutrition Program (SNP), mainly focuses on providing healthy meals to primary and secondary school students. However, such investment is non-existent within the post-secondary sector. The lack of continuity for adequate food programming is entirely counterproductive. Students have more autonomy during post-secondary but do not have adequate resources and supports to address food insecurity. Limited food options and restricted on-campus cafeteria hours further exacerbates the issue on some campuses by increasing students' reliance on fast food alternatives. Student associations must work alongside colleges to mediate this issue and provide unique resolutions across colleges.

RECOMMENDATION:

CSA recommends increased funding and resources for food security programs available for post-secondary institutions to supplement mental health and poverty reduction efforts.

Cost: Approximately 500,000 students are registered in Ontario colleges. With the inclusion of university students, there are approximately one million full- and part-time students enrolled in post-secondary studies in Ontario¹¹. Despite Ontario having a food insecurity rate of about 12%¹², various studies indicate that 29 - 39% of Canadian post-secondary students experience food insecurity^{13,14,15}. Based on the lowest estimate of 29%, approximately 290,000 post-secondary students may benefit from food security programming.

The province currently invests \$32.3 million each year for SNPs¹⁶, supporting more than 45% of Ontario primary and secondary students¹⁷ through an investment of approximately \$36 per child each year. If applying the ratio of SNPs to programs in post-secondary institutions, a minimum commitment of **\$10 million/year** can further food security and mental health initiatives, concurrently. Student associations must have autonomy in providing food security programming reflective of their student population. Being a part of the conversation will greatly maximize the impact of investment when customized for each college's unique demographic.

As part of the Local Poverty Fund, the Ministry of Poverty Reduction allotted \$5 million for food security initiatives available through application for the general community¹⁸. An additional \$10 million solely available for post-secondary institutions can integrate emergency provisions with nutritional knowledge, streamline efforts, and reduce future health care costs. Cross-ministry participation for continuous and proactive food security programming is imperative as effects of food insecurity are not fragmented. Ongoing data collection, in and outside of the post-secondary sector, can provide insight on food security to inform policy directives.

Benefit: Annual provincial funding will decrease the financial constraint colleges are experiencing while providing freedom for student associations to create services reflective of student needs. Students struggling with food insecurity prior to college may have the ability to accomplish and maintain a state of food security. Cohesive and streamlined food security programming can reduce healthcare costs by making services more effective and complementary to mental health efforts, alleviating the magnified effects food insecurity has on mental illness.

STUDENTS

- Increased healthy eating habits
- Transfer of nutritional knowledge
- Increased solidarity
- Increased mental health management

COMMUNITY

- Increased community partnerships
- Increased private-public partnerships
- Increased local investment
- Increased community resources

PROVINCIAL

- Substantial decrease in hospital expenditures
- Decrease in hospital wait-times
- Increase in economic productivity
- Increase in agricultural partnerships

MENTAL HEALTH

Efforts to de-stigmatize mental health concerns empowered many to start seeking supports. As a result, colleges are experiencing substantial wait-times for mental health services and are increasingly in need of resources. In Fall 2017, CSA, Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA), Colleges Ontario (CO) and the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) published *In It Together*, a report to encourage public stakeholders, health care sectors and community leaders to collaborate in the development of an effective mental health care strategy for post-secondary students.

Prior to entering college, Ontario secondary students are reporting psychological distress and serious levels of anxiety and depression¹⁹. In Ontario's post-secondary institutions, students are reporting elevated rates of anxiety, anger, and depression than years prior. Suicidal ideations and suicide attempts are also rising, despite increases in provincial funding²⁰.

College is the opportune environment for students to seek mental health care due to subsidized costs and increased independence, though colleges are not entirely equipped to manage the spectrum of mental health concerns. Long wait-times and astronomical increases in mental health helplines are evidence supports are in continuous demand²¹. Colleges require increased investments and community resources for students to access mental health supports prior to, during, and after their post-secondary careers.

There remains a need for specialized and diverse supports, especially for marginalized students. Indigenous youth experience suicidal ideations and attempts five to six times more than non-Indigenous youth²². More than 51% of trans youth aged 16 – 24 surveyed considered suicide at least once²³. Black youth access less mental health services and treatments than youth of other racial groups, yet are overrepresented in detention and confinement facilities²⁴. The statistics reflect an inaccessible mental health care system for many across Ontario, whether geographically, culturally, politically or financially.

RECOMMENDATION:

All post-secondary students, regardless of geographic location, should have access to gender and culturally-sensitive mental health services and supports that are timely, effective and flexible, and provided in a safe and comfortable environment.

Post-secondary institutions, government, health organizations and community leaders must work together to effectively streamline services using a **“whole of community approach.”** For government to ensure pathways to higher education, students most at-risk of not attending or completing post-secondary education must be considered when providing mental health and addiction services on campus.

RECOMMENDATION:

The government must increase overall spending on mental health and addictions by at least 10%, dedicating a portion of the annual budget to post-secondary institutions.

RECOMMENDATION:

Mandatory data collection from all publicly-funded post-secondary institutions must be collected containing data on in-house mental health services, waitlist times and crisis interventions to be delivered to the province annually.

Benefit: In support of **Bill 76**, ongoing data collection of on-campus mental health services will maximize funding efficiency and resource distribution for post-secondary institutions in Ontario. An increase in funding may provide opportunities to expand mental health technologies, such as Good2Talk to include text messages, video chat, and other capabilities, furthering the accessibility of mental health supports and alleviating wait-times on and off campus.

In alliance with **Truth and Reconciliation Initiatives** and by extension of **Ontario's Black Youth Action Plan**, increased recognition and accessibility of culturally-competent and diverse mental health services will increase opportunities for community partnerships, as well as ensure continuity of supports once students leave post-secondary. Cultural competency and diversity will assist in the development of student rapport with counsellors and clinical professionals. Inclusive mental health resources will encourage an introspective analysis on systematic biases entrenched in Ontario's healthcare.

The impact of this recommendation may mean saving the lives of some students. Accessing mental health services, on and off campus, can make the transition between secondary school to college much easier. It can also increase awareness of community health supports that are available to students once college is over, leading to stronger students, stronger colleges, and stronger leaders.

STUDENTS

- Increased student retention
- Ease of international student transition into Ontario colleges
- Increased health and wellbeing
- Increased resilience

COMMUNITY

- Expansion of mental health supports
- Increased community, academic, and cultural partnerships
- Increased funding for health, social and community organizations
- Increased Indigenous reconciliation and solidarity efforts

PROVINCIAL

- Decreased hospital expenditure
- Increased continuity of care for residents
- Improvement of mental health care system

Conclusion: College Student Alliance brings forth these recommendations not only to shed light on areas of improvement, but to determine how post-secondary institutions and the public sector can proactively create a sustainable and healthy economy. CSA welcomes the opportunity to provide suggestions and work alongside the Ministry of Finance and the Standing Committee of Finance and Economic Affairs. Colleges and students are both subject to economic changes and are pioneers in innovation; investing in tomorrow's leaders can greatly determine how the future unfolds. By ensuring reflective and accessible mental health and food security supports, we are preparing students to excel in Ontario's highly skilled workforce, as well as in their daily lives.

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