

# Student mental health needs growing, Ontario colleges say

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10/9/2017

By [Kristin Rushowy](#) Queen's Park Bureau

Tues., Oct. 10, 2017

Ontario colleges are spending \$160 million more than they receive from the government to provide mental health services and supports for students — a need that continues to grow and must be addressed, says a new report.

The report, released Tuesday, “is highlighting that we are seeing the acceleration of these challenges beyond what we might have expected to see,” said Linda Franklin, president of Colleges Ontario, which represents the province’s 24 public institutions.

At a time when general overall funding per student has been declining, colleges are “currently diverting significant funds from general operations and academic programming to provide student at-risk support programs and services,” says the report from Deloitte.

“This approach is not sustainable. As a result, colleges have pursued a number of innovations aimed at doing more with less.”

Including, it adds, “more proactive and holistic student support to address problems before a crisis occurs, expanding faculty and staff involvement, adopting new technological solutions, and building community partnerships that share resources and knowledge.”

The report also urges the provincial government to make sure that high school students are better prepared for the academic rigours of post-secondary life, “by encouraging the Ministry of Education to modify high school programs to better meet college requirements.”

Colleges Ontario first looked into the issue of [student mental health](#) five years ago, but felt an update was necessary because “over the intervening years, leaders in the college system, student leaders and faculty were saying to us that they were experiencing increasing levels of students coming to them with mental health (needs),” said Franklin.

Some students can’t find the supports they need in their local community, so they turn to the colleges, which provide services to those studying full- or part-time.

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Franklin said colleges are looking for more funds, new pilot projects, as well as partnerships with the government and community agencies to better co-ordinate services.

A three-year, \$720,000 pilot out of Humber College that began in 2012 provided “Mental Health First-Aid” training to college staff across the province, who then returned to their institutions to train others. About 3,000 in total took part, said Meg Houghton, associate dean of student wellness and equity at Humber.

“It’s helping people to understand what to ask, how to support someone [experiencing distress](#) ... and referring and getting support,” and how to distinguish moderate distress and crisis situations, she said.

The report notes that half a million students attend colleges in this province, and “over time, this student population has become increasingly populated by non-traditional [students at risk](#) of not completing post-secondary education,”

in particular students with learning and mental health disabilities, mature students, and those who are the first in their family to go beyond high school studies.

Deb Matthews, the provincial minister of advanced education and skills development, said she has heard “loud and clear at every campus” about the “need to better support mental health on campus.”

“There is no disputing that this is a huge issue on campus, right across our province,” she said in a statement to the Star.

Matthews noted that the government has worked with colleges and universities on a number of programs, and continues to boost funding.

“Colleges serve as an important ‘point of entry’ and resource for students who are seeking help with their mental health, often far from their home community or family supports,” said Matthews. “We will continue to work with colleges in the effort to improve the accessibility and quality of mental health supports for students.”