'We're not a treatment facility': The struggle for campuses to provide students mental health care

R therecord.com /news-story/7500114--we-re-not-a-treatment-facility-the-struggle-for-campuses-to-provide-students-mental-health-care/

8/13/2017

Despite the cash injection, campus services will not be able to meet everyone's mental health needs, Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Development Deb Matthews said in a statement to the Toronto Star.

"Mental illness is a spectrum," Matthews said. "For some students, on-campus resources such as counselling and/or peer support may be the best and most helpful provision of care. For students with more complex mental health needs, the institution can serve as a point of referral or information in helping that student access the appropriate community supports and get the help that they need."

The growing demand for mental health services has sparked a debate about universities and colleges' level of responsibility when it comes to caring for their students.

Some argue schools should take an almost parental role, guiding and advising their students as much as possible. Others, however, argue that universities are educational institutions and should not be called upon to help students with personal or health-related problems, particularly once students leave campus.

Alicia Raimundo began struggling with anxiety and depression in childhood in Markham, but it wasn't until she went away to the University of Waterloo that she was able to really pursue face-to-face help on a consistent basis.

Mental health staff at the university referred her off-campus, but did not help with the transition, she said.

"They gave me a number and a pamphlet and said good luck."

It can be daunting for students in need of help to venture off-campus, Raimundo said.

"Schools are their own communities, especially ones that have huge populations of students that move to that city or town for that school. When you refer somebody out ... it's basically like referring somebody to another town."

To ensure students follow through and get the help they need, mental health staff on-campus should have strong relationships with off-campus care providers, and take the step of booking students' first appointments with off-campus services, said Raimundo who graduated in 2012 and now works as a peer support provider at Stella's Place, a Toronto mental health organization for people in their teens and 20s.

Other students, however, say that the logistics of leaving campus at all can be difficult for students balancing a full course-load, a part-time job or other commitments.

"A long transit ride somewhere isn't necessarily possible... and a student who is in crisis is probably unlikely to go to great lengths to reach these services if they are a 45-minute bus ride away," said Alyssa Logan, a University of Guelph student who has looked for mental health services through the school.

To make access easier for students, off-campus mental health professionals should make regular visits to campuses to supplement school resources, said Taryn MacDonald, a recent graduate of the University of Guelph, who sought on-campus mental health services while a student.

"Just like there are dental and medical outreach programs that will come to schools, we need mental outreach programs to come to schools," MacDonald said. "Having psychologists, professional counsellors, or even social

workers come in once a week to hold walk-in sessions for students who need the help — but aren't getting it at school — would be beneficial."

University and college staff have to understand what community services are out there so they can properly inform the students they refer, said Erik Labrosse, director of student life at Laurentian University.

"(We must) be knowledgeable about the services, understand what the waiting times are and make sure that we're giving good advice and making good referrals to the community," he said.

Universities in smaller, more remote parts of the province face their own challenges and benefits in the collaboration with community mental health services.

Nipissing University, a school of about 5,000 students in North Bay, has fewer options when referring students off-campus, as compared to schools in large cities, where multiple hospitals and community resources exist, said Phillips.

The advantage of being a smaller school in a smaller town, though, is the ability to build relationships with the community resources that do exist, and really understand what services they provide, Phillips added.

"We might do a really good job of being able to collaborate and make those referrals out but ... we might not have as many community resources to refer them out to, and so sometimes you're trying to fit that circle into the square to provide the service as best we can."

The fact that more students are coming forward and asking for help is a positive development said Ann Tierney, vice-provost and dean of student affairs at Queen's University.

But the increase in demand has forced universities and colleges to rethink the way they work with outside services to address students' mental health needs.

"I see it as a partnership role," Tierney said. "Certainly we have resources on campus, but there are times when the student needs some expertise that is best available off-campus. Those community services are really key."

Toronto Star