

A Dinner Party Conversation: Student Well-being and Campus Life

an HM|HC learning event



Overview

On March 11 and 12, 2024, Selkirk College students met with their peers and Selkirk College employees to discuss topics around student well-being, including how students engaged in college resources and community to foster well-being.

Selkirk College's Healthy Campus Department collaborated with Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses to host a Regional Forum across five Selkirk College campuses. A total of 78 students and 10 employees took part, including students from the Student Ambassador program, three practicum students and our 10 faculty members, who acted as facilitators for small group discussions. They asked thematic questions designed to dig into the student experience and provide valuable feedback to direct Selkirk College's Student Engagement & Wellness in future goals and programming.

Strategic Plan

Learner success is a strategic direction in Selkirk College's strategic plan, so students were asked how the goal to "develop a consistent relationship-focused student service standard across all campuses and learning centres" was doing since implementation of the plan.

Students were also questioned on how the college could better "enhance student health and wellness programming and supports" (*Building Remarkable Futures: Strategic Plan 2019-2024*), especially after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Student Engagement Survey

In addition to the strategic plan, recent Student Engagement Surveys (SESSs) were examined for changes in what has been important to students since and even before 2019.

In the 2023 survey, 44% of students surveyed reported that balancing family/personal obligations was the biggest challenge to their academic success, followed by mental health and keeping motivated (Student Engagement Survey, 2023). This was a change from the 2016 SES, where managing finances was the biggest challenge for 54% of students surveyed (SES, 2016).

In recognition of the importance of balance to students' overall well-being, our *Mental Health & Well-being: Framework for Selkirk College* (2019) was used to guide the development of the questions presented at the forum.

Selkirk College Mental Health Framework

In 2019, Selkirk College published a guide "to support planning, implementation and evaluation of programs and services at Selkirk College so that student mental health and well-being is optimally fostered and supported" (*Mental Health & Well-being: Framework for Selkirk College*, 2019). As there have been many changes in the challenges experienced by students from then until now, student interview questions were used as an inspiration for those presented by our facilitators at the regional forum.

Responsive Evaluation as a Framework for Student Engagement



The developers of the Regional Forum sought to embrace tenets of responsive evaluation in the process of questioning students. Responsive evaluation is an assessment of the quality and value of an initiative as attested in some depth by its participants (Norman & Reist, 2020). In the case of this Regional Forum, what has students' experience of life at Selkirk meant to them and in what ways has it been beneficial (or not) to them?

While facilitators were not specifically trained in responsive evaluation, their campus roles already included skills in respectful active listening and developing safety and trust with participants. It was important that contributors felt comfortable with the facilitators, and so the majority of them were fellow students from across a variety of programs. The college's small campus size also enabled many of the Student Ambassadors and practicum students to welcome their friends and classmates to their facilitation tables, further supporting relationship and familiarity. While facilitators participated in the discussions, their main role was to listen without judgement and to gain insight into the experience of their peers.

Facilitators served students a meal and sat with them in small groups while eating to develop trust and safety prior to the semi-structured conversation. On smaller campuses, the facilitator's role was filled by employees with whom students already had a relationship.

Dinner Basket to Dinner Party: Bringing Students Together with the Power of Food



While Selkirk College provides students and employees with opportunities to host Dinner Basket Conversations on campus as a venue for discussions around mental health, substance use, sexual violence prevention and other topics, the regional forum required a transformation for

logistical reasons. Instead of preparing food together—as is normally done with Dinner Basket Conversations—students were treated to a catered meal from a local vendor, which supports the college’s sustainability goal of acquiring local services whenever possible.

At the Castlegar campus, students were served by Student Ambassadors who then later acted as facilitators and sat with them at tables to build relationships. At the conclusion of the meal, students participated in an online “game/questionnaire” that included a variety of questions designed to get them thinking about mental health and well-being and the services and supports available on campus.

After the warm-up activity, students settled in to provide their feedback to the forum’s guiding questions and engage in dialogue with each other and the facilitators. After the event, students were asked to provide some feedback on their experience via a questionnaire.

Key Insights on Student Mental Health and Well-Being



Facilitators were provided three guiding questions and prompts to further elaborate or provide context. The following is an outline of the questions asked and a summary of the responses received across the five participating campuses.

Question 1: Do you count on Selkirk College to support your overall well-being?

Most students do not fully rely on Selkirk College for their well-being. Many of them said Selkirk College plays a part but is not responsible for their overall well-being.

Students were asked which workshops/programs they would want to see more of at Selkirk College and responses included:

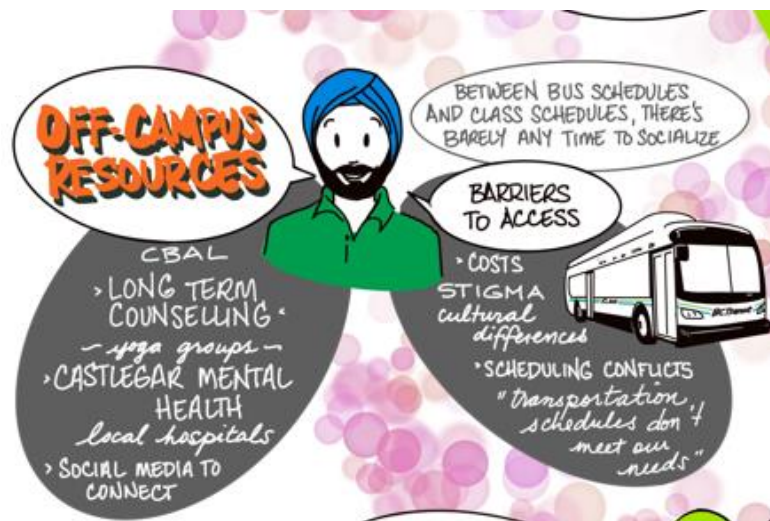


- Finances/budgeting
- Time management
- Art classes
- Managing stress and mental health
- General life skills (e.g., living on your own, doing taxes, etc.)
- Gym services (e.g., yoga classes, how to use gym/weight room)

Students seemed to be self-aware and understand the parts of their life that are going well and the parts that need some support. Students identified financial and time management, physical well-being and their social life as some of the areas where they struggle the most. Many students expressed that while they are doing well academically, there are barriers to their well-being, including schedules (e.g., bus, classes, work), family obligations, culture and managing finances.

Very few students knew of resources outside of Selkirk College that could help their well-being. Those they did mention had barriers to access, such as transportation, hard-to-get appointments, costs and scheduling conflicts.

Question 2: What is the college doing already to support your mental health and a vibrant campus?



There seems to be a big gap in getting information to students about services and programs provided on campus. Students were asked which programs/workshops they would like to see Selkirk College offer that would impact their mental well-being. Many of the ideas they noted are offered at Selkirk College, but they did not know about them.

One of the most requested services was more one-to-one counselling with Selkirk College counsellors. Moreover, suggested areas for improvement included increased availability of counsellors, face to face rather than online and increased accessibility to select preferred counsellors. Additionally, many international students reported they felt more comfortable talking to their peers about problems affecting their health and well-being than counsellors due to cultural norms and stigma around voicing mental health issues and seeking support.

Overall, students were happy or somewhat happy with the way that Selkirk College supports their well-being. Students love social events and appreciate the ones that Selkirk College does, including the Dinner Party Conversation. Students at smaller campuses would love to see more opportunities on their campuses.

Question 3: What more could we do to better engage our students in campus life?

Communication was one of the biggest challenges for students accessing programs and events. Most students found out about events through class presentations by the organizers or from their peers (68%). After that, their teachers either announced it in class or sent them emails about it (28%). Very few of them saw it on posters, social media or Selkirk College's events page (4%). Students said the biggest draw for them to attend the event was free food. However, within the post-event survey, 88% said they would attend more events like this, citing that they enjoyed learning more about mental health and enjoyed social events such as this one.



Top suggestions for engaging them in campus events were:

- Provide incentives (e.g., food, prizes, school credit)
- Make it social and fun!
- Use instructors to promote events in class
- Create an email newsletter sent to students with all the events/services on campus
- Work around conflicting schedules (e.g., bus, class, work) and provide childcare
- Bring in outside speakers

Limitations

Due to time constraints, not all the questions were presented at the Castlegar campus event, which had the largest student turnout. Bus schedules needed to be respected, so some questions were cut. At the March 12 event on the other campuses in Nelson, Trail and Grand Forks, all questions were completed but there were fewer participants, resulting in only 18 students completing the entire activity. Of these 18 students, 78% said they had struggled with their mental health and well-being as a student at Selkirk College.

 Have you ever struggled with your mental health and well-being as a student?
Ranking Poll 18 votes 18 participants



Out of all the services/events listed in another question, counselling supports were the most accessed at 50% of participants.

 Which of these events have you attended or services have you used on campus?
Multiple Choice Poll 18 votes 18 participants



Survey Monkey data was also limited to 25 participants (as the account was a free trial), although 44 completed the survey on March 11. Students gave verbal feedback to facilitators at the March 12 events. Students reported that learning about the variety of resources available to them was very helpful. They also suggested that mental health should be incorporated into all classes as a helpful way of making students aware of strategies and programs they could participate in.

Healthy Campus recognizes that the reflections provided are from a limited number of Selkirk College students, with the most representation from the Castlegar campus. Services and events are more limited on other campuses due to employee availability, different program schedules and smaller student numbers. Despite the relatively small number of participants, the sample size was ideal to abide by the principles of responsive evaluation in that it enabled “... stakeholders [to] actively participate in the evaluation, and the evaluator probes to understand not just their opinions but also their experiences (perceptions, feelings, learnings)” (Norman & Reist, 2020, pp. 1-2). The ability to engage students in reflective, rich, relational dialogue outweighed the numerical shortcoming.

Reflections and Learnings

While Healthy Campus recognized that some of the feedback from students would not be within the scope of the Student Engagement & Wellness Department to effect change, space was made for these conversations and for students to feel heard. Selkirk College actively advocates on behalf of students at the municipal and provincial government levels for changes in public transportation, affordable housing and food, and a variety of other issues brought to the Dinner Party Conversations.

However, many of the ideas brought forward from students are actionable, most notably, adjusting how the plethora of services and events offered to students are communicated. Ways to address cultural stigmas around mental health and to change the way students access



supports are challenges that can easily fit into department goals and plans. Trained peer-to-peer support can help with more minor mental health needs and reduce stigma around seeking help. Connections to community supports and collaboration between local programs and Selkirk College will also help alleviate some of the pressure on overwhelmed college resources. Increasing workshops offered early in the school year—such as stress reduction, time management, budgeting and meal planning—could potentially prevent students from reaching crises levels later in their studies.

Recognizing that the value of workshops and offerings will differ from student to student due to the vast intersectionality of experience can also drive decisions made at the departmental level. Conducting events that involve food incentives at the end of the month can help support students with financial constraints at those times. Combining social opportunities with important learning (i.e., mental health, substance use, sexual violence prevention, etc.) can further maximize student time and participation. Coordinating bus and major program schedules with planned events or initiatives can make services more accessible, in addition to providing childcare for students who are parents.

Selkirk College thanks Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses for their support in putting on this valuable and enriching event for students. We look forward to delving into the responses and enacting change wherever possible to better serve students and communities.

Acknowledgements

* Selkirk College acknowledges the traditional territories of the Sinixt (Lakes), the Syilx (Okanagan), the Ktunaxa and the Secwepemc (Shuswap) Peoples.

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Reference

Norman, T. & Reist, D. (2020). [A brief introduction to responsive evaluation](#). Victoria, BC: Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, University of Victoria.