

Framing Complex Collaboration

Conceptual Tool



Part of the Complex Collaboration Toolkit.

Introduction

About the Tools and Toolkits

These tools and toolkits are hosted by **Healthy Campus Alberta**, a provincial community of practice committed to cultivating caring campus communities in Alberta. Originally developed by **Alberta Campus Mental Health Innovation** (an initiative carried out by the **Alberta Students Executive Council**), the tools and toolkits are learning-focused, living documents that serve to support our community of practice.

About the Complex Collaboration Toolkit

Complex collaborations are essential to promote mentally healthy campuses across Alberta. Originally developed to support Regional Hubs, collaborative groups that originated amidst the launch of the Alberta Post-Secondary Mental Health and Addictions Framework, this toolkit is adaptable to any collaboration: interdepartmental, regional, provincial, national, or international. The toolkit frames complex collaboration as a point of connection among individuals, teams or organizations with complementary skills and resources willing to collaborate on a common objective. However, creating a shared approach for mutual gain is not an easy task. The complex collaboration model has been developed to provide some insights and approaches that weave together a variety of processes and theories to enhance the effectiveness of these complex collaborations.

About Framing Complex Collaboration

The **Framing Complex Collaboration** tool outlines definitions for collaboration and complexity, and introduces frameworks to assess collaboration and complexity.

Who could use this tool?

- Coordinators of collaborations among post-secondary institutions;
- Program planners in post-secondary student services or administration;
- Mental health professionals who work with post-secondary students.

What purposes could this tool serve?

- A starting point for assessment of collaborations among organizations, whether occurring presently or proposed for the future;
- Providing a conceptual basis for understanding complex collaboration

Complexity

What is Complexity?

To understand complex collaboration, we must first understand “complexity”. Complex problems, also sometimes called wicked problems, are increasingly common. In 2002, Glouberman and Zimmerman wrote a report on Complicated and Complex Systems in the context of the Canadian healthcare system. Simple problems are clearly defined and easily solvable; complicated problems have more moving parts but are solvable with expertise; complex problems involve navigating a high degree of ambiguity to achieve success.

Simple, Complicated, and Complex Problems

| | Simple | Complicated | Complex |
|---|-------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Example | Following a recipe | Launching a space rocket | Raising a child |
| Number of variables | Almost none | Some | Many |
| Usability of directions/ formulae | Essential | Important | Limited |
| Certainty of results if directions/ formulae are followed | Almost guaranteed | High | Low; uncertainty remains |
| Expertise needed for success | Expertise not necessary | High level of expertise needed | Expertise helps, but is neither necessary nor sufficient |
| Solutions require... | Simple models | Complicated models | Complex models |



Read Glouberman and Zimmerman's [report about complex collaboration](#) in the Canadian context.

Post-secondary student mental health can be considered a complex problem. Where does this complexity come from? Complexity can arise from differences across many domains, and each collaboration may find other complexity factors at play. Being realistic about what is possible, given degrees of complexity, requires being clear on the opportunities and the challenges of a potential collaboration. The *Assessing Complexity* worksheet can be useful to prompt conversation on the differences between organizations entering in to a potential collaboration.

Taking an intersectional approach, complexity can also arise from the differing positionalities of student populations and the people involved in the collaboration. The *Student Diversity Profiles* is another tool to assess complexity when starting a collaboration.



Access the Student Diversity Profiles Tool in the [Holistic Mental Health Approaches Toolkit](#)

Assessing Complexity Worksheet

Use this worksheet to brainstorm differences among organizations entering in to a collaboration. Write the differences in the space provided. Based on the differences, assess how complex the collaboration might be. More differences, and more significant difference, will usually mean more complexity. Remember that complexity can always be navigated!

*Processes,
Policies,
Procedures*

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*Focus of
Services*

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*Size and
Function*

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*Timelines and
Fiscal Years*

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*Community
Contexts*

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*Student
Population*

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History

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Terminology

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Collaboration

What is Collaboration?

There are many different interpretations and understandings of the term “collaboration”. According to the Alberta Post-Secondary Mental Health and Addictions Framework:

Collaboration: *The capacity to create healthy and resilient campuses is enhanced when people work together. This includes collaboration within individual campus environments but also collaboration across the province. Alberta institutions strive to harness a collective voice and commit to ongoing involvement across sectors, organizations and institutions.* (pp. 12-13).

Relationship-building and collaboration is also listed as a strategy and approach in the National Standard of Canada for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students (clauses 5.4.6.5 and 6.1.3.2).

Degrees of Collaboration

There are many different degrees of collaboration, and there are different ways of making decisions. The different degrees of collaboration permit different outcomes, in terms of the combined impact of the multiple collaborators.

The *Inter-organization Collaboration Continuum* illustrates the various degrees of collaboration – from unintentional sabotage through to integration. Each degree of collaboration involves different implications for the collaborating organizations – the different degrees of collaboration represent increasing complexity, increased amounts of time and energy, and increased risks and rewards. Engaging in collaboration itself can build individual capacity. With reflective practice and experimenting with different processes, you can build skills, knowledge and awareness of self and others in your collaboration.



Access the [Alberta Post-Secondary Mental Health and Addictions Framework](#)



Access the [National Standard of Canada for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students](#)

Inter-organization Collaboration Continuum

| Unintentional Sabotage | Co-exist | Communicate | Cooperate | Coordinate | Co-Design | Co-Create | Co-Implement | Integrate |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| No awareness of others' actions and impact of individual strategies on each others'. May be assumed to be intentional, but is actually a reality of disconnected organizations in disconnected systems | Aware of others but no systematic connection May be active or passive competition | Information sharing - ad hoc or formal | Known strategy. Don't change way of operating. Transactional - support another agency ad hoc or formally if no competition | Known strategy, Don't change ways of operating. individual agencies coordinate actions to align with a client's journey - may share some back office functions | Known strategy-co-design program based on combining existing services. Requires neutral secretariat. Don't fundamentally change way of operating though functions or co- implement through horizontal management or with ongoing Secretariat group | Novel strategy- collaborate to develop initial program strategy that creates synergy through a 'third way' - May co- implement or allocate functions for individual organizations to operationalize and evaluate. May require organizational change. | Novel strategy created elsewhere - share out functions and collaborative operationalize and evaluate. Requires organizational change and ongoing Secretariat group | Create new organization - may create co-governance structure. May be a spin-off or may dissolve existing organizations. |

Win-Lose, either/or mindset dominates
(Cannot imagine a Whole that does not dominate organizations or privilege other organizations)

Survival by Turf protection dominates

Working Trust increasing

Win-win, both/and mindset dominates
(Can imagine co-creating and managing a Whole to benefit all, each organization is self-directed and autonomous)

— Increasing Complexity, need for Organizations to evolve their management processes and structures
— Increasing time, required capacities and neutrality of Secretariat
— Increasingly seamless experience for clients, patients, and citizens

Reflective Practice-Based Experience through stages of increasing complexity helps build the working trust and increased collaborative capacity (personal and organizational) required to be successful

Resources



View the rest of the [Complex Collaboration Toolkit](#)

Questions for Consideration

- Are you already collaborating with other organizations? What do those collaborations look like?
- What are the benefits and challenges of inter-organizational collaborations?
- Is your organization equipped to navigate complex collaborations? What has worked and what hasn't?
- Where along the Inter-organization Collaboration Continuum do current collaborations fall? What degree of collaboration would be ideal?