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# A Conversation with Sydney Bennell



Health Promotion Specialist at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Sydney Bennell is a Registered Nurse, using her experiences in the healthcare field to promote holistic student wellbeing on campus.

She began her career as a nurse in Edmonton at Alberta Hospital. Her work in mental healthcare there shaped her approach to mental wellness advocacy on campus: “You see the need for earlier interventions, and being provided opportunities to connect with resources. There’s a lot that we can be doing.”

While she’s been at MacEwan for four years, “my pathway wasn’t necessarily traditional,” she explains. Sydney has always had a passion for health education and wellness promotion, since she completed her nutrition degree. While pursuing an after-degree program in nursing, she found the door opened towards work in mental health, where she discovered a passion for mental health and holistic wellness.

“I’ve always had a passion for mental health and health promotion. I find university settings a really great place to connect with people. **They’re learning academics, but also growing, as humans,**” she says.

At MacEwan, she sees herself as having a unique opportunity to connect with students in a period of transition between youth and adulthood, where skills for long-term mental health and wellness can be taught.

Her role has evolved since it was created in 2016, with initiatives including an online wellness course called MyHealth, the volunteer Peer Health Education Team, and working with the campus' mental health awareness strategy, Changing Minds. She explains, "during the academic year, my focus is primarily with students, working with our various teams."

**I've seen a shift towards putting students first.**

"We want to find unique solutions that work here at MacEwan." She sees a spectrum of needs across campus for students, staff, and faculty, that she wants to support more holistically. In her time at MacEwan, she's seen institutional shifts towards providing more empowering mental health and wellness supports. "I've seen a shift towards putting students first," she says, "which has been huge."

Since MacEwan is largely a commuter campus, Sydney has sought ways to motivate students to stay on campus after courses finished. Creating a community of engaged students eager to participate in initiatives was a challenge, but she explains that “it’s an exciting opportunity to learn from students, hear what they want, and work with them.”

Connecting with people in this way is much of what Sydney loves about her role. “I find when we traditionally look at health, it’s been very black and white, where you meet me where I’m at because I’m the clinician. I want to meet people where they’re at.” She envisions healthcare workers empowering people to make decisions about their own wellness, and wants to advocate for a culture change surrounding mental health on campus.

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“It seems like there’s a lot more collaboration, and it’s been one of my passions to connect with people. We don’t have to reinvent the wheel. We can collectively see that change.”

In her time working with post-secondary campuses, she's seen shifts towards community and collaboration across the province. She participates in a small group of wellness staff that meets monthly to discuss their campuses, initiatives, and share learnings. Her community on campus is also centered around support and collaboration, and the people involved in the community are her favourite part about her campus.

"I love our students. I love the team that I get to work with every day. I've never been in a work environment where there's been such a support system."

She envisions mental wellness as deeply tied to community connection. Believing wellness should be integrated into all aspects of campus life, she sees these changes as the way forward for mental wellness on campus.

"Are we supporting our communities?" she asks, guided by a vision of mental health and wellness supports that prioritizes student voices and needs. **"Mental health is practicing coping strategies, seeking support when you need, practicing prevention. But it's also providing services that are accessible and equitable.** Are we meeting students' needs? Are we receiving student feedback?"

*This has been part of the Healthy Campus Alberta Project, "Your Community of Practice." To read more conversations with members of the community of practice, visit [healthycampusalberta.ca/about-us/our-community](https://healthycampusalberta.ca/about-us/our-community).*

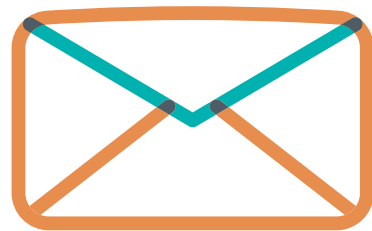
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