

COMMUNITEA



THEMES



THE PROMISING PRACTICE

Based on the premise that one conversation can make a difference in the lives of students, Communithea is a peer support program that facilitates building connections between students and Campus Wellness Advocates. It is a designated two hour drop-in tea time that occurs once a week on campus, where students can connect, engage in pre-planned activities, grab a free cup of coffee or tea, and access mental health resources. Held in the Student Association Lounge and at the Donald School of Business (DSB), students attend Communithea on a drop-in basis and can choose the extent to which they engage with others and the activities. Although the program is focused on building connections

ONE CONVERSATION

CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

Communithea provides opportunities for these conversations to happen.

Drop in, chat & drink tea.

Main Campus
Every 2nd and 4th Tuesday
11 am - 1 pm
Room 1205

*First Communithea date of each semester takes place in the Forum, September 10, 2019 & January 14, 2020

For specific dates, visit:
rdc.ab.ca/campus-connections



Brought to RDC by the Alberta Health Services Community Helpers Program.

In partnership with Campus Connections and the Students' Association



Figure 10. Poster promotion for Communithea.

and thereby facilitating positive mental health, there are no constraints around how students spend the two hours. Sensory items and activities such as colouring are provided, but students are welcome to finish homework or simply socialize with their peers. Communita is adapted from the University of Alberta's Unitea and was developed by Red Deer College's Mental Health Promotion & Education Coordinator.

RATIONALE

Prior to the development of Communita, staff noticed an increase in students reporting they were feeling lonely or isolated on campus. Despite already having mental health programming on campus, there was an urgent need for an offering that would address loneliness. The college's Mental Health Promotion & Educator Coordinator was responsible for spearheading this project, and through research, discovered the benefits of utilizing a peer support model to connect peers in meaningful ways. A shared social environment can contribute to a sense of belonging, purpose, and self-efficacy, which contributes to positive mental health. Likewise, peer support programs can show students the power of knowing they are not alone in their academic journey. Looking to other campuses for inspiration, Red Deer College connected with the University of Alberta, which facilitates a program called Unitea. Information sharing and the previously conducted research laid the groundwork for Communita. A particularly important aspect of Communita is that it was created in consideration of the institution's strategic plan. Specifically, the program is

aligned with two goals related to building community.

PURPOSE

Communita is a peer-support group that is based on the premise that one conversation can make a difference. It is meant to be a time when students can connect with one another, and Campus Wellness Advocates, thereby contributing to positive mental health and decreased feelings of loneliness on campus.

GOALS

- 1 Provide access for Red Deer College students with mental health needs to find a path to help them meet their social, health, and educational goals.
- 2 Increase engagement of Red Deer College students with mental health services through awareness and support.
- 3 Strive to create a sense of community for Red Deer College students.
- 4 Connect Red Deer College students to resources and supports on campus.
- 5 Help Red Deer College students find different ways to get involved on campus.

IMPLEMENTATION

In response to the noted increase in students feeling lonely on campus, the Mental Health Promotion & Education Coordinator took the initiative to find a way to fill this identified need. A scan of the literature revealed that a peer support program would be the most successful type of programming to offer. In addition to reviewing the theory and successes of peer education programs, research was done to understand best practices for implementing peer programs. McGill University's "Peer Program Toolkit" was sourced to gain a preliminary understanding of how to start, co-ordinate, and evaluate peer programs.¹ Hoping to learn from the successes of other campuses, the coordinator learned about Unitea at the University of Alberta. The Mental Health Promotion & Education Coordinator reached out to a contact at the University of Alberta, who shared information regarding the implementation of Unitea at their institution and offered insight into the development of Communithea at RDC. For example, Unitea gifted first-time participants with a travel mug, and Communithea adopted this idea. Equipped with the knowledge of what would work, it was then important to create a program that catered to the specific needs of the Red Deer College community.

From the beginning, it was important to garner insight and build relationships with representatives from other areas of the college, who would become stakeholders in Communithea. This included representation from Residence, the Student Life department, the Students' Association, Alberta Health

Services, and the Addiction and Mental Health Promotion Facilitator. Together, this team discussed the logistics of Communithea, including timing and location. Representation from Alberta Health Services was included because Communithea is funded by Alberta Health Services through the Community Helpers Program. The eventual date and time was selected based on data obtained from the Office of the Registrar, to learn when most students were not in classes during the day, and therefore, were more likely to be on campus. Each department contributed considerably to the creation of Communithea – staffing the sessions, helping with promotion, and splitting the costs of required materials. More recently, the Students' Association donated hot water dispensers and cold milk for each session. In return, the Mental Health Promotion & Education Coordinator is mindful of other service schedules when scheduling Communithea, so as not to compete for students' attention. The Marketing and Communication department was also sought



Figure 11. Tea and other supplies laid out in anticipation of a Communithea session.

out to develop promotional materials and a specific brand. Currently, Communita is promoted through a Students' Association agenda, screens around campus, and through posters and postcards. Additionally, Communita was shared with staff and faculty through an institutional newsletter. Fostering relationships with faculty on campus has resulted in the creation of a PowerPoint presentation that interested faculty can share with their classes. Social media (Facebook and Instagram) is also heavily used as a marketing tool through partnerships with Counselling Services and the Students' Association. The diversity in the marketing approaches was devised intentionally to reach staff, faculty, and students through different methods.

Communita officially launched in September 2017 and is held over the lunch hour every Tuesday. In preparation for the first day, the team purchased a kettle, tea, cups, a table cloth, and sensory items. As is the case with each subsequent session, there was an abundance of promotion before the session, as well as promotional signs leading students to the Communita room. Feedback to the team regarding the openness of the space later resulted in moving Communita to the new Students' Association Lounge upon its opening and extending the drop-in time to two hours. Communita has since branched out into doing promotion alongside other mental health programming. For example, a table to hand out promotional materials and free coffee and tea was recently set up in collaboration with an Eating Disorder Awareness Week event.

EVALUATION

The success of Communita is primarily evaluated through attendance numbers and the informal collection of anecdotal feedback. However, Communita is supported by literature that relays the benefit of using peer support programs to engage students in meaningful ways. Peer educators tend to be very valuable for an institution because they can relate to the experiences of their peers.² Moreover, peer education programs often contribute to perpetuating a sense of well-being, belonging, purpose, and self-efficacy for both peer educators and their peers.³ Self-determination theory suggests that meeting one's needs to build competence, relatedness, and autonomy can also predict psychological well-being.⁴ Communita is facilitated on the main campus approximately twelve times per semester, with an average attendance of 10 students per session. Most of the anecdotal feedback comes from trained students that run the room, as well as students themselves who choose to share feedback during the Communita hour. Students appear to be very appreciative of the quiet space away from the chaos of academics, and find the time spent at Communita to be "rejuvenating."

SUCCESSSES

Communita has overall been a very successful endeavor for Red Deer College. This success is largely attributable to the co-ordination and collaboration of other stakeholders, including various departments, the Students' Association, and the Community Helpers Program at Red Deer College. Likewise, the

partnership between the University of Alberta and Red Deer College demonstrates the benefit of knowledge-sharing practices and inter-institutional collaboration.

NOTED CHALLENGES

The largest challenge Red Deer College has faced is maintenance of consistent student attendance. Increasing the drop-in hours to more than once a week would be ideal, but staff capacity is limited. To circumvent this, Red Deer College created a student peer support volunteer opportunity within counselling services. These individuals have mental health and Community Helpers training, and are now able to run Communita sessions. Hosting Communita at the Donald School of Business has also resulted in challenges with attendance.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

In consideration of their satellite campuses, Communita facilitators hope to transition the program to an online platform using Blackboard Ultra, in addition to continuing to facilitate the in-person sessions. They envision this would be offered on a recurring basis in the evenings and led by a staff facilitator. There would be an anonymous sign-in process, with the understanding that students experiencing distress or in immediate need of medical assistance, would have their information shared with the facilitator. The team responsible for Communita on campus is currently in the process of holding focus groups about this idea. Similarly, they would like to redesign Communita offered on the DSB campus, or increase accessibility for students to attend Communita on the main campus.

However, being able to connect with students on their own campuses is the main priority at this moment in time. On the main campus, Communita looks forward to facilitating partnerships with the Indigenous Student Services department. The two departments are currently discussing potentially hosting a secondary Communita in a newly acquired space in the Indigenous Students' Centre. ●

References

- 1, 3 Malz, J., Dougan, M., & Lin, G. (2017). *Peer program toolkit: Starting, coordinating and evaluating peer programs at McGill University*. Peer Programs Network, 3-17. https://www.mcgill.ca/peerprograms/files/peerprograms/toolkit_3.pdf
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- 4 Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2008). Self-determination theory: A macrotheory of human motivation, development & health. *Canadian Psychology*, 49(3), 182-185. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012801>

OUTREACH WELLNESS LEADERS PROGRAM

 Southern Alberta Institute of Technology

THEMES



THE PROMISING PRACTICE

The Outreach Wellness Leaders (OWLs) are a group of three to eight student volunteers that are highly involved in mental health promotion initiatives on campus. The program leverages the benefit of engaging the student voice in mental health and is supported by research that demonstrates the importance of peer support programs. Oftentimes these initiatives are facilitated in collaboration with staff, faculty, and other departments. This involves facilitating events and creating mental health resources for dissemination across campus. Examples of these events include



Figure 12. The OWLs logo.

the screening and discussion of the *Happy* movie, the Disconnect to Reconnect campaign, representing SAIT Student Development and Counselling (SDC) at mental health promotion booths, and SDC wellness checks.

OWLs are selected through an online recruitment process and are expected to commit up to five hours per week. Before the

start of the school year, the OWLs are expected to complete training in various dimensions of wellness, including suicide prevention and how to respond to disclosure of sexual violence. The major distinction between OWLs and the Peer Support Workers on campus is that the OWLs are peer educators, specializing in mental health and wellness promotion.

RATIONALE

Prior to the creation of OWLs, SDC was involved in the creation of mental health promotion initiatives and found there was limited capacity to deliver content as intended. The idea that led to the development of the OWLs program was to have a student group dedicated to delivering this content, while leveraging the benefits of student engagement through peers. Further research on peer support as a best practice supported SAIT's interest in such a peer model.

PURPOSE

The OWLs program leverages the noted success of peer education to share information regarding mental health resources for students, staff, and faculty, thereby continuing conversations regarding mental health from a peer education perspective.



Figure 13. The OWLs team wearing their sweaters with the distinctive OWLs logo.

GOALS

- 1 To mobilize students and leverage peer interaction to effectively share mental health promotion initiatives on campus.
- 2 To create a program that promotes the multiple facets of health in a way that students find relatable and can understand.
- 3 To facilitate leadership opportunities by involving students in the development and creation of programming on campus.

IMPLEMENTATION

Prior to launching OWLs in September 2018, counsellors within SDC were trying to navigate delivering important mental health resources with limited capacity. Research was conducted into leveraging peer support programs before SAIT connected with the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) regarding their OWLs program. NAIT was able to share information regarding program development, implementation, and evaluation strategies. Once funding was obtained, SDC began devising an implementation plan.

Recruitment for OWLs was conducted through the SAIT My Career Hub, which is

an online platform where jobs and volunteer opportunities are consistently posted. Additionally, there were emails sent to other SAIT departments who work closely with students once the posting on the SAIT My Career Hub was live. At the time, there was a preference for students to meet specific criteria, including academic criteria, having successfully completed at least one semester at SAIT or having previous post-secondary experience, and an interest in the topics of mental health and well-being. As a part of the application process, students were asked to submit a resumé. Interviews with candidates were held with staff from SDC before the final team was selected. In August 2018, the OWLs were trained in a day and a half on various dimensions of wellness, SAIT's values, self-care, and other health promotion topics. SAIT Residence Advisors and SAIT Students' Association Peer Support Workers joined the OWLs for the general wellness training components.

The OWLs and OWL Facilitator have weekly group training and supervision meetings to discuss upcoming initiatives and brainstorm new resources or events based on interest. On occasion these meetings are used as dedicated time for the OWLs to pilot new online resources, as per the request of counsellors. These meetings are also a time of reflection for the OWLs to give feedback about a particular offering and discuss future improvements.

Post launch, the OWLs were permitted to create their own logo to showcase on campus. This was a key step in ensuring that events were branded as OWLs initiatives

and to gain more recognition on campus. This logo was printed on all OWLs resources and is the logo printed on the uniforms that OWLs are given and asked to wear during outreach. Simultaneously, the communications department has since published a number of articles about the OWLs on front-facing websites.

EVALUATION

Most of the evaluation components of the OWLs program focus on the structure of the program. Post-training in August, OWLs are asked to complete a survey regarding their level of interest in the training facilitators' topics and whether the content has increased their confidence in speaking about that particular subject. At the end of the academic year the OWLs are asked to complete another survey which asks them to reflect on the past year and share examples of their growth as a result of the program and ideas on how it can be improved in subsequent years. In regards to content delivered by OWLs, there is an opportunity to develop the initiatives during the weekly meetings and then debrief after an event has taken place. In preparation for the mental health promotion initiatives, counsellors are invited to the weekly OWLs meetings to train the OWLs on the rationale, key messaging, and tools they will be promoting, to ensure they are equipped to deliver the content. OWLs record metrics from each event, such as event attendance.

SUCCESSSES

The OWLs Facilitator and SDC team are most proud of creating an opportunity to

meaningfully engage with students. The creation of the OWLs program has increased the innovation of health promotion and mental health outreach on campus. For example, the OWLs have been successful at engaging students in conversations by approaching them at tables on campus. This is better received than when implemented by a staff member. Counsellors will often be present or will collaborate with the OWLs at specific events, which has increased their ability to meaningfully engage with students.

NOTED CHALLENGES

One of the challenges the OWLs program faced was clarifying the differences between the roles of the OWLs versus other student leader groups on campus in the broader SAIT community. Logistically, the sustainability of the program is a recurring challenge because of high turnover of graduating students and condensed semesters at SAIT. Most students complete their academic programs in two years, and their capstone projects and practicum requirements can impact commitment to OWLs partway through their role. This poses a particular challenge when trying to recruit more senior students who have experience with the campus.

Another challenge to the sustainability of such a program is that the OWLs are currently paid hourly for their time. Moving forward, SAIT may need to change this role into a volunteer role where students would be able to obtain a co-curricular record for their contribution.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

SAIT's vision for the OWLs is to become integral members in all the mental health education and outreach programming in which SAIT departments engage. This includes collaborating with the various departments to offer a holistic, balanced approach to positive mental health and well-being to all SAIT students. In the future, the creator of the program hopes that the OWLs can take more of a leadership role in the development and implementation of events. Currently, OWLs primarily support the health promotion endeavours identified by staff, however, there are immense benefits in encouraging the OWLs to spearhead their own initiatives based on their interests and what they are hearing from students. ●

PEER HEALTH EDUCATION TEAM

 MacEwan University



Figure 14. A PHET volunteer interacting with students at a mental health promotion display.

THEMES



THE PROMISING PRACTICE

The MacEwan University's Peer Health Education Team (**PHET**) is a team of seven student volunteer Peer Health Educators on campus that work to create and deliver mental health-focused health promotion offerings. Planning for the PHET began in 2017/2018, and content is created exclusively by students, using credible resources that have been vetted by the health and wellness staff at MacEwan

University. This is done to ensure students are creating relevant and informative offerings that appeal to the student perspective. The program began as a paid student opportunity in the 2018/2019 school year but transitioned to a volunteer-based program for the 2019/2020 academic year.

Throughout the year, the PHET engages MacEwan University's student population through facilitating educational table displays and other wellness activities in multiple accessible locations on campus. Each PHET member is expected to commit to volunteering five hours per week, and team meetings are held with the program co-ordinator as a means of support and to confirm that the program is running as intended. The PHET focuses on creating and sharing content built on existing campus resources that also meets students where they are at, using a non-judgemental and inclusive approach.

RATIONALE

The PHET was created at MacEwan University after a review of the needs of their student population, informed by their 2016 National College Health Assessment (NCHA) data. There was recognition that MacEwan University needed to be creating health and wellness content for students that was accessible and relevant to the student experience. As part of a needs assessment to identify best practices for health promotion strategies, an environmental scan and literature scan were conducted. Research revealed the existence of multiple peer health education teams across North America, as well

as the benefit of using students to create and deliver health and wellness content to the rest of the student population.

PURPOSE

The PHET program is created for students by students in order to maximize the benefits of peer health models when sharing health information and resources with students.

GOALS

- 1 To assemble a group of peer health educators to facilitate discussions and experiences regarding wellness topics.
- 2 To leverage the benefit of implementing a peer health model and having peers speak to peers.
- 3 To create a system that ensures MacEwan University wellness offerings are relevant to the target student population.
- 4 To provide sustainable health promotion programming.

IMPLEMENTATION

Based on the success of the creation of MacEwan University's myHealth, the university realized that the health and wellness

content being created could be better shared with students in a way that was more relevant and accessible. In 2016 an environmental scan was conducted of other institutions in North America, specific to peer health education teams. The University of Toronto, University of Manitoba, and University of British Columbia were consulted in relation to how their peer health education teams were developed. All those contacted graciously shared considerations and guidance for setting up a similar program at MacEwan University. This involved the sharing of a training program, program handbooks, and webinars for how to create a peer health team. After additional research on the sustainability of a PHET, MacEwan University was excited about the prospect of creating their team.

Early on, there was an intent to involve students in the creation of the PHET. Over the summer of 2018, two students were hired under the title of Summer Peer Health Educators. They spent the summer creating a structure for the program, developing PHET training, and creating health and wellness content for the academic year. Part of their role involved reviewing NCHA results to ensure that content being created was relevant to students. There was increased emphasis on bringing a mental health perspective to all content. Additionally, rather than create brochures and lectures, the hired students were encouraged to create handouts and structured activities using credible information. It was decided that content delivery would be aligned in relation to the student life cycle. At the time, the program co-ordinator was also receiving feedback from Wellness and Psychological Services regarding what they saw students struggling with most on campus. This informed the direction and creation of new offerings and strategies for the PHET.

In summer 2018, recruitment began for the PHET. Recruitment was done primarily online, through social media, and posting the position on MacEwan University's career/job posting page. A requirement for the position was that students had to be in at least the second year of their program. After holding group interviews, five students were hired, each expected to commit 10 hours per week.

When the 2019 NCHA was released, third year nursing students completing their community rotation course requirement over the summer



Figure 15. The Peer Health Education Team logo.

of 2019 created new resources, ensuring that information being disseminated the following year by the PHET continued to be relevant to the student population. In order to ensure that the program remains sustainable, the PHET transitioned to a volunteer program for the 2019/2020 academic year. Recruitment efforts were increased by posting the position on volunteer boards and through the use of posters and promotions on campus. All PHET communication is reviewed to ensure it meets accessibility and institutional design guidelines.

EVALUATION

There are multiple ways in which the PHET is evaluated. Each PHET member is expected to complete training upon commencement of the role. Post training, the PHET members have opportunities to provide feedback on their confidence with key skills and on what topics they hope to gain more training. At this time, PHET members are asked to set short, medium, and long-term goals for themselves in the program.

For PHET programming, students, staff, and faculty are asked to provide feedback to the PHET at different events and activities. A feedback form is used to capture information on demographics of participants and their level of interest in the event and mental health topics. At the end of each event, the PHET members collaboratively complete an event debrief form. Usually an average of 15 feedback forms are completed per session, but larger events in high-traffic areas will collect more feedback than smaller-scale events. Otherwise, attendance is tracked at each event,

as well as how much “swag” is handed out and the number of invitations the PHET receives to special events on campus. These forms are entered into a spreadsheet that is managed by the PHET co-ordinator. Feedback is often very positive, and students enjoy many of the larger activities that PHET facilitates, such as setting up colouring spaces on campus. Additionally, students suggest more frequent offerings on topics such as stress and time management.

SUCCESSSES

A very obvious success for the PHET has been relationship building between students in recognition that there is power in seeing that others share similar experiences. There has also been a great effort to connect the MacEwan University community to external stakeholders. The Eating Disorder Support Network of Alberta, the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, the United Way, the Canadian Mental Health Association, Camp Firefly, the Family Centre, and local psychological agencies have all since collaborated with the PHET on the creation and implementation of initiatives.

NOTED CHALLENGES

Recruitment for the PHET was initially a challenge but was explained by the infancy of the program and the confusion of how to differentiate between PHET and another peer education team on campus at the time. Additionally, it was important to develop an appropriate communication strategy to engage students. There was a considerable amount of time spent creating a communication strategy that would meet students where they

are at, while navigating and complying with institutional procedures.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Future development of the PHET at MacEwan University is envisioned as the implementation of different 'streams' to divide students based on their interests. There is interest in recruiting more students to increase programming and offerings, such as facilitating activities in classes. For this upcoming year, the PHET co-ordinator hopes to implement an exit interview for all PHET volunteers to promote reflection of growth within their roles, as well as how they are using and applying skills learned from the PHET into their everyday lives. There is also interest in streamlining training with other leadership opportunities on campus to foster building connections between programs and ultimately offer more comprehensive training. ●