

# ACCESS OPEN MINDS

 University of Alberta



Figure 18. Inside of the ACCESS Open Minds drop-in space.

## THEMES



## THE PROMISING PRACTICE

ACCESS Open Minds is a national research project originating from the Douglas College at McGill University as a means to fundamentally change how youth mental health services are provided. The project ultimately seeks to provide high-quality mental health support in a timely manner to meet the range of mental health needs an individual may have. The service has been constructed in partnership with students to ensure that the range of services meet their needs. The resources developed are not meant

to be solely clinical and can include the referral of youth to a range of social supports, such as financial, food security, social services, and/or housing supports. Recognition of the need for such varied and non-traditional supports emphasizes the need for building students' practical competence in resilience skills from a holistic perspective. These skills help not only during transition to post-secondary but offer life skills beyond PSI to navigate available support within the greater community. The University of Alberta has been a contributor to this project since 2015 with the research project coming to a close in September 2020. After September, the service will continue to operate and is currently being expanded. The University of Alberta first began the project by striking an ACCESS steering committee comprised of students, service providers and campus community stakeholders. This committee began its work by creating a virtual hub for student mental health and social support resources. The steering committee has since transformed this virtual vision into a drop-in centre staffed by two [Community Broker](#) Social Workers and a Research Assistant to help connect students to various services on campus. This is a welcoming, casual, drop-in space where students are able to study, connect with others, have tea or coffee, and access the Community Brokers, who possess a clinical social work background. The intent of the broker role is to foster non-clinical mental health relationships in partnership with the students. These Community Brokers are the first point of contact for students. They assess student needs using a mental health and social wellness protocol (prescribed by the National Research Team) and create a care

plan for the student, including bridging them to appropriate internal and external supports. These supports will help the student learn a holistic skill set of coping and resilience that will allow them to manage the demands of student life and beyond. Simultaneously, the student will become more confident in their ability to cope with stressors and to self-identify when to access professional mental health care if required. Additionally, the ACCESS Open Minds Team has worked with the campus ACCESS Network to develop a tool called the Access Network Wellness Assessment. This assessment tool is informed by validated assessment tools and is intended for campus partners to use in assessing the needs of students and informing care plans and referrals.

## RATIONALE

The University of Alberta was fortunate to have been approached to participate in the ACCESS Open Minds national research project. The decision to join the project was influenced by the identified challenges students had navigating complex campus and community mental health services. The University of Alberta saw ACCESS Open Minds as an innovative opportunity with particular focus on engaging their students – referred to as youth in the national project – in decision-making and breaking down silos in student support services. Students are co-creators of the ACCESS Open Minds model, moving beyond consultation to assist in the development of contextually relevant mental health supports for the campus community. The decision to join the national project was also influenced by

the emphasis for evidence-informed service delivery practices. Many of the tools that ACCESS Open Minds provided to participating sites were heavily researched.

## PURPOSE

ACCESS Open Minds is meant to provide high-quality mental health support in a timely manner and meet the range of resources and mental health needs an individual may have. This involves working with students to identify their needs and connect them to appropriate resources in a timely fashion. These resources are not all meant to be clinical and can include other systemic supports, such as housing services, for example. ACCESS Open Minds is meant to support a youth on their journey.



Figure 19. The ACCESS Open Minds Space from various angles.

## GOALS

The ACCESS Open Minds Service Framework was developed by the ACCESS Open Minds National Network, and aims to mitigate where services usually fail youth and their families in their time of need. The ACCESS Open Minds Service Framework has the following parts:

- 1 Early Identification: youth in need get help as soon as possible; youth and families know where they can get help
- 2 Rapid Access: help is offered right away & can be accessed through multiple ways (walk-in, phone, email)
- 3 Appropriate Care: youth and their families are connected to the right services for them and are fully supported until they receive the right care
- 4 Services for anyone 11-25: no age cut-offs at 18
- 5 Youth and Family Engagement: youth and families/carers are engaged in the design of services and are partners in their own care
- 6 Continuous Evaluation: evaluation is integrated into services to understand their impact, respond to community needs, and to inform return on investment

## IMPLEMENTATION

After signing on as a contributor to the national ACCESS project, the University of Alberta was interested in focusing on the youth hub model. The national project encouraged relationship building with families, Indigenous communities, and youth. As such, a working group for each of these groups was struck with the intention of working alongside clinicians in the development of this hub. In the case of the University of Alberta, the definition of family was changed to “carer” in consideration of how varied the definition of a family can be on a university campus (e.g., Residence Association, Indigenous Elders, etc.). Additionally, rather than create a new Indigenous working group, the University of Alberta chose to liaise with the First Peoples House on campus. These working groups were accountable to the campus ACCESS Open Minds steering committee, which was responsible for communication with the national project. Each of the working groups had representatives who also had a seat on the steering committee. Originally, the vision for the youth hub took the form of a virtual online meeting space, as the steering committee was aware that students already had numerous in-person gathering spaces on campus. That vision required extensive consultation with various student and service provider stakeholders on campus. Therefore, another working group was struck, which consisted of representatives from support services, residence, and chaplain services. This working group, along with the steering committee, worked to identify the needs of students and service providers, and determine how the ACCESS Open Minds model would address those needs to create a seamless

approach for students who were unsure where to go for help. With time, other working groups were formed to address related projects. For example, one working group was tasked with researching the implementation of an online resiliency tool, while another was struck to develop standards for a potential mentorship program in the university.

By the end of year two, consultation and knowledge sharing with the national project resulted in the transformation of the vision of the virtual hub into a physical social hub. By this time, the university was ready to hire its first community broker social worker. At the beginning of year three, the steering committee focused on building relationships with clinicians and talking about the benefits of ACCESS Open Minds. Shortly afterward, a second community broker was hired and the team began to seek out a physical space. It was important that the space was located near other campus clinical and social support services for ease of continued relationship building and student referral. The ACCESS Open Minds Youth Council was critical in the development of the space in order to contextualize it and the model for the University of Alberta’s student population.

## EVALUATION

There are a few sources of evaluation for the ACCESS Safe Space. Metrics, such as how students heard about the service, are tracked. The Community Brokers use the same electronic records system as University of Alberta’s counselling department, which facilitates a seamless experience for students

accessing counselling and the ACCESS team. Likewise, there are a variety of psychosocial assessments students are asked to complete over time with regards to assessing initial needs, services, and progress in support. Using the same system as the counselling department eases information sharing protocols and lessens the navigation challenges of students accessing multiple services. Building such relationships has shown ACCESS Open Minds to be successful in supporting students beyond just mental health.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of the ACCESS steering committee, the different committees and working groups introduce varying levels of accountability. Working groups are expected to report regular project updates to the steering committee, whereas the committee reports to the national ACCESS program and the Dean of Students. When the working groups were dissolved after their work wrapped up, the steering committee and ACCESS Open Minds National Youth Council became the major liaison between service providers and the national project. After the national project ends, the university intends for the Youth Council and service providers to continue to communicate for assessment purposes. What's more, the University of Alberta ACCESS Open Minds service will continue with an expansion of service currently underway in the summer of 2020.

## SUCCESSSES

The University of Alberta believes that the success of ACCESS Open Minds is in its ability to improve mental health support for the community. Most students who use ACCESS

Open Minds are able to access services within 48 to 72 hours of reaching out for support. ACCESS Open Minds is able to identify the complex needs of students that would extend psychological and social support. Due to the inter-departmental collaboration, ACCESS Open Minds has facilitated the breaking down of silos and barriers between traditional (e.g., clinical) and non-traditional mental health supports and services. Students are now being referred to service they may not have previously accessed, as well as being connected to non-mental health resources. This collaborative approach has been a critical step forward in efforts to decrease vulnerability to mental health issues and ensure that students have access to supports that help build effective coping mechanisms and resilience to manage the demands of their unique journey.

## NOTED CHALLENGES

The most notable challenge that the University of Alberta had to overcome was garnering the buy-in of campus mental health clinicians. Prior to ACCESS Open Minds, there were clinical areas of support that were operating at full capacity and predicated on traditional clinical models of care. The introduction of the ACCESS Open Minds model initially involved challenging conversations with clinicians about students' perception of the lack of accessible services and the value in co-creating mental health services with students. These conversations were especially challenging as they involved working with health professionals to collaborate with others to co-care for clients. However, these challenges began to give way to close collaboration and

a fundamental shift in mindset as clinicians were introduced to the model and began to see its significant impact on the quality of care provided to students.

## FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

As the national funding comes to an end in September 2020, the University of Alberta has an opportunity to build upon and further contextualize ACCESS Open Minds for the campus. This involves the creation and utilization of tools from the national team that have been successful with the campus population, while discarding those assessments that have not proven to be successful or relevant. The University of Alberta is interested in expanding the ACCESS Open Minds model on campus. The campus envisions an expanded space in which students can drop in to continue conversations with the Community Brokers, but can also drop in for a snack, to participate in a workshop, or complete homework. While students may not access the space for help-seeking purposes, the wrap-around nature of the space makes reaching out for support more readily accessible. Long-term, the university hopes to expand ACCESS to connect students across all student services (e.g., mental health, academic, social, etc.). The ACCESS Open Minds Safe Space would become a hub students can visit in order to be connected to the services they need and mitigate the confusion of navigating multiple services. Although a student might not know exactly which services they need, the job of ACCESS would be to determine their situation and redirect the student appropriately. ●

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### References

- 1 Vallianatos, H., Friese, K., Perez, J. M., Slessor, J., Thind, R., Dunn, J., . . . Shah, J. L. (2019). ACCESS Open Minds at the University of Alberta: Transforming student mental health services in a large Canadian post-secondary educational institution. *Early Intervention in Psychiatry*, 13(S1), 56-64. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eip.12819>