

# Online Provincial Gathering Report

The Online Provincial Gathering was held on March 13, 2026 virtually on Zoom. The meeting was attended by 25 attendees including students, faculty, staff and other organizational representatives from 15 different postsecondary institutions and community organizations.

## Event Summary: Collaboration Activities

This year, based on feedback from the HCA Community of Practice, the Provincial Gathering was centered on networking and topic-focused discussions pertinent to the CoP, which were selected by attendees. These topics were pulled from 2024-25 feedback common themes throughout campus visits, and conversations with the Community of Practice. The survey was used to inform the 5 different topics for which challenges and solutions were discussed.

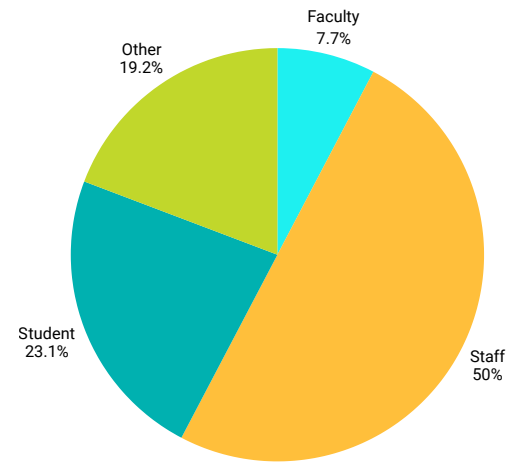


Chart showing the **roles** of the participants at the Provincial Gathering.

## Key Insights from Collaboration Activities

### 1. Student Engagement & Loneliness

Key Challenge Themes	Key Takeaways (Strategies, Actions & Examples)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Low engagement despite programming</b></li> <li>• <b>Barriers to connection (social anxiety, vulnerability, post-COVID shifts)</b></li> <li>• <b>Structural barriers (funding, lack of student unions, competing priorities)</b></li> <li>• <b>Difficulty reaching unengaged students</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low-barrier activities and bite-sized engagement strategies (e.g., tabling in public spaces, informal drop-ins, quick activities, bracelet making where mental health is discussed, rather than Mental Health 101.)</li> <li>• Gamification to increase participation</li> <li>• Peer-based approaches such as buddy systems, mentorship, student ambassadors</li> <li>• Physical and experiential activities (chalk the walk, fitness, play-based events, pet therapy, Shrek-fest)</li> <li>• Multiple engagement formats in one space (e.g. food station, chill zone in addition to main activity allow students to participate at their comfort level)</li> <li>• Student-led planning</li> <li>• Meeting students where they are including residences, high-traffic areas, and informal spaces</li> </ul>

### 2. Substance Use, Addiction & Recovery

Key Challenge Themes	Key Takeaways (Strategies, Actions & Examples)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>High accessibility and normalization of alcohol and substances, though varies by region/campus</b></li> <li>• <b>Rise of process addictions</b></li> <li>• <b>Cultural, social, religious drivers and barriers (stigma)</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desocializing alcohol through reduced marketing and promotion of non-alcoholic alternatives, hosting substance-free events (e.g., Paint Patrick’s Day)</li> <li>• Expanding harm reduction approaches and inclusive mental health framing</li> <li>• Increasing education and awareness on substance impacts and process addictions</li> <li>• Having champions among students, talking about recovery and addictions to reduce stigma</li> <li>• Leveraging wellness trends and broader health promotion to include recovery messaging as a low-barrier approach</li> <li>• Digital detox events have been very successful</li> </ul>

### 3. Food Insecurity

Key Challenge Themes	Key Takeaways (Strategies, Actions & Examples)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Rising food insecurity and unmet basic needs</b></li><li>• <b>Access and logistical barriers</b></li><li>• <b>Cultural and dietary needs not fully met where supports exist</b></li><li>• <b>Awareness and navigation gaps</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Encourage low-barrier food access models (Room of Plenty, grab-and-go snacks, community fridges/freezers)</li><li>• Transitioning from hamper models to client-choice models to increase dignity and autonomy</li><li>• Incorporating cooking-based programming (e.g. crockpot lunches, cooking with students, recipe cards)</li><li>• Centralizing food hubs to streamline access</li><li>• Developing mobile food banks and partnerships with local food organizations</li><li>• Increasing culturally relevant food options through grocery partnerships</li><li>• Funding through student fees, fundraising events, and community partnerships</li></ul>

### 4. Stigma Reduction & Culturally Appropriate Mental Health and Wellbeing

Key Challenge Themes	Key Takeaways (Strategies, Actions & Examples)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Cultural stigma and mismatch with Western models</b></li><li>• <b>Language and framing barriers</b></li><li>• <b>Limited culturally responsive capacity</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Peer-to-peer models such as student facilitators, classroom outreach</li><li>• Reframing services as “wellness” instead of “mental health”</li><li>• Offering culturally-relevant programming (art-based, tea-based, connection activities)</li><li>• Creating identity-based spaces (e.g., Black student lounge, spiritual wellness rooms)</li><li>• Expanding spiritual care and alternative wellness approaches (meditation, forest bathing, mindfulness programs)</li><li>• Intentionally hiring culturally-responsive staff</li></ul>

### 5. Climate Change, Global Events & Mental Health

Key Challenge Themes	Key Takeaways (Strategies, Actions & Examples)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>High levels of anxiety, helplessness and uncertainty</b></li><li>• <b>Polarization and difficulty facilitating open dialogue</b></li><li>• <b>Emotional burden on staff and caregivers</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Creating spaces of commonality, belonging, and connection to help offer a break from heaviness and celebrate small wins</li><li>• Encouraging balanced media consumption (e.g., curated newsletters like Apathy is Boring).</li><li>• Building capacity to hold difficult conversations through training, having someone who can help facilitate</li><li>• Providing tools and resources (eco-grief toolkits, resilience guides)</li><li>• Reinforcing sense of agency and connection as protective factors</li><li>• Ensuring wellness staff are aware when potentially divisive presentations/discussions taking place</li></ul>

## Participant Feedback: Participants shared how they felt at the end of the Regional Gathering

“

I've always found this group of humans to be so willing to share insights, resources, etc. and nobody gatekeeps information which is so rare. We're very lucky!

It's always so valuable to connect with others and bounce ideas around..

I always think these things aren't long enough...

This is a COMMUNITY that cares for each other

We're all in the same boat so I wish we were more open about our struggles and accomplishments and not wait for gatherings like this. We need to be less superficial.

The struggles that we're facing aren't unique to our own campus.

We all rock.

”



### What's Next?

## 2026 HCA Wellness Summit

May 21-22nd, 2026  
Concordia University Edmonton

## References & Resources

Below is a list of resources shared by attendees during the Rapid Fire Open Floor portion of the Online Provincial Gathering:

### Ecological Grief Support Toolkit

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1aNxdhEm7ZeD8SZjRc2BmK5KLcbvIBlQq/view>

### NWP: Mental Health Services Events

<https://vimeo.com/1172394454/0e14a21941?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>

### Remaining Resilient While Making a Difference

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1A1w\\_04uiKwt2QyPM4WBhomBbgDXsWVd/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1A1w_04uiKwt2QyPM4WBhomBbgDXsWVd/view)

### Apathy is Boring

<https://www.apathyisboring.com/>

### Recovery on Campus | Institutional Commitments| UofC

<https://www.ucalgary.ca/about/commitments/recovery-campus>

### Prescription to Get Active

<https://www.prescriptiontogetactive.com/>

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www.healthycampusalberta.ca