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Human-Centring a Mental Health Service System

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Abstract

A university-based research team completed a service design research study in order to understand the journey of students who are seeking mental health services on university and college campus, and develop a set of initiatives, both local and systemic, intended to improve student awareness and access to mental health services. This project utilizes service and system mapping, ethnography, and participatory design research methods, and proposes a student-centred service concept that can help inform the evaluation and redesign of campus mental health services.

Background

Founded in 1876, OCAD University is Canada's largest post-secondary art and design institution. With a distinguished history educating many of Canada's well-known artists and designers, the school operated as Ontario College of Art for most of the 1900s until becoming a university in 2010. The school supports a studio-based curriculum in fine arts and design with liberal studies and awards degrees at both the undergrad and graduate level. Located in the heart of downtown Toronto, over 6,000 full-time and part-time students attend OCAD U.

As Canada's "university of the imagination," OCAD U is engaged in transformative education, scholarship, research and innovation. Throughout its history OCAD U has made important contributions to the fields of art, design and media through local and global cultural initiatives.



OCAD University Health and Wellness Centre Waiting Area

The OCAD University Health and Wellness Centre

The OCAD U Health and Wellness Centre provides medical and counselling services to students that are accessible and responsive to issues relating to gender, race, age, culture, abilities, sexual orientation, income and faith. Under the leadership of Jennifer Robinson, Clinical Director, the Health and Wellness Centre provides support to students while they are at OCAD U so they can have a positive and fulfilling experience and maintain optimal physical and mental health while pursuing their post-secondary education.

The team supports student mental health needs through a number of different programming options including group sessions, one-on-one counselling sessions, email therapy and referrals to community based services where students can get additional, ongoing support while at OCAD U.

Post-Secondary Mental Health

According to Health Canada, most mental illnesses occur during adolescence and young adulthood. In fact, we know that one in five Canadians will experience some form of mental illness in their lifetime, and young people aged 15-25 make up the highest percentage of individuals affected. With this in mind it is easy to see why university and college campuses across North America are recognizing the important role that they play in proactively supporting students' mental health.

As reported in the 2013 America College Health Association – National College Health Assessment (ACHA- NCHA-II):

- 23 percent of Ontario university and college students reported that they “felt that things were hopeless” in the last twelve months,
- 18 percent reported that they “felt so depressed that it was difficult to function”,
- 21 percent reported that they “felt overwhelming anxiety”, and
- 6.5 percent of students reported that in the last twelve months alone they “have seriously considered suicide”.

Mental illness and mental health issues are of significant concern to university and colleges. Not only are post-secondary students part of the population that is at most risk for mental health issues, but they also have the added stress associated with transitioning from home to campus life. Through our research we identified a variety of challenges faced by young adults as they go through this transition including social pressure, added responsibility associated with living on your own for the first time, and the academic demands placed on students.

The same ACHA-NCHA-II survey revealed that OCAD University students reported higher scores on the same questions. For example:

- 29 percent of OCAD University students reported that they “felt that things were hopeless” in the last 12 months,
- 23 percent reported that they “felt so depressed that it was difficult to function”
- 24 percent reported that they “felt overwhelming anxiety, and
- 15 percent of OCAD University students reported that in the last twelve months alone they “have seriously considered suicide”.

Our research points to additional factors that we feel are unique to OCAD University, or perhaps art and design schools in general. In addition to the challenges mentioned above, OCAD U students also described the ongoing pressure to “be creative”, the public critique process involving both faculty and peers, and some of the personality traits of students who are attracted to art and design as factors that were unique to their experience.

Post-secondary mental health is also gaining additional attention as a result of some recent high profile incidents that have taken place on college and university campuses. The statistics, the first person ethnographic interviews that we conducted and the tragic stories that we read about in the media all point to the fact that without access to effective mental health services on campus student populations are vulnerable to a variety of mental health concerns.

A Human-Centred Design Study

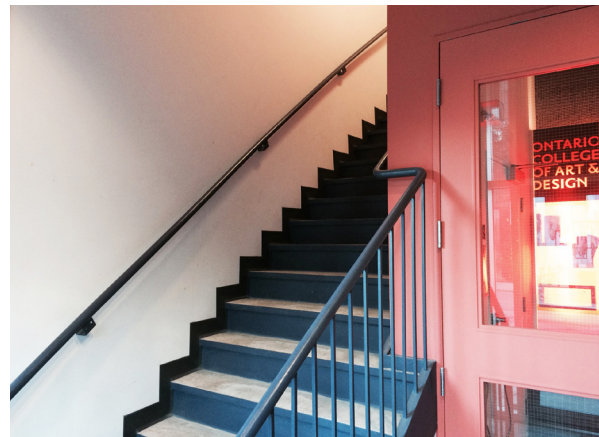
The goal of this project was to help the Health and Wellness Centre at OCAD University better understand how students discover, use, and benefit from the health and counselling services on campus. It was our hope that this study would help the Health and Wellness Centre improve their services and better address the health needs of OCAD University students. The methods of human-centred design research enabled us to understand, first hand, the service priorities of the OCAD U population.

Discovery and Research

The research team conducted a set of structured observations as a way to understand the physical environment of the Health and Wellness Centre and how the centre itself is situated within the broader university campus.

One of the key insights that became apparent thorough our observation is the need to meet students where they are. By this we mean that the Health and Wellness Centre must better address the physical barriers that result from the fact that the centre is off the main campus, and the fact that students are not responding to the traditional methods of communication.

Furthermore, we also observed that the Health and Wellness Centre's physical space and layout is not effectively meeting the needs of their clients and students in general. The space is small, clinical in nature and does not provide an adequate amount of privacy to students and staff who may be accessing services.



Structured observations of the OCAD U Health and Wellness Centre were conducted to understand the physical environment.

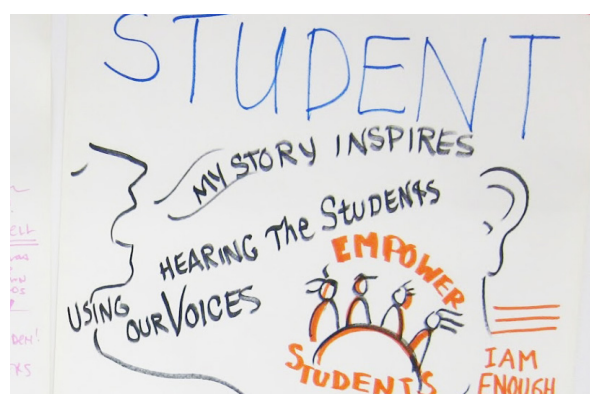
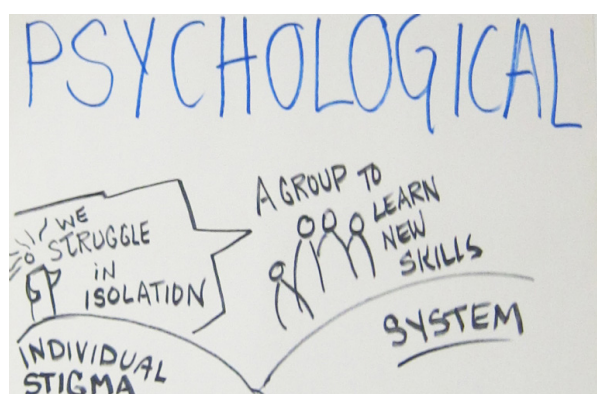
We developed a semi-structured interview guide and conducted a series of confidential interviews with six students who had access the Health and Wellness Centre for counselling services, and 4 members of the Health and Wellness staff. The intention of these ethnographic interviews was to gain a better understanding of the students experience with the Health and Wellness Centre, and to gain an empathetic understanding of what it was like to work in the Health and Wellness Centre at OCAD U. The research focused solely on the student experience with the Health and Wellness Centre's services and therefore no personal health information from students was collected.

The student interviews confirmed some of the things that we had observed such as the lack of privacy and the lack of awareness that students described related to the services that are available.

The research team also facilitated a dialogic design workshop that included students, faculty, university staff and members of the broader community. Through this workshop we explored four perspectives around student mental health:

- Societal
- Institutional
- Psychological
- Individual

As a way of raising the level of awareness for the entire group and in order to provide a common level of understanding around the room the workshop began with brief presentation from an expert from each perspective. Following the four brief remarks the research team facilitated a World Café style discussion and asked the group to break-up and self-select the perspective that would like to explore further in a smaller group. Each group was provided with markers and flip chart paper and was asked to create a record of their conversation. Following the initial small group discussion we asked one member of the group to remain behind and act as host for the next group of people who were interested in exploring that particular perspective. Hosts welcomed the new group into the discussion and once again recorded the additional insights that the new group brought to the conversation.



At the conclusion of the small group discussions each group shared their artifacts and the research team, and all participants, were able to harvest the collective wisdom generated through the workshop.

Simultaneously, the University conducted two open forum sessions around mental health. One session was open to the entire university community and one session was for students only. The reports produced from these sessions were also helpful to our research as a way to better understand the general feeling that existed on campus around mental health issue.

Design and Mapping

The findings of the Discovery and Research phase of the project are articulated in a set of maps including the current service flow, identified barriers to help-seeking, and a high-level system map which places the Health and Wellness Centre within the broader context of mental health services.

Current Service Workflow

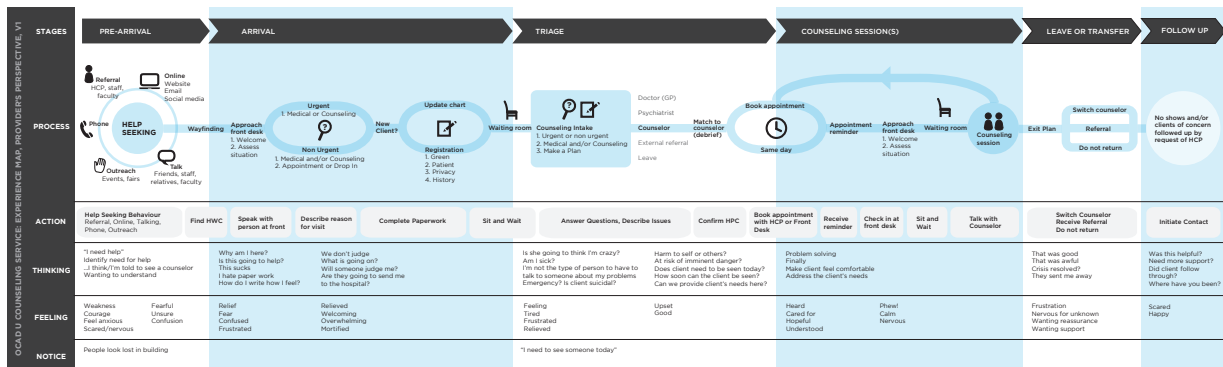
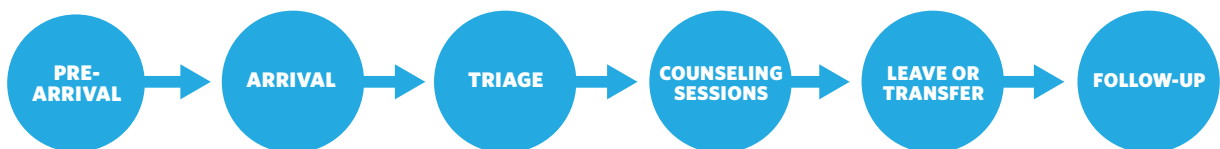


Image courtesy of Andrea Yip

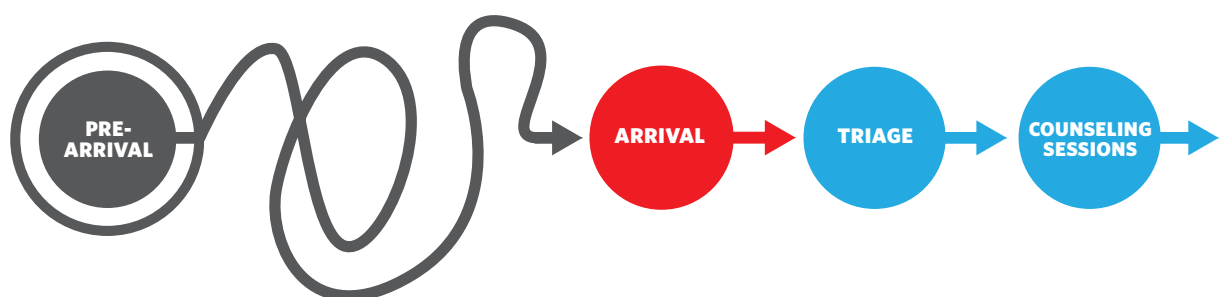


The Centre's current workflow map was a valuable piece to our research but through the discovery phase of the project we learned that in fact it was much more common for students to spend a long time in pre-arrival and that there exists a number of barriers to help-seeking.



For example, some students reported fear associated with their mental illness as a barrier to them accessing services. While much work in recent years has been done to combat the stigma that surrounds mental illness, many students still described comments or behaviours of family members, peers, and others as a barrier to them accessing the support that they needed. For the student these experiences, either intentionally or unintentionally, reinforced the stigmas in their mind and made accessing mental health services even more difficult.

Not surprising to us, based on our own observations, students also identified lack of information and awareness about the available services as a barrier to help-seeking. But, perhaps the most enlightening learning from the first stages of our research was the complexity of the journey that students described. With each and every wrong-turn, misstep, or false start that the individual had as they struggle to deal with their own mental health issues their fears, feelings of desperation and isolation escalate, and so from this it is not surprising that, as reported by the staff of the Health and Wellness Centre, many students arrive at the Centre in a state of crisis.



Of course each and every student's journey is unique, but as a way to bring the student experience to life we developed two student personas that reflect some of the challenges that students with mental health concerns face when trying to access the support and services that they need. These personas were helpful tools as we moved into the design phase of our project because they provided us with a snapshot of what we had heard, and observed from those with lived experience and ensured that we remained focused on addressing the true needs of those accessing the services of the Health and Wellness Centre.



Madison

First Year Undergrad Student
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Drawing and Painting

Madison moved from northern Ontario to attend OCAD University.

In high school she enjoyed painting and did well in art class. Her parents weren't very supportive of her going to "art school" but agreed to let her try it for a year.

Madison didn't have any friends when the semester started. Her closest family member was an aunt living 45 minutes from the downtown Toronto campus.

She poured her heart and soul into first projects but after getting her first critiques and grades, Madison felt that her instructors and peers treated her unfairly.

She felt defeated, depressed and worried that her parents would make her drop out and come home.

After two weeks of not eating or sleeping, Madison and her new friend Marcus walked into the Health and Wellness Centre and asked to see a counsellor.



Olivia

Second Year Graduate Student
Master of Fine Arts, Criticism & Curatorial Practice

After being accepted into the Master of Fine Arts in Criticism & Curatorial Practice Program at OCAD University Olivia and her husband moved to Toronto from Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Working at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia for about four years Olivia saw the program as an ideal opportunity to elevate her career to the next level.

Just before graduating from undergrad Olivia was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. With the support of a few different psychotherapists she was, for the most part, doing very well managing her symptoms.

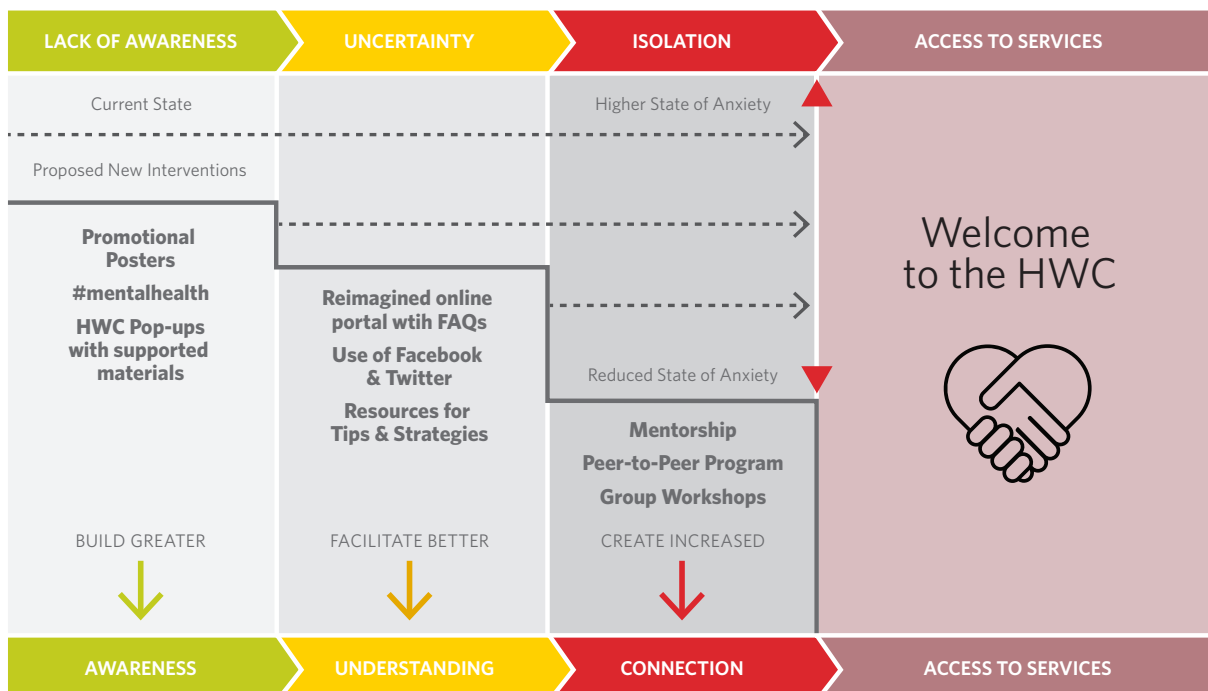
Olivia and her husband have been fighting a lot and he noticed that she seemed more depressed lately. Olivia agreed it was becoming more and more difficult to manage the extremely demanding course work and her part-time job.

With her husband's encouragement Olivia reached out to the Health and Wellness Centre to inquire about how to find a Cognitive Behavioural Therapist in Toronto.

Prototyping and Implementation

Through our research we came to understand that post-secondary student mental health is a growing concern in Canada. We learned that there are a variety of societal and systemic barriers that make it difficult for students and other help-seekers to access the mental health services. We uncovered that there remains a lack of coordination across campus, and that there isn't yet a comprehensive strategy in place that allows post-secondary institutions to properly address the needs of student mental health. And finally, through this project we gained a better understanding of the fear, anxiety, isolation, that some students face as they struggle with their personal mental health concern.

That said, our research also suggests that students who had accessed mental health services on campus are generally happy with the types of services that are available on at OCAD U, but access to these services remains difficult for some. With this in mind we developed a student-centred service concept that recognizes the lack of awareness, uncertainty and isolation that characterize the student mental health experience. Our service concept proposes that early intervention is the key and that student mental health needs to be incorporated into all aspects of campus life.



Handshake designed by Sam Garner from thenounproject.com

Tools need to be co-created with students and those with lived experience to build greater awareness around mental health issues so that early indicators and warning signs can be acted upon sooner.

Universities and colleges need to reflect on the institutions policies, procedures, and overall culture and ensure that resources are in place that facilitates better understanding of the types of mental health issues faced by students. And finally, institutions need to increase connection among students as a way of combating stigma around mental health and creating an environment where students feel supported and encouraged to flourish.

This service concept remains a prototype but we propose that the result of employing this structure to the planning and implementation of mental health services will increase the likelihood of students accessing the help that they need before they are in a state of crisis.

This will provide better outcomes for students and reduce the strain that is currently being placed on the Health and Wellness Centre.

Next Steps

We acknowledge that there are gaps in this research and future work should be done to expand the sample and ensure that a broader range of stakeholders are included in the refinement of this service concept. For example, our sample of student interviews did not include any male students and we feel that this is an important voice to incorporate into our thinking.

This research pointed to some specific opportunities at OCAD University that we would like to explore further. As mentioned above the current physical space creates some challenges and physical barriers to students accessing the services that are available. We propose facilitating a participatory workshop with a variety of university stakeholders to design a new space that better meets the needs of all help-seekers.

Similarly, we feel that there is an opportunity to develop a web portal that provides help-seekers with information and resource that they can access early on in the mental health journey. By making this resource available and broadly recognized many students will not need to access Health and Wellness Services directly.

Members of the research team have also developed a proposal to pilot a mental health pop-up idea. These pop-up installations could be rolled out on campus at various times throughout the academic year and serve two functions. First they would provide some basic mental health support, such as stress reduction strategies, tips to better sleep habits, and perhaps more high-level health and wellness tips. The second goal of these pop-ups is to raise the level of awareness across campus about the Health and Wellness Centre and the types of services that are available. It is our hope that by publicizing the role of the Health and Wellness Centre we will be able to engage students in need or those at risk earlier in their journey.

Our research points to a difference of opinion regarding peer-to-peer networks and peer-mentoring. Further investigation into the effectiveness of these resources is required.

Finally, work has been done by another research team at OCAD U to visually represent the system that surrounds campus mental health services, and a great opportunity exists to incorporate the two projects as a way of ensuring that our proposed system concept is sustainable, and scalable across all university and college campuses.

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