

On August 16-17th, I had the pleasure of attending the national Collaboration for Change's (C4C) conference all about post-secondary mental health.

Within this conference overview, I will first go over a description of the organisation, C4C, the importance of a conference like this to my role as VP Academic, and finish with my goals and visions moving forward.

### What is Collaboration for Change?

Collaborations for Change is hosted by [UCalgary's Campus Mental Health Strategy](#) and [Best Practices Network in Canadian Higher Education \(BP-Net\)](#) with support from the [Canadian Association of College and University Student Services \(CACUSS\)](#). It is a semi-annual conference that occurs typically within the context of the Canadian post-secondary landscape. It covers research, programs, and actions currently going on in this realm on a variety of different topics:

- Collaboration and Partnerships
- Decolonization and Indigenization
- Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Accessibility (EDIA)
- Impact
- Systemic Approaches

The keynote of the conference was delivered by Dr. Chika Stacy Oriuwa, a Canadian physician, spoken word poet, and advocate against systemic racism in the health care system. To support this, there were panels conducted by Indigenous elders, Indigenous counsellors, and student roundtables, on various topics like Indigenous perspectives on wellness and the current student lens on mental health and wellbeing.

### Why is the Conference Important and Relevant to being VP Academic?

Due to the relevance of mental health wellness and academics - particularly when it comes to the post-secondary space - the primary advocate for mental health wellness falls underneath the VP Academic portfolio. In addition to this, I myself find this connection extremely influential on student success at the U of L. There are so many reasons why a student's mental health can decline: isolation from previously established support systems, academic competition and pressure, financial burden on post-secondary, minority-related issues, and so much more.

Throughout my term in this role, I will be leading weeklong events to promote mental health wellbeing on campus and combating the stigma around asking for help. Going to the virtual conference (especially when it was only \$25.00) was a great opportunity to get ideas and gain insight into what other institutions are doing for students at their own campuses. I will go more in depth about my ideas for the future later on in this report.

### What Did I Attend?

Something great about this conference being virtual is that all of the sessions were recorded at the time, so C4C will be converting their conference website to an archive of the two day's sessions so participants can rewatch all of the material for the next 6 months. So while there were 6 concurrent sessions going on at once, I will be able to review that session plus watch the other sessions I missed.

The conference was opened up with a traditional blessing from Elder Alvin Kube of the Saulteau First Nation. Our keynote, Dr. Oriuwa, spoke next. She spoke about effective strategies to support mental health wellness at both an individual level and an institutional level. She discussed her educational experience with being one of the few Black people to be in her undergraduate class and the only Black person in her year at the U of T Medical School. Much of her advocacy involves providing a greater understanding of mental health and EDI are interconnected.

This was followed by the Elder Panel with Elder Betty Carr-Braint, Elder Jean Wasegijig, Elder Mae Bickley, and Elder Roberta Price. The main take away that I got from their panel was the issues, barriers, and possibly solutions in services for Indigenous students and communities on campuses. They also discussed many possibilities for contributing to support campuses and communities in post-secondary. One quote that I will mention here is the idea that "wellness is connection" which I believe was said by Elder Mae. This sentiment is so important to spread due to the truth in that statement. Being around people can combat so many symptoms of declining mental health and is a large preventative measure as well. People thrive in communities and it is important to think about our relationships both between each other and the world around us.

For the first round of concurrent sessions, I attended "A Collaborative Pilot Initiative to Improve Mental Health in Post-Secondary Institutions" which was held by Jesse Hayman who is part of Greenspace Health. With Greenspace Health and a few other post-secondary

institutions worked together to create a pilot initiative about the difficulty of promoting mental health wellness and resources to students. Their pilot provides an online self-guided wellbeing hub that is based in measurement-based care (MBC). It is meant to allow students the agency to understand their medical needs and be more informed about their mental health plan moving forward.

I did see a bit of the session titled “Evaluation of Perception of Mental Health among Students Using Campus-Based Services: A Collaborative Approach” that was held by Sandra Yuen and Sarah Brennenstuhl (both from U of T) that was about developing tools to evaluate satisfaction for students.

Followed was a few poster sessions that I will be reviewing. During this time, there was a two members of U of C, Lisa Mah and Meadow Schroeder, that was giving a presentation called “Measuring Wellbeing in Post-secondary Students: Relationship Between Coping, Self-Efficacy, Self-Compassion, Perceived Time Use, and Stress”.

For August 17th, the conference started with a traditional welcome and transitioned into a session from the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) about supporting inclusive student engagement in campus mental health. The MHCC created a standard for addressing the rapid decreasing population’s mental health. Recently, they found that the situations around the stresses of post-secondary students is too unique compared to the general population so the MHCC created a new standard that is unique for post-secondary students, communities, and institutions. It has 6 distinct dimensions to the standard: Institutional level factors, Planning, Socio-ecological framework, Evaluation and repeating, Student-centeredness, and Continuous improvement.

For the first round of concurrent sessions, I attended “Co-Creating Peer Support Interventions for Crisis and Suicide with Post-Secondary Students” both U of C presenters, Gina Dimitropoulos and Julia Hews-Girard. This presentation focused on providing peer support for students that is made with the assistance of students and facilitated by students. They went further in detail by talking about student apathy on campus and how that can be a hindrance to peer support groups. Suggestions that they included in their presentation included:

- Increasing education regarding suicide identification and prevention/awareness of existing mental health resources and crisis supports
- Improving immediate access to supports

- Improving university-provided academic supports for those in crisis and those that have experienced crisis
- Improving communication regarding student suicide
- Improve access and services for marginalised people and groups

It was a great presentation about the importance of including students in mental health strategies, programs, and supports in a post-secondary environment.

For the last concurrent sessions of the conference, I attended one called “Sharing Our Experiences of the Collaborative Co-creation of the Suicide Stigma Reduction Program: An Advisory Group Perspective” hosted by Brittany Lindsay, a graduate student from U of C that presented on her thesis alongside the participants of her study. This study focused on the public perception of suicide and the stigma that surrounds it. Lindsay created an information course called *From Taboo to Talked About* that contained five modules and a conclusion that discusses the current culture of suicide, the stigma around it, lived experiences with suicide and stigma, and a call to action for everyone that is involved in the stigmatization of suicide.

To finish off the conference, I got information around blanket exercises and what they explore and represent. It was a great experience where participants got to engage in conversations around Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships and how we can contribute to positive change moving forward.

### What Am I Going to Do Moving Forward?

Mental health wellness before this conference was definitely a large part of my advocacy goals while in this position, but after this conference, I am even more inspired to work with U of L stakeholders like our Counselling Services, Health Centre, Gender-Based and Sexual Violence Prevention Education, to make our campus a more sustainable place for student mental health.

Within each of these stakeholders are a variety of different programs that students have access to. For example, with our Counselling Services, there are wellness workshops that provide students with strategies for maintaining positive mental wellbeing (this semester they are doing art journaling which I love seeing on Tik Tok, it is genuinely so relaxing). They also do group counselling and peer support groups for people that are more used to and comfortable in group settings, or even for people that want to expand their counselling experiences and learn from others. And Counselling Services also does training and

certifications for those that are very passionate in these topics for students at discounts prices.

One of the frequent criticisms that I hear about when it comes to student services on campus has to be that many students do not know what is on campus. I want to work with our stakeholders and members within the ULSU to make a bigger presence for the help, care, and support that they get on campus.

Going back to the quote “wellness is connection” that I heard during the Elder panel on the first day of the conference, I want to facilitate events where students can meet others on campus that are going through similar situations. One idea that I had was to do workshops on citations. Citations are very important to get correct in academic writing and it is even more important that we provide students with resources to learn about the importance of it and how to do it correctly in post-secondary. Students can meet each other at events such as this and connect over the proposed topic.

I also want to commit to ensure that members of the campus community that are part of student services are trained in EDIA awareness and cultural sensitivity. When it comes to students that are BIPOC or students that are part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, many of them can feel unsure, uncomfortable, or unsafe when talking about topics where they are minority. This can drive away marginalized students from getting the care and support that they need on campus.

### Wrap-up

For anyone that would like to discuss matters that I have mentioned in this report, please contact me through my email ([su.academic@uleth.ca](mailto:su.academic@uleth.ca)) or my phone number (403-329-2770). You can also catch me in my office in the ULSU office (SU180).