



Mental Health
Commission
of Canada

Commission de
la santé mentale
du Canada

Unlocking the Standard: Supporting Mental Health in Post-Secondary Education



What is the Standard?

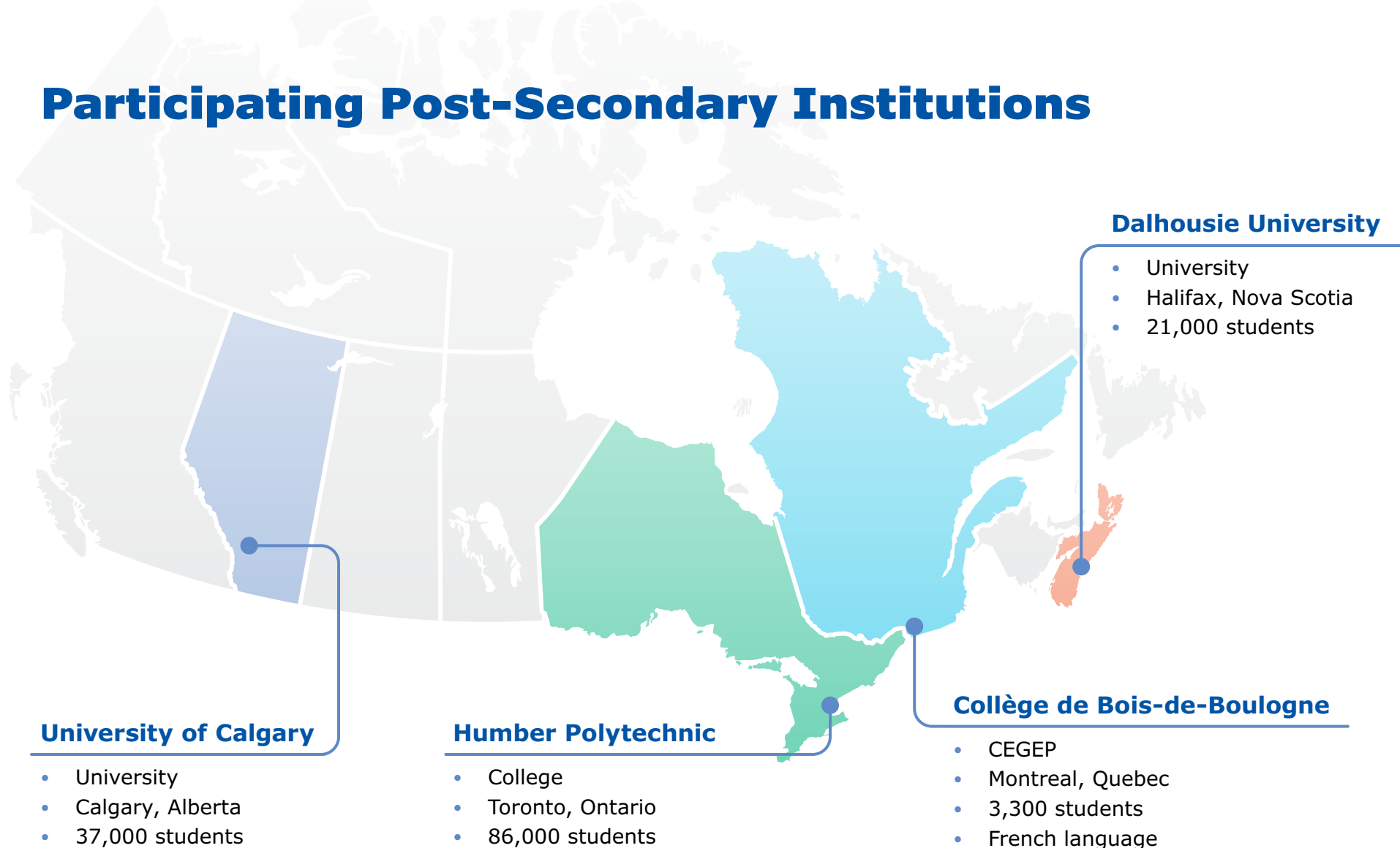
The first of its kind in the world, the [National Standard of Canada for Mental-Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students](#) (the Standard) provides flexible, voluntary guidelines to **promote student mental health and well-being**. Grounded in a commitment to continuous improvement, the Standard is designed to be **adaptable to the needs and circumstances** of each post-secondary institution (PSI), so each can determine their own priorities over time, no matter where they start. Since the Standard's release in 2020, Canadian institutions both large and small have been using it to enhance their mental health initiatives and advance student well-being.

Learning from Experience

While there is no single way of implementing the Standard, there are lessons to be learned from the experiences of other PSIs in their implementation journeys. In collaboration with the [Mental Health Commission of Canada](#) (MHCC), the [Social Research and Demonstration Corporation](#) (SRDC) interviewed representatives from four Canadian PSIs varying in type, size, and location, to explore their differing approaches to aligning with the Standard. **These conversations provide valuable insights into how institutions are bringing the Standard to life in meaningful and impactful ways.**

This resource shares what these PSIs have learned from their implementation journeys so far and how they have strategically leveraged existing strategies and frameworks, how they have built buy-in through champions, and how they continue to overcome barriers through innovative solutions.

Participating Post-Secondary Institutions



"When I review the Standard, I find that it not only outlines the essential components but also provides guidance on the steps required to move forward."

– Representative, Humber Polytechnic

Building Momentum: How Institutions Align and Engage with the Standard

INTEGRATE WITH CURRENT STRATEGIES AND VALUES

While most PSIs were already leading student mental health strategies and initiatives before they implemented the Standard, the Standard has provided an opportunity to build on and strengthen their existing mental health strategies to align with national best practices. For many, it has been the natural next step in their ongoing efforts to create supportive and inclusive campus environments. At the **University of Calgary**, the Standard has been integrated into their broader strategy rather than explicitly implemented clause by clause. This holistic approach has allowed University of Calgary to maintain their existing strategies while integrating key aspects of the Standard, ensuring that the initiative feels cohesive with their broader vision. Similarly, **Humber Polytechnic** appreciates how the Standard has provided both the components and the steps for implementation, as well as nuanced recommendations, allowing for flexible integration with their other well-being strategies.

"It's much easier to sell a project or idea that aligns with the values of the institution and is part of the strategic plan."

– Representative, Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne

LEVERAGE EXISTING FRAMEWORKS

Integrating the Standard with other established frameworks that institutions have already been using has enhanced its usability and alignment with institutional and national goals. The [**Okanagan Charter**](#) advocates for a holistic, whole-campus approach to mental health and complements the Standard's focus on creating a student-centred, inclusive environment. Similarly, the [**Canadian Association of College and University Student Services \(CACUSS\)'s Systemic Approach**](#) emphasizes addressing the systemic factors affecting student well-being and resonates with the Standard's call for comprehensive, sustainable change. Together, these frameworks create a unified strategy that makes it easier for PSIs to implement the Standard without having to reinvent their existing strategies.

Aligning with the Standard also reinforces campus-wide mental health efforts for both students and staff. **Dalhousie University** and the **University of Calgary** have integrated the Standard alongside the [**National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace**](#). **Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne** has integrated the Standard into their ongoing whole campus approach to promoting a supportive and inclusive environment. This has allowed them to quickly gain support for the Standard and integrate it into their broader initiatives. For example, the Standard is explicitly woven into their guiding documents, like their strategic plan, which emphasizes the need to adjust institutional practices and implement prevention and intervention structures to enhance student well-being.



ENHANCE EXISTING PROGRAMS AND ENGAGE CHAMPIONS

Alignment with existing mental health programs has allowed institutions to incorporate the Standard seamlessly into their efforts. At **Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne**, the creation of a multidisciplinary one-stop-shop, “[L'Archipel](#),” brought together student services such as psychosocial, financial, and guidance support under one roof. This initiative demonstrates how the Standard can enhance existing services, providing more accessible supports for students. The **University of Calgary** embedded a [certificate in mental wellbeing and resilience](#) that offers academic recognition for students’ efforts in promoting mental health and inclusivity, supporting the Standard’s implementation by fostering mental health literacy and reinforcing the university’s broader efforts.

Successfully implementing the Standard also relies on strong support from champions — staff, faculty, and administrators committed to mental health and wellness. At the **University of Calgary**, champions have worked closely with student wellness services to integrate the Standard, ensuring institution-wide buy-in and fostering cross-departmental partnerships. As one staff member shared, “*We recognize that resources and capacity are a limitation, but we get around that by working with units, faculties, and departments, creating relationships.*” This collaborative model helps overcome resource limitations and move initiatives forward. Strong relationships with leadership are also helping with implementation efforts at **Humber Polytechnic**. One staff member emphasized, “*I’m learning that strategic work like this really depends on strong relationships with campus partners including our leaders. Having good connections makes it easier to share ideas and it paves the way for those ideas to come to life.*”



“The Standard incorporates aspects of various strategies that existed even before its official launch, as well as key documents like the Okanagan Charter. Our strategy was already aligned with the Standard, so it felt like a natural progression to adopt it.”

– Representative, University of Calgary

Overcoming Barriers in Promoting Campus Mental Health

STAFFING CAPACITY: MAXIMIZE IMPACT THROUGH COLLABORATION

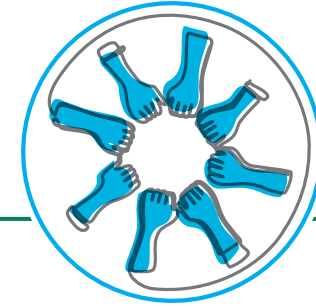
Promoting campus mental health often involves working with resource limitations and alleviating financial burdens. Institutions are navigating these challenges by implementing creative and effective initiatives to ensure student well-being remains a priority.

At several PSIs, staffing capacity has emerged as a significant challenge in the effort to promote campus mental health and apply the Standard effectively. At the **University of Calgary**, staff noted that while they were fortunate to have a dedicated office for community mental health and well-being, resource and staffing limitations have still hindered their ability to fully implement initiatives. As one staff member shared, *"Capacity resources is always a thing. And I'm sure every single person would mention that. I think we're very, very lucky that we have a dedicated office of community mental health and well-being ... though, to really do all the things that we do, we don't have enough resources or capacity right now."* They advance mental health initiatives through cross-department collaboration to increase resource efficiencies and maximize impact.

EVALUATION: MOVE BEYOND TRADITIONAL METRICS

A shift toward more holistic, community-centred evaluation is seen as essential for capturing the true impact of mental health initiatives. At the **University of Calgary**, for example, staff emphasized the need to move away from conventional metrics. As one staff member explained, *"I think we have to move away from some of the traditional count measures, the people in seats.... That doesn't tell us the whole story. So, it's really engaging and talking and hearing stories and listening to our campus community ... we're trying to do evaluation differently."* Similarly, **Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne** uses surveys like the Four Keys of Success to gather feedback from both students and staff. These surveys, conducted twice a year, have provided significant insights. For example, before the opening of L'Archipel, around 55 per cent of students were unsure where to seek help, but just six months later, that number had dropped to nine per cent. The data collected through these surveys cover a wide range of topics like campus environment, accessibility of services, and student-staff relations. Data are shared with the leadership team and incorporated into decision making across all areas of the college.





RESOURCING: ADDRESS FINANCIAL PRESSURES ON STUDENTS AND INSTITUTIONS

Many students have voiced concerns about financial burdens impacting their mental health, particularly amid the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. In response, some institutions have implemented strategies to reduce costs for students. **Humber Polytechnic**, for instance, encourages faculty to use zero-cost learning materials like online resources where possible, recognizing that textbooks can cost hundreds of dollars per course. Similarly, **Dalhousie University's Be Well at Dal** initiative includes six action groups, one of which focuses on financial well-being, working to develop and implement strategies that address student and employee financial needs, such as improving wage rates for student jobs, enhancing food security, and expanding well-being bursary supports.

"The idea of adopting the Standard as a collective of colleges gave us a greater sense of ownership, recognizing that we operate differently than universities and need each other's support."

– Representative, Humber Polytechnic

As a smaller college with fewer resources than larger PSIs, **Humber Polytechnic** recognizes the value of the Standard as a unifying framework for fostering partnerships with other institutions. To address resource limitations, Humber has partnered with four other colleges in the Greater Toronto Area, forming a **consortium** to strengthen mental health support across their campuses. A **Bell Let's Talk Post-Secondary Fund** grant provided the seed funding that brought the consortium together, laying the foundation for a collaborative approach that has become an invaluable asset for all participating colleges. By pooling knowledge and resources, the colleges have been able to enhance their mental health initiatives in a way that would have been difficult for them to achieve individually. The collective approach has fostered a shared commitment to the Standard, allowing the institutions to maximize their impact and resources. Humber has also expressed interest in revisiting the Standard over time or partnering with research institutions to continue its implementation. As one staff member explained, *"It takes leaders willing to innovate. When we see other leaders adopting similar initiatives, it gives us a valuable point of reference to start a conversation."* This collaborative approach has helped them feel more invested in the process and has fostered a sense of community among like-minded institutions, creating the mutual support needed to advance campus mental health efforts.



Getting Started with the Standard: Access Resources and Track Your Institution's Progress

1. **Download** your copy of the Standard, and for more information and resources that support implementation including a Starter Kit, visit the MHCC [website](#).
2. Track your progress implementing the Standard with the [Campus Mental Health Action Tracker](#), a free, bilingual online tool developed by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation in collaboration with the MHCC. To get started, email info@mentalhealthtracker.ca.



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