



Mental Health
Commission
of Canada

Commission de
la santé mentale
du Canada

Championing Campus Well-Being through Student-Centred Initiatives

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.

Student engagement plays a critical role in shaping effective campus mental health initiatives. The Standard defines the term “student centred” as prioritizing the mental health and well-being of students and including them in the process of developing, implementing, and evaluating the institution's framework for student mental health and well-being, emphasizing students as partners whose opinions are required, valued, and respected as vital expertise.

This resource shares how three PSIs have taken a student-centred approach to their mental health strategies to ensure that student voices not only are heard but also actively contribute to shaping the direction of mental health initiatives in alignment with the Standard.

It is important to recognize that every PSI serves a diverse range of students, from various backgrounds and of different ages. As the three PSIs profiled in this resource have done, other institutions are encouraged to reach out to their student populations to ensure the unique voices of their students are heard and incorporated in the development and implementation of student mental health initiatives and strategies.

Participating Post-Secondary Institutions

University of Calgary

- University
- Calgary, Alberta
- 37,000 students

Dalhousie University

- University
- Halifax, Nova Scotia
- 21,000 students

Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne

- CEGEP
- Montreal, Quebec
- 3,300 students
- French language

Create Safe Spaces for Students to Engage in Mental Health Conversations

To be truly student-centred, mental health initiatives must prioritize creating environments where students feel safe and comfortable discussing mental health. A critical component of this is providing accessible platforms where students can openly engage in conversations without fear of stigma. These spaces can be online or in person. For example, students shared that social media is an effective tool for outreach. One student from **Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne** emphasized the role of platforms like Instagram in reaching their peers: *“For me personally, it’s more on Instagram. They [Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne] have an Instagram page, and they post photos, ads, and there are comments where you can discuss, and that helps. I think that for our generation, social networks work better.”*

At **Dalhousie University**, the establishment of a mental health forum has provided students with a unique, open space to discuss any topic they wish, with the added benefit of inviting faculty and staff to participate in the conversations.

This initiative aims to create a safe, non-judgmental space to explore mental health topics and seek support if needed. One staff member explained: *“Six years ago, I partnered with our student union to host this monthly forum that we call the Dalhousie Mental Health Forum. It’s not a clinical group, not a counselling group, not a support group — nothing like that. It’s just a space to talk about anything that anyone wants to talk about related to mental health. And then maybe a student feels some comfort to be able to say, ‘I found myself struggling with my mental health.’ It opened up the space on campus to talk about mental health a little bit more as we moved forward.”* By creating this open, accessible platform, co-led by the vice-president of the student union, Dalhousie has fostered a community where both students and staff can engage in meaningful discussions about mental health. This initiative not only encourages ongoing dialogue but also helps to break down the stigma around mental health, providing a space where students feel safe in sharing their concerns and ideas.

Use Creative Outreach Methods to Seek Student Feedback

All three PSIs recognize the crucial role of student voices in shaping programs and initiatives that support mental health on campus. To gather valuable feedback, they use a variety of approaches, including surveys, informal conversations, and forums, understanding that a one-size-fits-all method does not fully capture the diversity of their campus communities. Web surveys, such as the [Canadian Campus Wellbeing Survey](#), are a commonly used tool. At **Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne**, their data from the Four Keys of Success survey directly inform the daily actions of campus teams and the results are shared with leadership and integrated into all sectors of the college, helping to guide decisions that reflect the students' needs.

The PSI representatives interviewed for this resource also recognize that data collection through surveys needs to be complemented by other methods to ensure inclusivity and to better understand how to best serve diverse student needs. Students from **Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne** shared several innovative ideas regarding well-being strategies, feedback collection, and fostering open discussions on mental health. Using social media for outreach and feedback collection offers an effective way to meet students where they already are, and it is ideal for raising awareness about initiatives and programs that might not have a permanent physical presence on campus. By connecting with students through familiar online spaces, institutions can better engage with their communities and increase participation in mental health initiatives.

A goal at the **University of Calgary** is to establish an advisory council with students. To expand the representativeness of student voices in feedback mechanisms, staff have built strong

relationships with various student groups and can rely on these groups to eventually expand their engagement beyond the advisory council by incorporating creative approaches such as pop-up sessions and consultations throughout the year.

"We want to be as broad and diverse as possible when we engage our campus community, be intentionally inclusive and think about who we are missing, who is not at the table, and who we need more information from."

– Representative, University of Calgary

Another creative suggestion from students was to place QR codes around campus as a quick and accessible way for students to provide feedback. One student at **Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne** shared: *"We could quickly scan and then give our opinion and maybe ask a few questions."* This approach could make it easier for students to share their thoughts and opinions in real time, offering a more seamless and immediate way to gather input. In addition, students suggested tweaks to existing surveys to improve accessibility and ensure brevity, making it easier for students to participate without feeling overwhelmed.

Empower Student Partnerships through Peer-Support Programs

At **Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne**, as part of the effort to enhance student-centeredness, the wellness initiatives committee developed a strong, student-led peer support program through their **BdeB Écoute** initiative. This program provides a structured peer support network of students called allies. It encourages students to take an active role in mental health, helping them not only assist their peers but also develop valuable skills for their own personal and academic growth. Unlike friendships or professional counselling, peer support services focus on active listening and empowering students to find their own solutions. The BdeB Écoute program embodies these principles, with staff supporting students to create an inclusive, empathetic, and supportive environment. As part of their training, peer support allies are required to sign a non-disclosure statement that reinforces their commitment to maintaining confidentiality and ensuring a safe space for their peers. This formal documentation ensures that students feel comfortable sharing personal concerns, knowing their information will be protected.

Addressing students' need for peer support, **Dalhousie University** has established a sustainable and robust peer-to-peer mental health support program; each year the university hires and trains students to serve as mental health peer support providers who hold regular office hours. While not acting as counsellors or therapists, these peer supporters use their own lived experience to offer a supportive and non-judgmental space for students to express themselves. This structured model ensures that peer supporters are appropriately trained and supervised, but if a student appears to need more specialized support, the peer supporters

encourage them to seek help from professional services, guiding them on how to make appointments with mental health professionals. Additionally, in line with the Standard's definition of student-centredness, peer supporters provide valuable feedback to the university, highlighting areas where mental health services could be improved or expanded, on the basis of their interactions with students. This peer-driven model helps create an ongoing dialogue about mental health and ensures that students feel supported by their peers in a way that's both approachable and effective.



Support Student Engagement through Recognition Programs

“We constantly have to demonstrate to students the value of participating in these types of activities and show them how taking care of their mental health and overall well-being will have a positive effect on their academic success, rather than the opposite.”

– Representative, Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne

Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne and the **University of Calgary** have developed innovative programs to recognize students’ contribution to campus mental health in ways that support the students’ holistic well-being. These programs not only provide opportunities for students to contribute to the campus community but also offer tangible benefits that enhance both their personal development and their academic success. The **University of Calgary** has implemented an embedded [certificate in mental wellbeing and resilience](#) that offers academic recognition for students’ efforts in promoting mental health and inclusivity. This program encourages students to engage in activities that support their mental and emotional well-being while fostering a positive campus environment. The recognition through academic credit further motivates students, reinforcing how prioritizing mental well-being positively impacts students’ academic experiences.

Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne’s [Cheminement +](#) program allows students to earn points through various activities like sports, enrichment activities, and community engagement. Points are awarded on the basis of the level of engagement, with students earning between 50 and 200 points. These points can be transferred to different academic tracks and culminate in a certificate recognizing the student’s commitment. As one student shared, *“At the end of your education, you can be recognized by the CEGEP, which will offer you a certificate stating that you have achieved more than 500 points.”*

Recognition systems like these not only encourage students to stay engaged but also provide meaningful benefits — such as a sense of accomplishment and improved well-being — that support their overall growth and academic journey. By offering such recognition, these institutions have created a sustainable model for student involvement, enabling students to balance academic pressures with the desire to contribute to improving campus life.

Foster Holistic Well-Being through Student-Centred Initiatives

During conversations with students at **Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne**, many expressed their gratitude for the well-being initiatives designed to create a student-centred, inclusive campus environment. These efforts align with various dimensions of the Standard, contributing to a supportive and holistic campus experience. **Bois-de-Boulogne** provides several amenities aimed at enhancing mental health, fostering social connection, and encouraging active engagement in learning. Notable initiatives include quiet study areas, ping pong tables, pet therapy sessions, and a free food refrigerator to address food insecurity. These efforts reflect the college's action plan to create warm, welcoming spaces for students to relax and socialize.

One initiative that particularly stood out was the pet therapy program, which not only has a calming effect on students but also helps mental health professionals build rapport and

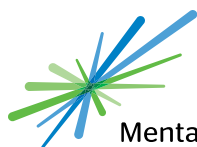
trust with them. As one student shared: *"We also have a social worker at the college who walks around and talks to people. And we also have Albert (pictured below), who is an emotional support dog. She often goes for walks with Albert, which is really nice because you can stop and pet him, and he's so happy to see you. At the same time, the social worker takes the opportunity to check in and see how we're doing."* Additionally, students emphasized the importance of maintaining confidentiality within the peer-to-peer support group BdB Écoute. One volunteer explained: *"Some students may be hesitant to share their problems because they're worried we'll share their information. It's really important to make it clear that their information will be kept confidential."* This focus on privacy and consent helps ensure that students feel safe sharing their concerns, furthering the sense of community and inclusivity at **Bois-de-Boulogne**.





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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