

# Students' Perspectives on Mental Health: Using World Cafés to Engage in Dialogue about Health Promotion and Support Services



Danielle de Moissac, Candice M. Waddell, Nadine Smith, Rhéa Rocque  
Université de Saint-Boniface & Brandon University

*With the increased incidence of poor mental health in young adults, health promotion strategies are needed on campuses. World Cafés were held to facilitate discussion around three main topics: thoughts about findings emerging from a recent health survey, resources currently available on campus, and strategies or resources needed to improve student well-being. Participants readily provided insight into mental health concerns among students, and their recommendations focused primarily on creating a culture of well-being in the university with more professional support services and greater health promotion. Overall, the World Café approach provided an effective method to engage students and discuss possible strategies to promote better mental health on campus.*

*Étant donné l'augmentation des problèmes de santé mentale chez les jeunes adultes, il faut adopter des stratégies de promotion de la santé à l'université. Des conversations de type Café du monde – World Café – ont eu lieu autour de trois sujets : 1) des réflexions autour des résultats provenant d'un sondage récent pourtant sur la santé; 2) les ressources qui sont actuellement offertes à l'université; 3) les stratégies et les ressources nécessaires à l'amélioration du bien-être des étudiants. Les participants n'ont pas hésité à témoigner des enjeux de santé mentale dans la communauté étudiante. Leurs recommandations ont convergé principalement vers la création d'une culture du bien-être à l'université, ce qui suppose un accroissement des services d'aide professionnelle et de la promotion de la santé. Dans l'ensemble, la méthode de type Café du monde a permis de faire participer les étudiants et de discuter des stratégies potentielles pour la promotion de la santé mentale à l'université.*

Health promotion is one of the main pillars in public health and is becoming increasingly important in higher education settings, particularly pertaining to mental health, harm reduction, and cannabis use in the young adult population (Canadian Public Health Association, 2018). Why are postsecondary students of particular concern? Studies have shown that during the transitional period into adulthood, traumatic events or daily stressors such as an unfavorable environment, academic demands, and

the quest for employment and financial autonomy may have an impact on psychological health and adaptability to change (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013; Ruberman, 2014). Poor academic performance (Owens et al., 2012; Ruthig et al., 2011) and psychosocial functioning (Dawson & Pooley, 2013; Farrell & Langrehr, 2017) may lead to long-term negative outcomes (Poon & Knight, 2013). Young adults are therefore identified as a vulnerable segment of the population.

National organisations, including the Canadian Association of College & University Student Services, the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health, and the Mental Health Commission of Canada, recognize the critical role that postsecondary institutions play in promoting well-being and harm reduction as well as improving access to resources and support services for young adults. The *Mental Health Strategy for Canada: A Youth Perspective* (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013) suggests that strategies promoting mental health, treatment, and prevention of mental health issues are more likely to be successful when target populations are identified, protective factors are strengthened and risk factors reduced, goals are set, communities are provided with adequate resources to take action, and long-term planning has been considered. This research project is based on this approach. Our long-term goal is to promote the well-being of student bodies by promoting student engagement in the development of sustainable support initiatives on campus and in the community.

## Student Engagement on Health Issues

Student engagement has been recognized as a key element in health promotion among youth (Sprague Martinez et al., 2018). Student leadership initiatives have been developed in high schools (Canadian Student Leadership Association, 2019) and universities across Canada (Mount Royal University, 2019; University of Waterloo, 2019) to foster the development of skills required to be actively involved in one's learning environment and to contribute to the betterment of society. Whether it be action-research involving student stakeholders (Berg et al., 2018) or student-led/peer-to-peer initiatives, successes have been documented for health promotion activities around nutrition (Feldman, Harwell, & Brusca, 2013), suicide prevention (Tsong et al., 2018), and sexual consent (Ortiz, Shafer & Murphy, 2015). Student engagement is also perceived to be a protective factor against risk behaviors, poor

self-esteem, psychological distress, and low academic achievement (Bryan et al., 2012; Corso et al., 2013; Thapa et al., 2013). Hence, involving students in promoting well-being on campus was deemed vital to attain our goals.

Our recent attempts to engage students around health issues on our campuses have proven to be challenging, with poor turnout to events or gatherings. Although classroom discussions provide a time and space to explore student knowledge on health issues, not all academic programs and courses can justify using class-time for this purpose. Upon reflection on past experiences, our research team chose to use the World Café as our approach to engage students in dialogue about their well-being.

## World Café Approach

The World Café is a group facilitation technique developed by Brown and Isaacs (2005). It is a structured research methodology that gathers information through progressive group discussions and offers a more consensual, positive approach to problem solving (Alfred, 2009). It has been used to develop business and organizational strategy in different contexts, including board or staff meetings (Inman & Thompson, 2013; Jorgenson & Steier, 2013), academic departments (Fallon & Connaughton, 2016), community organizations (Ritch & Brennan, 2010; Sheridan et al., 2010), and conferences (Cassidy & Fox, 2013; Haywood et al., 2015).

The World Café website ([www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com)) provides information on the key concepts of this approach as well as the design principles and tools needed to host a World Café. Our research team followed the seven principles guiding this methodology in order to have structured conversations around student mental health and risk behaviour.

## Objectives

This article highlights students' concerns expressed in the World Cafés pertaining to mental health issues

and strategies to promote well-being on campus, particularly in smaller-sized postsecondary institutions. To achieve our objectives, seven world cafés were held during the winter session of 2019 in two universities in Manitoba, which are described below.

## Study Context

Université de Saint-Boniface (USB), located in Winnipeg, is considered the largest Francophone university in Western Canada. Approximately 1,200 students are enrolled in either an undergraduate or collegiate program. All students have access to student accessibility services as well as academic counsellors. In 2018, part-time counselling services were made available to students via a community-based agency, with counselling offered either on campus or in the community. Student-related support staff had received mental health first aid training the year prior to the study.

Brandon University (BU) is in Brandon, a rural setting in southwestern Manitoba. Approximately 3,600 students are enrolled in this university annually. All Brandon University students have access to two full-time counsellors on campus and at the time of the study, all students had access to the I.M.Well App (Integrated Mental Wellness) through their student health insurance provider.

## Methodology

The research team chose to conduct a qualitative study, using the World Café as a forum for small-group discussion around mental health. Ethics approval was obtained for the Research Ethics Bureau from both participating universities (ETH 2018 10 juillet - Université de Saint-Boniface and BUREC #22428 - Brandon University).

Students were recruited either by invitation from a research assistant in the classroom, or by an email from the student association, providing information about the study and specifying time and date of World Cafés. In total, 73 students participated. Students were from social work, psychology,

sociology and health studies programs such as nursing and psychiatric nursing, as well as student association representatives.

Students were invited into a spacious room with small tables, each with large sheets of paper, markers, and pens for notetaking. Participants were invited to enjoy a snack or beverage. After participants consented to participate and were informed that counselling services were available should they feel the need to talk during or after the activity, students were encouraged to discuss three topics:

- 1) Mental health and risk behaviour generally
- 2) Mental health resources currently available on campus
- 3) Strategies or resources needed to improve student well-being

To initiate these discussions, students were given a brief overview of key findings from a mental health and risk behaviour survey conducted by the authors in both universities in the fall of 2018 (de Moissac, Gueye & Rocque, 2019) in the form of an oral presentation and a visual display (infograph). This survey focused on the following findings: most participants worked and were financially dependent on their parents; a significant proportion of participants self-reported depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, lack of sleep, and poor body image; use of alcohol and cannabis was common; prevalence of speeding and using mobile devices while driving was reported; having a designated driver when partying was common; use of condoms was inconsistent; time spent on social media, streaming or texting was 3 hours or more per day for approximately half of participants.

Students were grouped at tables of four to five participants; one participant volunteered to be host and documented the group discussion. Participants were encouraged to comment on findings from the mental health and risk behaviour survey and to capture their ideas through key words, phrases, or drawings, thus enhancing creative thinking, expression, and communication. This first topic was discussed for 15 minutes, after which each participant was asked to disperse to a different table to promote exchange of ideas throughout the group.

Following a brief overview of the discussion of the first topic with their new discussion group, students engaged in a discussion about the second topic. The process was repeated for the third topic. A plenary followed, allowing for general discussion of main ideas emerging from the small group discussions.

Data collected during the World Café, including key phrases, statements, lists, sketches made by participants, and notes taken by hosts during the small-group discussions, as well as by researchers during the plenary discussion, were examined. Notes were grouped according to the three main topics. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted for each topic to identify emerging themes and sub-themes by a minimum of two researchers at each site (Haywood et al., 2015). Frequency analyses guided interpretation of findings, as frequency counts were used as an indicator of main themes (Bazeley, 2013). However, we did not limit our interpretations to themes with high frequency counts, as high frequency does not necessarily equate to significance. Findings are presented below for each of the three topics discussed at the World Cafés.

## Results

Main themes emerging from the small group discussion are summarized and then described with a few examples for each university for the two first topics. However, as recommendations from students from both institutions were similar, they are presented together.

### Students' Thoughts about Current Mental Health Status and Risk Behaviours of Students on their Campus

Main concerns expressed by participants included poor mental health status and associated risk factors such as social media overuse, sleep deprivation, poor access to support systems, and impact of psychological characteristics such as self-esteem and body image. A second topic pertained to unsafe

sexual practices, including inconsistent condom use and withdrawal, sexual harassment, and bullying.

Most students at USB were surprised by findings pertaining to high prevalence of suicidal ideation and poor mental health, with some questioning the use of new technologies, particularly social media, as a risk factor contributing to poor self-esteem, negative body image, and eating disorders. Some wondered if mental health had become a central issue, as it is more socially accepted today. Others questioned the cause of stress: academic demands, financial difficulties, employment issues? Do students have sufficient sleep, leisure time, and support systems?

The second most commented-on topic was sexual practices. Inconsistent condom use was discussed with a potential link to sexual harassment. Participants wondered if sexual harassment was more prevalent on campus and who the perpetrator was (fellow student, staff member, on-line acquaintance).

Most students at BU were not surprised by the prevalence of suicidal ideation and actually stated that this could be because it has been well publicized in social media campaigns and, for students in the health field, normalized in class discussions. However, students were surprised that the mental health scores were similar to the national statistics when the suicidal ideation scores were so high. Additionally, students were surprised and confused that the survey asked questions about technology use and that this was being linked to poor mental health. They did not feel that technology use had a detrimental effect on student well-being.

Similarly to USB students, BU students were surprised and concerned with the lack of condom use and the use of withdrawal as a method of contraception. One participant wrote, "*Come on people, it is 2019*" regarding condom use. The students also queried on the current rate of pregnancy within the student population. Students were surprised by the rates of bullying but felt that more information should have been gleaned from the study in regards to the perpetrators and the situations where bullying was present. They were not surprised by the amount

of people that were told mean things about their race and attributed this to racism on campus.

## Resources Currently Available on Campus

Participants generally shared that students were not aware of mental health services available on campus and that accessibility services, sports, spiritual or cultural-related services or events, and participating in research were viewed as beneficial for better mental health.

Participants at USB were generally not aware of mental health services available on campus. Most students acknowledged accessibility services, well-being activities put on by the student union, and the sports centre on campus. Others provided examples of services or activities that indirectly support positive mental health: for example, stress-management or note-taking workshops, the food bank, and cultural activities such as theatre. Others mentioned that participating in the World Café and the health survey were also conducive to improving student well-being as it provided a safe space to express concerns. Different types of support were identified, including professors, security guards, well-being campaigns, and promotion of diversity on campus. For instance, students described some professors as *“being encouraging, supportive, flexible, understanding and available to meet one on one to discuss course evaluations as well as personal issues, if needed.”* Being on a small campus was also identified as a facilitator in seeking assistance.

BU students had mixed reactions to the services that were available on campus. One group indicated, *“Is there anything being done on campus? We don't know!”* Others did mention that they were aware of the I.M.Well App, student counsellors, the multi-faith prayer room, and accessibility services. Everyone indicated that they wished that more could be done regarding mental wellness on campus.

## Recommendations to Improve Student Well-Being

Recommendations provided by participants can be summarized under three themes:

- 1) Easy access to full-time counselling services on campus, peer-support groups, and better advertisement of available services
- 2) Improving balance between studies, work, and social life and promoting a healthy learning environment
- 3) Allowing students a greater voice in decisions that concern them

## Easy Access to Full-Time Counselling Services on Campus

Students had many suggestions as to how to improve student well-being and decrease risk behaviours. First and foremost, having access to full-time counselling services (psychotherapy) on campus was identified as a priority, as current counselling services were not deemed sufficient on both campuses. Participants suggested that additional resources should be provided for advertising counselling services and promoting well-being across campus, as many students were not aware of what was currently available. Suggestions were made as to how to promote counselling services in a less stigmatizing and more accessible way, such as booking appointments by texting. A few groups suggested that organizing peer-led support groups would be beneficial. Better advertising of other available services and organizing activities were other propositions, as these provide time and space for students to talk about mental health, reduce social isolation, and promote a culture of well-being on campus. Risks associated with cell phone use and social media, how to manage technology use, and time or stress management were identified as topics for workshops. Animal-assisted therapy, mental health first aid, volunteer opportunities, and greater student leadership in providing these opportunities were also suggested.

## Improving Balance between Studies, Work and Social Life and Promoting a Healthy Learning Environment

Participants recommended having greater balance between academic, extracurricular, and social activities, as well as a healthy environment that fosters opportunities to relax, socialize, and enjoy student life. Comfortable areas to write exams and gathering spaces for students in the same field of study were suggested. Students with access to such gathering spaces acknowledged that they felt privileged and appreciative in this respect. According to participants, well-being should be integrated into all aspects of student life, with time allotted every day for mindfulness, meditation, positive psychology techniques, yoga, individual or team sports, group discussion, and leisure. Equilibrium was also sought in academia, as some programs were perceived as overwhelming. Improving examination procedures, with no more than one exam per day and eliminating the pass/fail system, and organizing study groups would improve student well-being during exam periods, suggested others. Promoting a sense of belonging to the university, as well as departmental or program-specific group cohesion, were suggested as important elements that could also contribute to better mental health.

## Allowing Students a Greater Voice in Decisions that Concern Them

Lastly, participants suggested students should have a greater voice in decision-making. Students were concerned about academic and financial demands and wished to be heard. Students felt that communication needed to be improved with faculty on topics such as student well-being and examinations, respect in the classroom, and, particularly at USB, intimidation linked to linguistic competencies. For instance, a group of participants at USB wrote *“teachers could show that they have empathy for us and that they understand how much effort we put into this program”*. They also felt that improving pedagogical techniques and continued education related to mental

health and workplace respect should be a priority for faculty. Greater dialogue between students and administrators to discuss financial concerns was also recommended.

## Discussion

This article presents how a research methodology using progressive group discussions was used to promote student engagement focused on mental health and risk behaviour in postsecondary institutions. Using the World Café approach to engage students in dialogue, students felt comfortable and safe to share their thoughts. They became engaged as the discussion topics focused on their well-being. Through small group discussions, they were able to voice their concerns and propose recommendations. Additionally, knowledge mobilization practices that incorporate a World Café methodology ensures that all students know that they have been listened to and that their thoughts have been recorded; this positive outcome occurs regardless of whether their thoughts are given priority or not (MacFarlane et al., 2017). Thus, their participation may have an impact on their perspectives related to their own well-being and their contribution to improving university life in the future.

Recommendations provided by participants focused primarily on creating a culture of wellbeing in their university. The need for professional support services, with easy access to counsellors and psychotherapists, was a priority. However, access to psychotherapists on campuses (Gibson, 2019) and in Manitoba (Institute for Work & Health, 2017) is limited. As suggested by some participants, peer-support group psychotherapy may be a more feasible approach. Group therapy has proven to be effective in improving depressive and anxious symptoms, as well as self-esteem in college students (Koutra, Katsiadrami, & Diakogiannis, 2010; Mejias et al., 2019; Weatherford, 2017). This type of intervention could support a greater number of students as compared to individual therapy. Complementary to therapy and professional support services, students also mentioned greater health promotion on campus,

with proposed workshops and integrated strategies to facilitate greater equilibrium between academic demands and extracurricular activities.

Students from both institutions emphasized the need to have a greater voice in decision-making regarding educational programming and university life. This idea is consistent with findings from other research studies that indicate that student participation in decision-making pertaining to all aspects of health promotion within the educational setting provides positive outcomes for students (Griebler et al., 2017). Although Griebler et al.'s (2017) systematic review focused on educational settings with children ages five to nineteen, there is other literature that indicates that school engagement (i.e., being active in decision-making processes) is positively correlated with achievement and a sense of accomplishment (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Gregoire, Lachance, Bouffard, & Dionne, 2018). Institutions need to accommodate this by allowing students to have a voice in decision making that is meaningful to them.

The World Cafés have had a positive impact on student support services and has inspired some students to take action. For example, students have expressed their concern about student well-being to the university president and continue to advocate for better support services. Consequently, improved advertisement about counselling services and increased hours of service on campus have been put in place. Discussions focusing on how to streamline referral processes have taken place between student support service providers and users. At the administrative level, a research report on survey findings and recommendations emerging from the World Cafés has been shared with students, faculty members, university administrators, regional health authority representatives, and the provincial ministry of postsecondary education. Discussions as to how to bring about a culture of well-being with greater equilibrium and improved support services are ongoing. These positive outcomes highlight the importance of channelling the student voice to initiate change.

Although easy to conduct, quick, and cost-effective, the World Café approach as a qualitative research method has limitations. Data collection, although guided, relies on untrained volunteers. Ideas are noted randomly with no indication of prevalence of opinion within the small group or from all participants. However, as with other qualitative data collection methods (Bazeley, 2013), the frequency of comments is not as important as the diversity of ideas. As one of our objectives was to better understand mental health on campus through the students' eyes and explore innovative ways to improve supports, small-group discussions between peers have proven to be effective. Participants, who are most knowledgeable of the context of interest, are also well suited to suggest strategies that would be helpful to most students.

In conclusion, World Cafés have proven to be an effective way to validate findings and engage students in a meaningful dialogue about student well-being and supports provided on campus. Participants have shared what really matters to them and simple actions which can make a difference in students' lives. Through group discussions, students have been given an opportunity to speak up about mental health issues and changes needed on campus. Researchers are equally empowered as they now have the students' perspective to involve university leadership in facilitating change and promoting a culture of well-being on Manitoba postsecondary campuses.

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## Biographies

Danielle de Moissac is professor at the Faculty of Science at the Université de Saint-Boniface. Her research focuses on mental health and access to care.

Candice Waddell is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatric Nursing at Brandon University. Her research includes improving health care practice and systems.

Nadine Smith is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Health Studies at Brandon University. Her research interests include nursing/psychiatric nursing and clinical education.

Rh ea Rocque is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Prairie Climate Centre, University of Winnipeg. Her research interests lie within the field of environmental psychology.