



We Need More Than Words: An Open Letter to Post-Secondary Administrations

Last March, I woke up to devastating news—one of my peers had died by suicide at the University of Toronto's Bahen Centre. It was the second suicide in that building within the year. Together with my fellow students, I advocated for the university to install barriers in Bahen. We wanted to prevent further tragedy. To students, it seemed like the least that could be done—a preventive measure to take while we worked with the university administration to address the real causes of the mental health crisis on campus.

That was seven months ago. Last week, another young person died by suicide in Bahen. There had been no barriers erected to stop them.

I've spent years of my life advocating for better mental health policies on campus. I know that effective advocacy requires us to be persistent when change doesn't happen as quickly as it should. But I'm reaching the threshold of my patience. Students are reaching the threshold of our patience. We're tired of only seeing action after something terrible happens—only after a life has been lost, when it is far too late. Simply reacting to suicide is not going to prevent it.

This crisis is happening right now on campuses across the country. Though the number of students who die by suicide on Canadian campuses is not reported, we know that, since June of 2018, there have been four confirmed deaths by suicide on the UofT St. George campus alone. In 2015, 518 people between the ages of 15 and 24 died by suicide in Canada, and an estimated 150,000 young people attempted suicide.

All that said, suicide statistics alone tend to miss the real scope of the problem. Rates of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and addiction among young people are on the rise. Record numbers of young people experience negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that affect their ability to function. And while it's a good thing that help-seeking is increasingly encouraged on campus, services are often not scaled up quickly enough to match the demand.

This year, as part of Jack.org's Campus Assessment Tool pilot project, I worked with many of my peers to assess mental health services on campuses across the country. We found that, on average, students faced wait times of four weeks before they got the help they so desperately needed. We also found that nearly half of students felt that faculty or staff would think differently of them if they knew they sought mental health support. Students at campuses whose faculty receive mental health training feel that their faculty is more supportive, but only four of the ten campuses we assessed require that vital training.

Please realize that while blanket solutions aren't realistic, a lack of solutions isn't our most pressing problem. What we lack, seemingly across Canadian post-secondary campuses, is the institutional will to find solutions, implement them, and make the hard decisions that come with it. Jack.org's 2019 Youth Voice Report makes five evidence-based recommendations that can serve as a starting point. For example, university administrations can do a better job of connecting students with community supports. We also know that providing campus faculty and staff with

mental health training can help them recognize when a student is struggling and, from there, get them the support they need. Reducing campus wait times and making sure that students have enough insurance to cover the costs of off-campus counselling would also help. We could also reimagine our teaching practices and think first and foremost about how they serve the health of students, which in turn increases their chances of long-term success. These are all realistic steps universities across the country can take to change mental health on campus. I'd encourage everyone who cares about youth mental health to read our Youth Voice Report—there's so much more we can, and need, to do.

This is a national issue. My co-signees on this letter are my fellow Network Representatives— thirteen highly-trained mental health advocates from across Canada who represent Jack.org's network of 2,800 young leaders from every province and territory. We're asking administrators across the country to commit to proactive approaches that improve student mental health. With a collaborative approach and commitment to action, we can help close the gaps that so many young people are falling through. I believe Sandy Welsh, U of T's vice provost for students when she wrote, in the wake of what took place last weekend, that the "safety and well-being of our students are our top priorities." This system has failed too many young people to be met with a muted response.

We call for collaboration between administrators and students. We call for careful consideration of existing data and recommendations around student mental health. We call for student well-being to be the top priority. We've lost too many people already. For the sake of me and my peers, listen to us and take meaningful action.

Respectfully yours,



Melanie Asselin, Toronto



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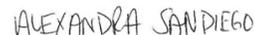
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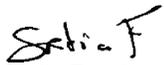
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