

Professor Hippo-On-Campus Mental Health Education Program for Graduate Students

Final Report for McCall MacBain Foundation
December 2024



Okanagan
Office of Health
& Well-being

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Executive Summary

Introduction and Background

Graduate students are a diverse and distinct population on university campuses, carrying valuable experience and holding significant roles and responsibilities, as learners, teachers and emerging researchers. They frequently interact with faculty and undergraduate students as teaching assistants (TAs) and in research contexts, and undergraduates often feel more comfortable discussing academic and personal challenges with them, as compared to faculty or staff. However, typically graduate students have not been offered training to support undergraduates or colleagues in distress or difficulty or who are experiencing mental health challenges, and they can experience different role conflicts and issues of boundaries and scope of responsibilities, which are distinct from those of faculty and staff.

Despite being successful and high-functioning students, they face significantly higher mental health challenges compared to the general population at their age and stage of life who are working, with studies indicating they are six times more likely to experience depression or anxiety. Contributors can include financial stress, life-work imbalance and conflict, uncertain employment options, poor supervisory relationships, and navigating the 'success at all costs' academic culture. Given the numbers and prioritizing of undergraduate mental health needs historically on campuses, there has been less attention and focused prevention and care available to graduate students.

We identified an opportunity both to train and improve graduate students' mental health literacy, and to help prevent and protect their emotional and psychological health during graduate school, given the associated challenges and risks to their mental health. Given the numbers of graduate students in post-secondary, this cannot be achieved with individual-level intervention, nor should it be limited to provision of health care and counselling, which can be perceived as stigmatizing and pathologizing and tends to be sought out late, when patterns of feeling, thinking and acting have become entrenched or problems have progressed.

Guiding principles in the Professor Hippo-on-Campus Mental Health Education Programs is that, in order to offer compassionate, effective support to others, we must protect and preserve our own mental health, treat ourselves with compassion and care, and connect in meaningful and genuine ways with one another.

Project Purpose and Program Overview

The purpose of this project was to evaluate the feasibility and acceptability of a mental health literacy program specifically designed for graduate students at McMaster University. The project received ethics approval from the Hamilton Integrated Research Ethics Board (HiREB). There are 2 components – Level 1 modules and workshops focused primarily on supporting undergraduates which were developed, offered to hundreds of graduate students at McMaster, and a Level 2 workshop focused on protecting and preserving mental health in graduate school, which was developed and piloted to a small number of graduate students.

The programs, known as the Professor Hippo-on-Campus Mental Health Education Program for Graduate Students, built and capitalized on our existing program for faculty and staff, included four online modules followed by a 2.5-hour online workshop. The initiative aimed to engage

graduate students in structured dialogue, enhance their knowledge about mental health and available resources, and practice key skills to support others and care for themselves.

Overview of Recruitment and Participation

- **Participants:** 217 graduate students from McMaster University.
- **Initial Interest:** Approximately 170 students enrolled within the first week.
- **Recruitment Methods:** Social media outreach and targeted email invitations.
- **Incentives:** Participants were offered escalating rewards for completing various evaluation components, with an additional \$30 bonus for completing the entire program. Each participant could receive up to \$175 in incentives.

Program Phases

- **Registrations, Consent Form, and Module Pre-Survey:**
 - a. 208 students completed a consent form and 207 Pre-Module Surveys were collected.
 - b. Participants received a \$5 gift card incentive and access to the online modules.
- **Online Modules and Module Post-Survey:**
 - a. 179 students completed the modules (86% completion rate). Four modules covering mental health issues, inclusive thinking, effective communication, and recognizing/responding to distress. No incentives.
 - b. 178 students completed the Post-Module Survey (99.44% completion rate, based on the participants that completed the modules), receiving a \$15 gift card.
- **Level 1 Workshop:**
 - a. 165 students attended virtual workshops, each receiving \$25 gift card.
 - i. Workshops covered key concepts, resources, communication skills, self-care, and boundary-setting.
- **Workshop Post-Survey and 3-Month Follow-up Survey:**
 - a. 164 students completed the Workshop Post-Survey (99.39% completion rate, based on the participants that attended the workshop).
 - b. 161 of those students completed the 3-Month Follow-Up Survey (97.58% completion rate).
 - c. 14 out of 14 participants that did not attend a workshop completed the 3-Month Follow-Up Survey (100% completion rate).
 - d. Participants received a \$50 gift card for the follow-up survey and a \$30 bonus gift card for completing all phases.
- **Level 2 Workshop Research, Development and Pilot:**
 - a. Identified unmet mental health needs and key priorities with graduate students for a follow-up workshop through prior work, Level 1 experiences and follow-up surveys.
 - b. Developed objectives to discuss challenges, enhance self-care, and apply knowledge through interactive exercises.

- c. Researched effective strategies and approaches to improve graduate student mental health, chose methods to engage and teach key concepts and approaches.
- d. Ran a pilot workshop with five participants and captured additional feedback about the experience. No formal evaluation undertaken to date

Evaluation of Program Outcomes – Level 1

- **Confidence:** Significant improvements in confidence were observed between the pre-module and post-module surveys, sustained at the three-month mark.
- **Sense of Belonging:** Increased from 55% at baseline to 66% after the workshop.
- **Interactions with Students:** Frequency of interactions with distressed students trended downwards, possibly due to the timing of the program.
- **Satisfaction:** High rates of satisfaction, with 97% of respondents glad they attended the workshop, 90% felt it added value, and 93% recommended in the program.

Key Findings and Future Directions

- **International Students:** Over-representation and unmet needs among participants, indicating a need for targeted training.
- **Development of multiple short Level 2 sessions, building on experience of Level 2 Pilot:** Suggest building on this experience offering multiple, shorter, focused virtual synchronous sessions on managing emotions, supporting success, and effective communication versus a single lengthy workshop.

Financial Reporting

Total Costs: \$90,057.95 with \$30,045 of that total given as Gift Card incentives to students.

Acknowledgements

Our gratitude is extended to the McCall MacBain Foundation for their funding and support of this project from our graduate student participants and the entire team at the McMaster Okanagan Office of Health & Well-Being. We offer special thanks to our additional workshop facilitators Lindsay Crocco and Sam Bengall. We also wish to thank Steve Hrlanovic, Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies, Andrea Cole in the School of Graduate Studies, and the entire team at the School of Graduate Studies who enthusiastically spread the word about and championed our program. Thank you to the graduate student supervisors and faculty who directed their students to our programs and support graduate students every day. We also wish to thank Dr. Susan Tighe, Provost and AVP (Academic), for her leadership and support which allowed for Dr. Munn's work on this project, and Dr. Paul O'Byrne, Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences, for his leadership and support of the Okanagan Office of Health & Well-Being, within which this work occurred.

Throughout the document in gold and maroon text boxes, we have included verbatim, written qualitative quotes from students who participated in the programs collected during confidential surveys. Identifying information or details have been removed.
We are currently undertaking a more comprehensive qualitative analysis of the programs.

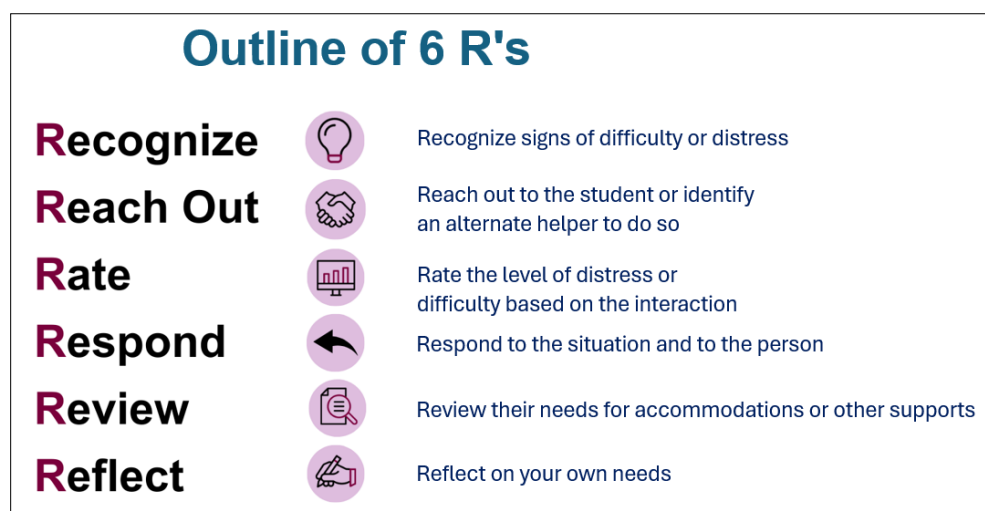
Introduction and Background

Graduate students experience increased mental health difficulties compared to the general population, with recent statistics indicating graduate students are six times more likely to experience depression or anxiety when compared to the general population (Evans et al., 2018). Factors such as chronic environmental stress, life-work imbalance, lack of employment options, longer study periods, poor supervisory relationships, and increased competition have been reported to increase stress and exacerbate mental health symptoms (Chi et al., 2023; Moss et al., 2022). Current interventions across post-secondary institutions are reactive and fragmented (Ng & Padjen, 2019), and there is a call to improve early intervention approaches for all students. Graduate students require early intervention approaches that are adapted to support their unique needs and experiences, some shared and some different than undergraduates, within the context of post-secondary education.

Individual characteristics (self-efficacy, optimism), coping mechanisms, and help-seeking behaviours are factors that have been linked to better mental health and student resilience (Linden & Stuart, 2020). It is important that interventions address mental health literacy and stigma to improve student knowledge and confidence in identifying mental health issues and seeking appropriate support when needed.

The purpose of this project was to assess the feasibility and acceptability of a mental health literacy program for graduate students at McMaster University. The project was reviewed by Hamilton Integrated Research Ethics Board (HiREB) [Project 16630] to allow for the proper evaluation of the entire intervention.

At McMaster, the Responding to Students in Distress and Difficulty Protocol was created in 2017 in response to uncertainty by faculty and staff members regarding how to identify and direct students needing mental health support. This document has been revised regularly since 2017, and in its current format has “6R’s” to guide users (<https://mentalhealth.mcmaster.ca/mental-health-toolkits/rsdd/>).



This template for action is one of the core teachings for the Professor Hippo-on-Campus Mental Health Education Program for Graduate Students

“I was raised as someone to stay away from a fight or a conflict, and it also made me stay away from people in need, but I am now more open to helping people in need of mental health resources.”

“Since the graduate mental health workshop, I have been more intentional about setting boundaries for myself to ensure better work/life balance and mental wellness.”


Methods and Processes

The Level 1 project successfully recruited 217 graduate students from McMaster University to participate in this mental health literacy initiative, which included 4 online modules watched in advance followed by a 2.5-hour online workshop designed to engage graduate students in structured dialogue using a combination of approaches in order to enhance knowledge about mental health and resources and practice key skills to support others and care for themselves. The program saw immediate, significant interest, with approximately 170 students enrolling within the first week.

Recruitment efforts aimed to closely reflect the distribution of graduate students across faculties, ensuring diverse and broad representation from across the university. Recruitment was conducted through a combination of social media outreach and targeted email invitations sent by the McMaster Okanagan Office of Health and Well-Being in collaboration with graduate program Chairs. Social media posts garnered over 3,700 views across platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and LinkedIn, contributing to the program’s visibility and reach.

Participate in the Professor Hippo-on-Campus Mental Health Education Program for Graduate Students

Evaluating the Feasibility and Acceptability of a Mental Health Literacy Program for Graduate Students



If you are a current McMaster graduate student, you are invited to participate in an optional research study to assess your understanding and experiences in taking the Professor Hippo-on-Campus Mental Health Education Program.


Note: Limited spots are available.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete four online modules (1 hour 15 mins total), one online workshop (2.5 hours) and accompanying surveys, and will receive up to \$175 in gift card compensation.

The modules and workshop will help you:

- Recognize and respond to students in distress or difficulty
- Learn about mental health services and resources at McMaster and beyond
- Develop strategies for protecting your own mental health

Study Contact:
Dr. Catharine Munn (munnc@mcmaster.ca)

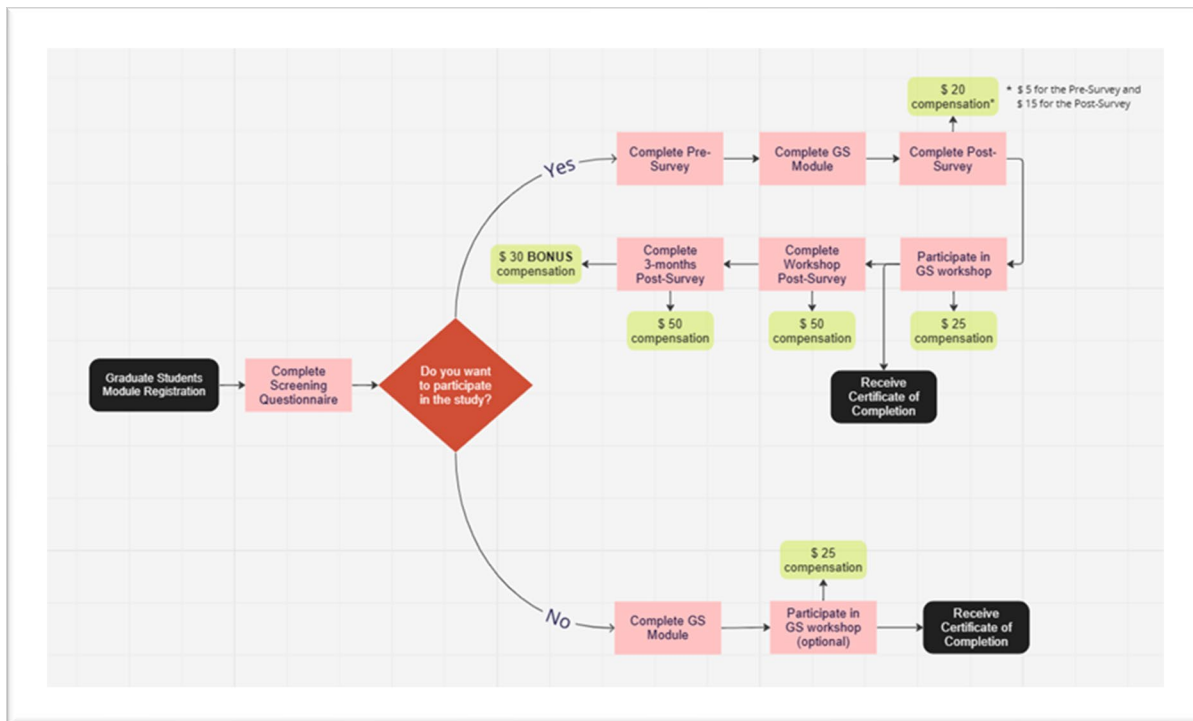
Scan here to register and learn more → 

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This study has been reviewed by the Hamilton Integrated Research Ethics Board under Project 16630.

With the support of the funding, we implemented an incentive-based approach to encourage engagement in the evaluation process. Participants were offered escalating rewards for completing various evaluation components, with an additional \$30 bonus for completing the entire program. The diagram below illustrates the participation flow and incentive structure.

Participant flow and Incentive Structure Diagram



The Program

Phase 1 – Registrations, Consent Form and Module Pre-Survey

The first step for participants was to register by completing a screening questionnaire via Microsoft Forms. These registrations were reviewed by the program manager at the Okanagan Office, who assessed them based on eligibility criteria, study requirements, and faculty distribution targets. Once approved, participants received detailed information about the study and were prompted to complete the consent form and the Pre-Module Survey.

The program successfully collected 208 completed consent forms and 207 Pre-Module Surveys. Only participants that completed the consent form were considered as part of this study and included in the data analysis.

“I really enjoyed the modules, they were very engaging and informative.”

Upon completing the Pre-Module Survey, participants received a \$5 gift card incentive and were provided with an access code to be used on Avenue to Learn (A2L), McMaster University's centralized platform for online teaching, learning, and course management. Using this code, participants were granted access to the online modules for the Professor Hippo-On-Campus Mental Health Education Program for Graduate Students.

Phase 2 – Level 1 Online Modules and Module Post-Survey

The online modules were adapted from the existing Professor Hippo-on-Campus Mental Health Education Program, making the content specific to the context for graduate students at McMaster University in roles supporting undergraduate students (e.g., as teaching assistants, lab assistants) and working alongside fellow graduate students. In total there were four modules for students to watch, taking about 70 minutes to complete. Participants were encouraged to watch the modules over a series of days, providing time to think and reflect on the content presented.

The four modules addressed the following key content areas:

1. What are the mental health and well-being issues and challenges facing graduate students?
2. How can you think broadly and inclusively about mental health and well-being on university campuses and as a graduate student?
3. How can you communicate with students in distress or difficulty effectively?
4. How can you recognize and respond to other students in distress and difficulty?

Participants were recruited through a variety of outreach methods, including social media posts, emails from departments, and word of mouth. Over the study period, more than 200 students engaged with the program and 179 successfully completed the online modules. This equates to an 86% completion rate which highlights the participants' genuine engagement and commitment to the program's objectives.

One thing to note here is that students were not compensated for completing the modules as incentives were only offered for participation in the surveys and the workshop. Thus, the high completion rate is remarkable, reflecting the perceived value of the program's content.

After completing the online modules, participants were asked to complete the Post-Module Survey, which was successfully completed by 178 students, resulting in a high completion rate of 99.44%. As an incentive, each participant received a \$15 gift card for their time and input. This excellent response rate underscores the participants' commitment and continued engagement with the study.

Phase 3 – Level 1 Workshop

Following their completion of the online modules, students were invited to attend a workshop. Initially, these workshops were planned as in-person sessions. However, after consulting with students, it became clear that a virtual format was preferred. Students were informed that to meet

the participation requirements and receive the compensation, they needed to have their cameras on, remain fully present throughout the session, and engage actively in the discussions. A protocol was developed to manage and support students who disengaged or who became distressed during the virtual workshop.

Workshop content summary:

- Key concepts and epidemiology of mental health issues on campus (statistics, stressors, dual continuum model, etc.).
- Information regarding resources available on campus to support mental well-being.
- Discussion and skill building: including practice for communication skills and navigating scenarios which involved responding to students in distress to illustrate and practice the 6 Rs (Recognize, Reach out, Rate, Respond, Review, Reflect) for situations ranging from students requiring no additional support to students requiring emergency support
- Self-care and collective care, assertiveness and boundary-setting as a graduate student with students and faculty

“I enjoyed the opportunity to talk through different case scenarios as this helped solidify my understanding and was a chance to think about how I might react in a situation.”

The primary goal of the workshop was to provide students with the opportunity to apply the skills learned in the online modules, achieved through interactive activities and case scenarios. From February to July 2024 the study ran 10 workshops, and a total of 165 students attended the workshops, meeting the active participation criteria. Each participant received \$25 gift card compensation for attending a workshop session.

“Great Job on this workshop! I feel like I learned a lot. I was apprehensive at first at having to have my camera on the entire time as I usually do not do that, but I see what you meant by making it a safer space for us to speak up.”

The workshops were 2.5 hours in length and graduate students interacted in multiple ways in the online workshop: verbally, through text using the Zoom written chat function, and using Google Jamboards, an interactive software which allows for anonymous commenting and input.

What do you say next?

Hi Parveen, I noticed that you were upset in class today. How are you doing?

do you have any friends or family you've shared this with?

I'm so sorry to hear that, do you want to talk about it?

I'm so sorry to hear that. Would you like me to suggest some resources at campus that might be helpful?

I'm so sorry to hear that, thanks for feeling comfortable sharing that with me.

I'm really sorry to hear that. Would you like to go somewhere more private to talk?

My boyfriend just broke up with me. We've been fighting over the last few weeks. I have nowhere to go.

I'm so sorry to hear that. Have you had the chance to discuss this with anyone else close to you?

thank you for sharing that, I'm so sorry you are going through that right now.

Thanks for sharing. Is there some way I can help?

I am so sorry that you are experiencing this, it sounds like that is a challenging situation. I know some supports around McMaster, would you like hearing about them?

Validating statement - Parveen, that sounds really difficult. Do you want to talk about it?

Parveen says, "I've been living with NIM lately because things are really bad with my parents.... I can't go there, I'm just so overwhelmed and can't focus and I don't want to fail the term."

Take a star- where would you rate Parveen?

No additional support	Requiring support (in the next week or more)	Requiring urgent support (1-2 days)	Emergency Support Immediate
		★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★	★

Each of the 10 workshop sessions had an average of 17 participants and was led by two trained facilitators (CM, EB, LC, SB), with an additional team member assigned to manage technical issues, coordinate chat messages, and ensure the well-being and safety of all participants throughout the session. This extra support proved invaluable, allowing the workshops to proceed smoothly even if one facilitator was required to provide one-on-one assistance.

"After attending the graduate mental health workshop, I applied communication skills during a group project. When a teammate missed deadlines, instead of getting frustrated, I calmly approached them, opened up a constructive conversation, allowing me to address the issue without confrontation and work together on a solution. "

Given the sensitive nature of the material, there were rare instances when students needed to be moved to virtual breakout rooms for individual dialogue or support, where the second facilitator could address their concerns and determine if further assistance was needed. Anecdotally, this additional staffing contributed significantly to the workshops' success, ensuring they were both well-received, psychologically safe and effectively executed.

"It's my first time to attend a mental health course. I think it's very helpful to understand the causes of mental health issues, how to identify them, and more importantly, tackle these problems appropriately and help others. I think all graduate students should take this program to create a supportive and inclusive environment. "

Phase 4 – Workshop Post-Survey, 3-Month Follow-up Survey and Bonus Compensation

Among the 165 participants who attended a workshop and met the active participation criteria, 164 students completed the Workshop Post-Survey, reflecting a completion rate of 99.39%. This survey provided crucial data for the program's evaluation. To encourage participation and recognize their efforts, participants were compensated with a \$50 gift card, which likely contributed to the high completion rate.

"I was lacking experience in identifying mental health related issues, was not so confident to offer help, and didn't know how I could help. This program equips me with solid knowledge to tackle these issues. I think helping people with mental health problem is everyone's responsibility."

Regarding the follow-up evaluation, all participants who completed Phase 2, which included the online modules and the Module Post-Survey, were invited to participate in the 3-Month Follow-Up Survey and receive a \$50 gift card compensation. For those who attended a workshop, the follow-up survey was distributed three months after their workshop date. Participants who did not attend a workshop (14 in total) were sent the survey only after all workshop sessions had concluded.

"Given how difficult students' financial situations often are, offering incentives to spend additional time on commitments like these workshops and surveys certainly feels appropriate. "

Of the 165 workshop attendees, 161 completed the 3-Month Follow-Up Survey, representing a completion rate of 97.58%. All 14 participants who were eligible but did not attend a workshop also completed the survey, achieving a 100% completion rate among this group. Therefore, the 3-Month Follow-Up Survey had 175 respondents in total.

To further encourage full program participation, all participants who completed every phase of the program received a bonus \$30 gift card as a token of appreciation. This bonus was awarded in addition to the individual compensations provided for each phase of the program. Offering this additional incentive proved to be an effective strategy for motivating participants to stay engaged and complete all required components, including the online modules, workshops, and surveys. The bonus not only served as a gesture of gratitude but also reinforced the value of their sustained participation in the program.

These results highlight the program's success in maintaining participant engagement throughout multiple phases of data collection. The combination of structured incentives and clear communication was instrumental in achieving such high levels of participation, providing robust data to assess the program's impact over time.

"It was great to be able to talk through everything, address concerns about situations, because this is not something easy to talk about. It was really beneficial to have a safe space to talk about mental health."

"I am so glad I took the course and feel that my toolkit for mental health support is greatly expanded."

Phase 5 – Level II Workshop



After completing a first workshop, participants were asked whether they wished to learn more about developing their skills and capacities to protect and preserve their own mental health as a graduate student.

Previous work had been conducted with two Occupational Therapy Master's level students in Evidence-Based Practice (2023-24) supervised by Emma Bruce and Dr. Munn (see figure above). Through this work, which included a review of the literature and some co-design, focus group sessions, an improved understanding of the issues from the perspective of graduate students and key issues and desired skills for the level 2 workshop were identified such as navigating supervision challenges, balancing academic and social pressures, and boundary setting were identified.

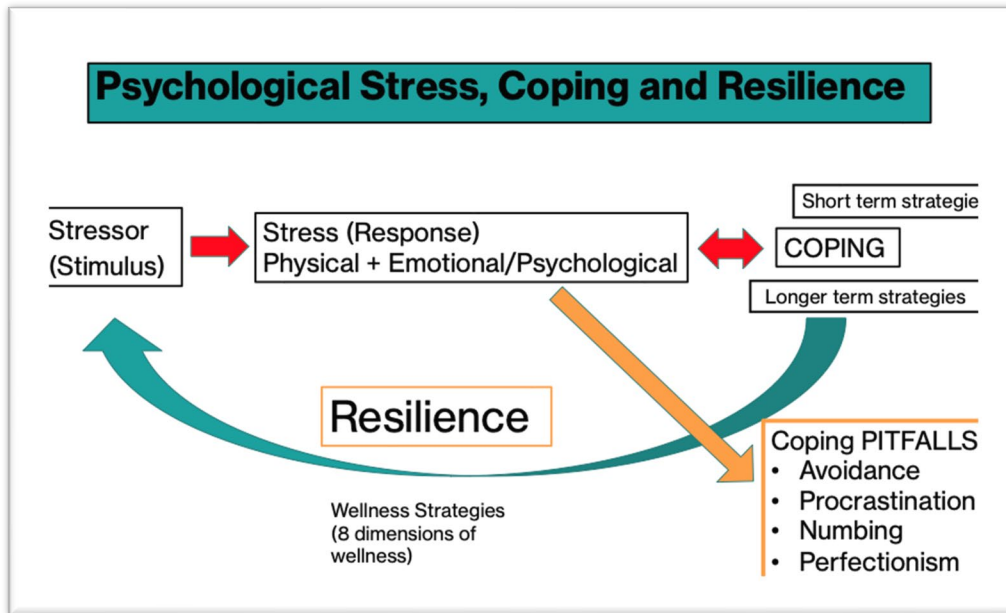
"I sometimes used to forget to take into account the fact that some mental health issues are invisible. I think the most striking change for me is the role of culture in mental health; I realized in some cultures people talk more openly about mental health; it's the other way round in other cultures."

"Graduate studies often present challenging situations, such as presenting to a large group or meeting deadlines for thesis submissions. In those moments, tasks can feel overwhelming, particularly when we're in a negative mindset. However, by learning to manage our emotions—whether through techniques like CBT, holding an ice cube, or deep breathing—we can feel more empowered to tackle these challenges and succeed in our academic journey."

Under the scope of the current funding, two facilitators and a graduate student in the Master of Public Health program engaged in additional discussions and research regarding potential topics, evidence-based approaches to teaching on those topics and interactive exercises to engage graduate students in a second workshop.

The following three objectives were outlined:

- To provide an opportunity to discuss and reflect on common challenges and potential pitfalls in graduate school which can influence well-being in a welcoming, non-judgmental and inclusive environment.
- To reinforce and build knowledge and skills to enhance self-care and collective care in graduate school using evidence-based approaches, aligned with McMaster graduate student preferences.
- To better understand oneself and apply knowledge and skills with brief quizzes, scenarios, experiential exercises and open discussion.



Prior to the workshop, participants were asked to complete surveys or exercises including:

- The Post-Secondary Stressors Index (PSSI) to identify salient stressors.
- Communication Style Assessment to identify communication patterns (Killman approach).
- Value Card Sort Activity from Motivational Interviewing to identify core values.

"Graduate students are guilty of all or nothing thinking, catastrophizing etc/ especially related to their identity as a student. So much work is expected from Graduate students that it's easy to fall into these negative thinking traps, that become our automatic thoughts. Having examples of "Coping thought" or CBT was really helpful and I think many participants will make note of the suggested coping thoughts and add them into their personal lives (I know I wrote one or two down for myself)."

"It allowed me to think about why or why certain aspects of academia are more stressful to me than others. The second most stressed section for me was the Academic Domain, and I reflected on that for a second, because maybe even though we are enrolled/pay to obtain our education, should we be THIS stressed throughout the process? How much stress is appropriate and/or acceptable for me to have regarding deadlines for exams or actual exam writing? It made me think that I should be putting more energy into other aspects of my life that bring me up (focusing more on getting sleep, right diet, making time for my hobbies...etc)."

A small sample of 5 students were invited to participate in the pilot of the second workshop held in November of 2024. We reviewed some key approaches in depth and experientially and others in a more limited manner, giving participants a chance to experience the approach and activity and offer their impressions and feedback, in order for our team to consider how to optimize for future workshops.

The following topics and activities were reviewed:

- Stressors in post-secondary school and discussion of key stressors
- Stress responses and reactions: managing feelings, thoughts, and behaviours
- *Feelings - emotion wheel, systems and regulation, introduce stress-inducing scenario involving negative evaluation and discuss several immediate coping strategies, including box breathing, 3 centre check in meditation (introduces noticing thoughts)
- *Thoughts – introduce CBT/ABC, discuss common thought patterns/distortions and pitfalls, introduce 5 column exercise CBT
- Coping and Wellness Behaviours - introduction and discussion of starfish model – what you want to do more/less related to 8 dimensions of wellness, set a goal or area of focus
- *Values – Values card sort review; discussion whether and how values are aligned with behaviours, preserving values in graduate school
- *Active Listening Overview - active listening exercise in break-out rooms with partner; reflection as group
- *Communication Styles (Kilman, 4 types); Scenario involving assertively communicating with an angry student or underperforming student (paired)
- *Assertiveness and Boundary Setting (paired) – scenario involving professor/supervisor requiring assertiveness and boundary-setting with someone in an authority position
- *Common Challenges and Pitfalls in Graduate School: Imposter Syndrome and Perfectionism
- *Mindful Self—Compassion Exercise (insufficient time to cover)

Topics which were particularly well-received and should be included with potentially more time taken to address, or spread over 2 workshops, are starred above, and include:

- Understanding Emotion and Emotion Regulation Strategies
- Identifying Thoughts and Cognitive Distortions,
- Naming Core Values,
- Active Listening, Communication Styles and Strategies,
- Imposter Syndrome and Perfectionism,
- Assertiveness and Boundary Setting

Using graduate student-specific scenarios and focusing on student, supervisory and faculty relationships also led to lively interaction and discussion and perceived benefit. One of the specific scenarios discussed and role played to teach about collaborative, assertive communication strategies and boundary setting is depicted in the three slides shared here.

Small Group Activity- Breakout Room Role Play

One person is Alex (Partner 1) and one person is the graduate TA (Partner 2):

Graduate TA: Indicate that you are not going to change his grade AND use a collaborative style at the same time to engage in the conversation

Alex: should not make it too easy for the graduate student

What Does It Mean to Collaborate?

- **Collaborating** is both assertive and cooperative—the complete opposite of avoiding.
- Collaborating involves an attempt to work with others to find some solution that fully satisfies their concerns. It means digging into an issue to pinpoint the underlying needs and wants of the two individuals.
- Collaborating between two persons might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights or trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.

Scenario 1 – Alex and the graduate student

- Alex, a second-year undergraduate student, recently received their grade on a major project. The grade was lower than they expected, and they believe they deserve a higher mark. Alex feels the grading criteria were not clearly explained and that some of their work was not fairly evaluated. They've emailed you multiple times expressing their frustration and have requested an in-person meeting to discuss the grade.

You've already reviewed the grade and the criteria with the professor and you both feel that it was fair and no other students have expressed concerns

During this meeting, Alex appears visibly upset and immediately begins by saying, "I put so much effort into this project, and it's not fair that I got such a low mark. I need you to reconsider."

- What would it be like to have this conversation with Alex?
- What are some of the potential barriers or pitfalls to navigating this conversation effectively?
- How might the graduate student communicate they are not going to change his grade and do so in a collaborative way?

Part 2: Switch Partners (same dyad)

You've already reviewed the grade and the criteria with your supervisor/professor, and you believe Alex is right and should receive a higher mark. But, your supervisor/professor says, "It's fine how it is" and does not want to change it. He says, "You have better things to do then spend all of this time on one student".

Partner 1 - Professor: takes on role as Professor, who also says later in the discussion, "I've been marking papers for 10 years and usually TAs get this done in a lot less hours than you have. You need to move on".

Partner 2 - Graduate Student- Alex: If you are truly not comfortable with that decision, what will you say to your professor?

- The grad student now needs to revisit the conversation about the situation and their wish to adjust the grade with the Professor. The Professor should not change their mind easily as they are overly busy and don't wish to resubmit a grade for time reasons
- Reflection: What might get in the way of setting boundaries with someone in a position of with authority like this?

Evaluation Measures and Key Indicators – Level I Workshop

Throughout the program we were interested in evaluating three main outcomes:

1. Frequency of interactions with students with a mental health concern.
2. Confidence in knowing what to say and do during those interactions.
3. A sense of belonging at the university.

Beyond those three main indicators, other factors such as: mental health related stigma and a student's own use of mental health services were measured. Further, demographic data like place of birth, age and gender may allow us to look at differences between groups. Finally, satisfaction with the program was measured to assess the perceived level of usefulness of the program for graduate students.

1. Frequency of interactions with students with a mental health concern

The frequency of interactions was measured as both the typical frequency over a 3-month period, as well as a reporting of the actual frequency over the previous three months. This distinction may be important, as we anticipate that interaction frequency may be dependent upon time of year, with fewer students participating in university activities during the spring and summer months.

"Now I know that I am not alone if I myself encounter any mental health related issue or I can help anyone in that too. I am glad that McMaster also provides such kind of services which make me feel that we are not alone, we are together. "

2. Confidence in knowing what to say and do during those interactions

"I will be more willing to help those who I notice are struggling with mental health. Previously I had the belief that there was little I could do for someone else."

The confidence questions are a main outcome and directly linked to the materials taught. In line with the "6R's" we measure an individual's confidence to recognize, reach out, rate, respond, review, and reflect

3. A sense of belonging at the university

A sense of belonging is important to measure, as it is correlated with both mental health and academic success in previous studies, and as we anticipate could improve through breaking down of negative attitudes and stigma regarding mental health and with effective group engagement and interpersonal connections.

"I was led to believe that I was alone in the way that I felt about certain things. Learning some of the statistics regarding mental health on campus made me realize I am not alone. "

"I've already found myself putting the knowledge to use and shared the "responding in distress" pdf with the professor I TA for. I found the program very useful."

Results

This report will highlight some of the most critical results. Throughout the project, significantly more quantitative and qualitative data was collected which is currently being cleaned and analyzed, with the goal of sharing the knowledge through academic publications and presentations. These future results and publications will be shared with the McCall MacBain Foundation.

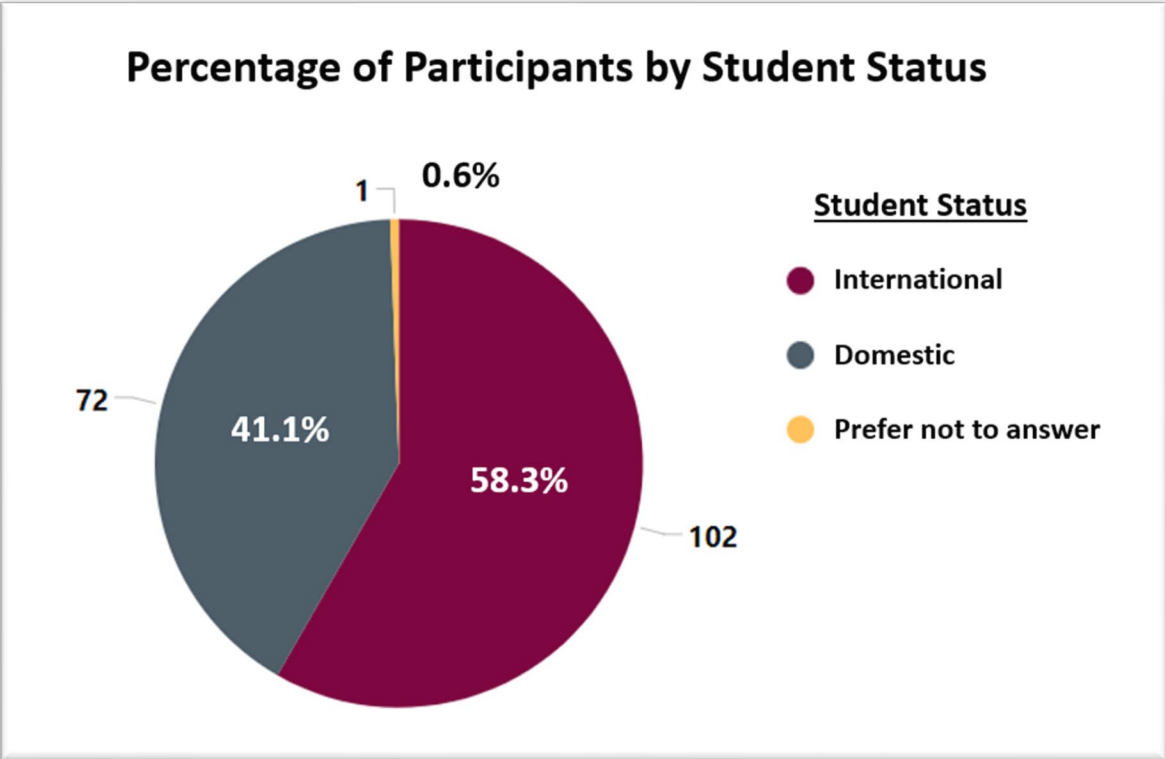
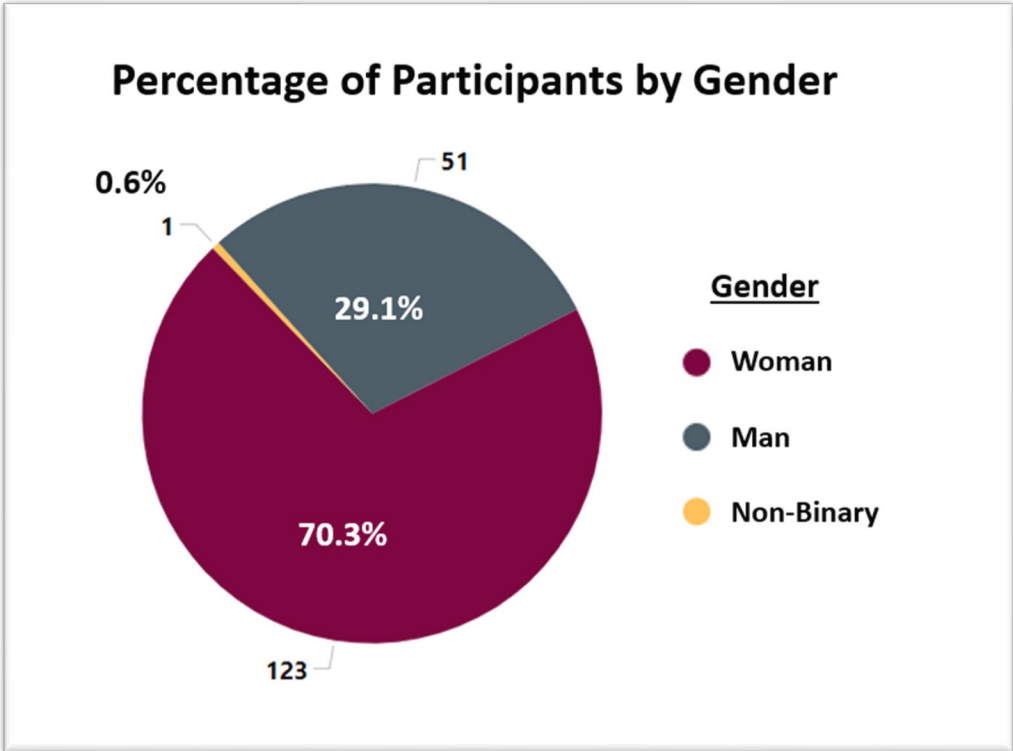
Participation Rates

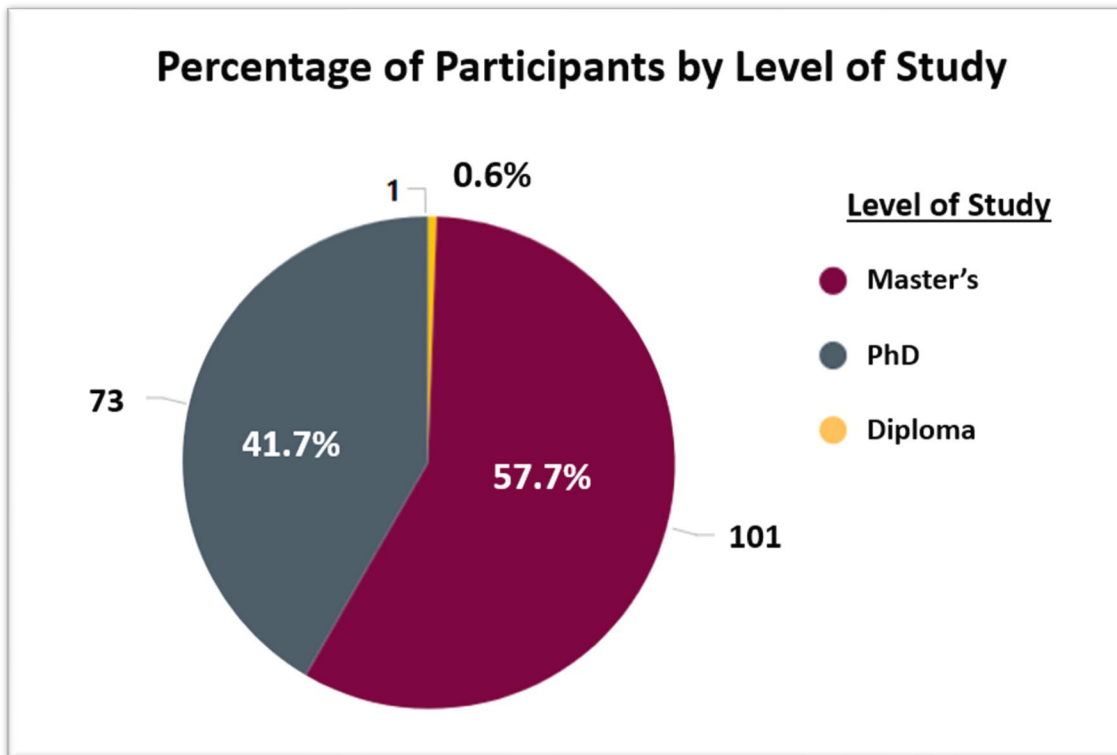
The project recruited 207 participants who completed the consent form to participate in the study. Eighty-six percent of those who enrolled in the project completed the online modules, and of those we saw an overall response rate throughout the program of more than 95%. The table below shows the breakdown of participants within each faculty, a number that is close to the proportion of the overall distribution of graduate students at McMaster. We believe these results are thereby generalizable to the greater graduate student community.

Participation numbers for each step by Faculty

Faculty	Pre-Module Survey	Online Module	Post-Module Survey	Workshop	Workshop Post Survey	3-Month Follow Up Survey
	# completed	# completed	# completed	# completed	# completed	# completed
Business	20	20	20	19	19	19
Engineering	49	47	46	45	45	47
Health Sciences	71	57	57	49	48	55
Humanities	13	9	9	9	9	9
Science	40	34	34	32	32	32
Social Science	14	12	12	11	11	13
Total	207	179	178	165	164	175

Participants' Demographics by Student Status, Gender and Level of Study





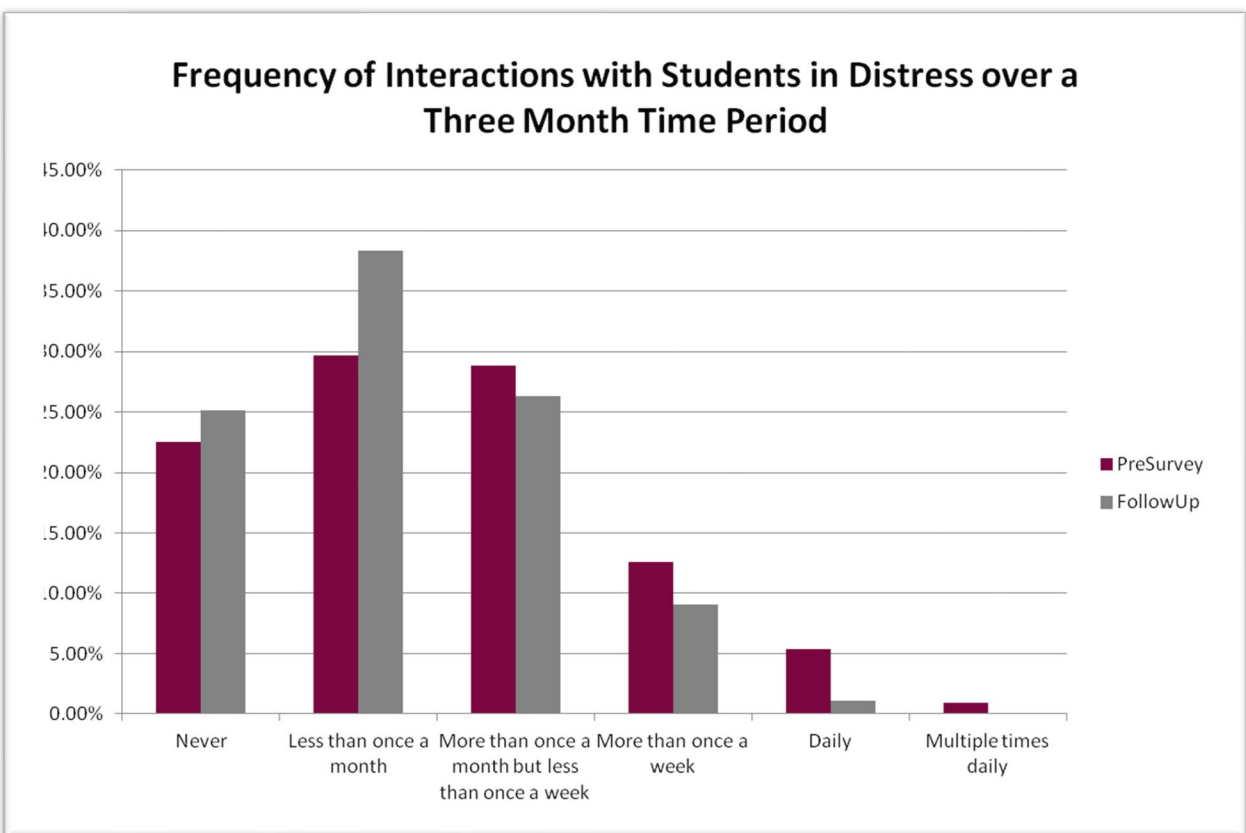
“Following the session I have recommended the student wellness centre counsellors and/or Good2Talk helpline and have reached out to students after sudden changes in behaviour (e.g. no longer attending class), and received positive feedback from students, saying that they felt their mental health was actively supported in my class. I also feel I developed key language for responding to mental health disclosures from students.”

Frequency of interactions with students with a mental health concern

The figure below, represents the results of the frequency of interactions with students in distress that the participants reported having at baseline and at the three month follow up. In this case our data showed a decreasing trend over time. For example, during the pre-survey 13% of the students reported interacting with another student in distress more than once per week, while this number decreased to 9% at the 3-month follow-up. Additionally, on the lower side of the scale (i.e., never interacted or less than once per month) we saw an increase in these values. Upon reflection as this is not the outcome we expected or hoped for, we suspect this difference is due to the timing of the program and surveys, with follow-ups being completed outside core academic terms.

"This program was much more in-depth than any mandatory training I've previously received from the university. It hit upon some issues I've struggled with previously, such as accurately assessing a student's level of need and how to approach them, and I would feel much more confident doing so in the future as a direct result of this online module + workshop."

Frequency of interactions with students in distress



Confidence in knowing what to say and do during those interactions

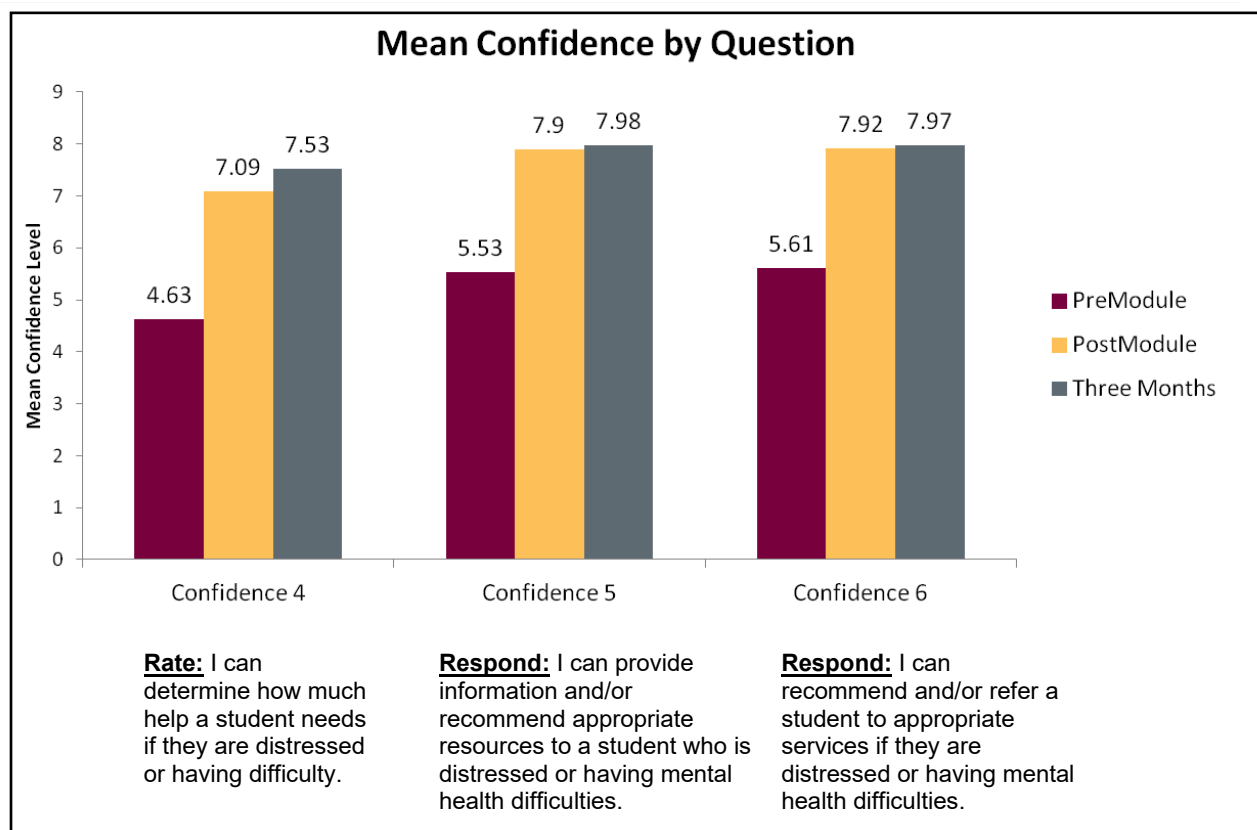
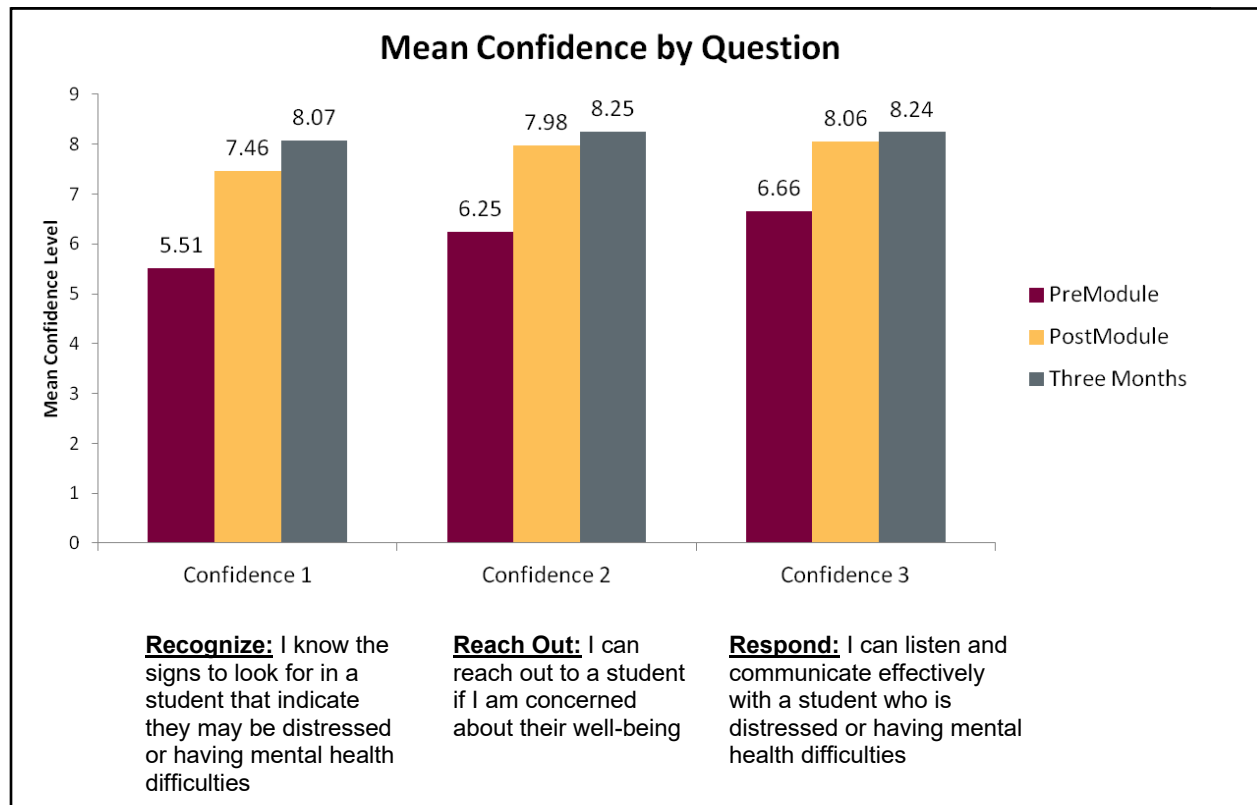
"This program has made me more understanding of others. I also will now pay more attention to students' behaviour and pay attention to any changes I observe. As soon as I see a change from their typical behaviour, I will be sure to check up on them."

"I have already been more proactive in emailing students who suddenly start to miss class, instead of just assuming that they're overwhelmed and choosing their priorities at the end of the semester."

The figures below show the level of confidence across three time points (baseline, post module, and three-month follow-up). The scores shown are the mean confidence across the full data set, with scores in the range of 1-3 demonstrating a low level of confidence, 4-6 demonstrating a moderate confidence, and 7-10 demonstrating a high confidence.

Across all domains in the figures, we see that, on average, graduate students start with a moderate level of confidence at baseline, move to a high level of confidence after the modules, and sustain this high level at the three-month mark. This result is important as it shows that the skills developed through the modules alone can be sustained at least for an entire academic term. To our knowledge this is the first time a mental literacy program for graduate students has demonstrated this powerful effect.

Mean confidence by each of the 6R's and by project phase

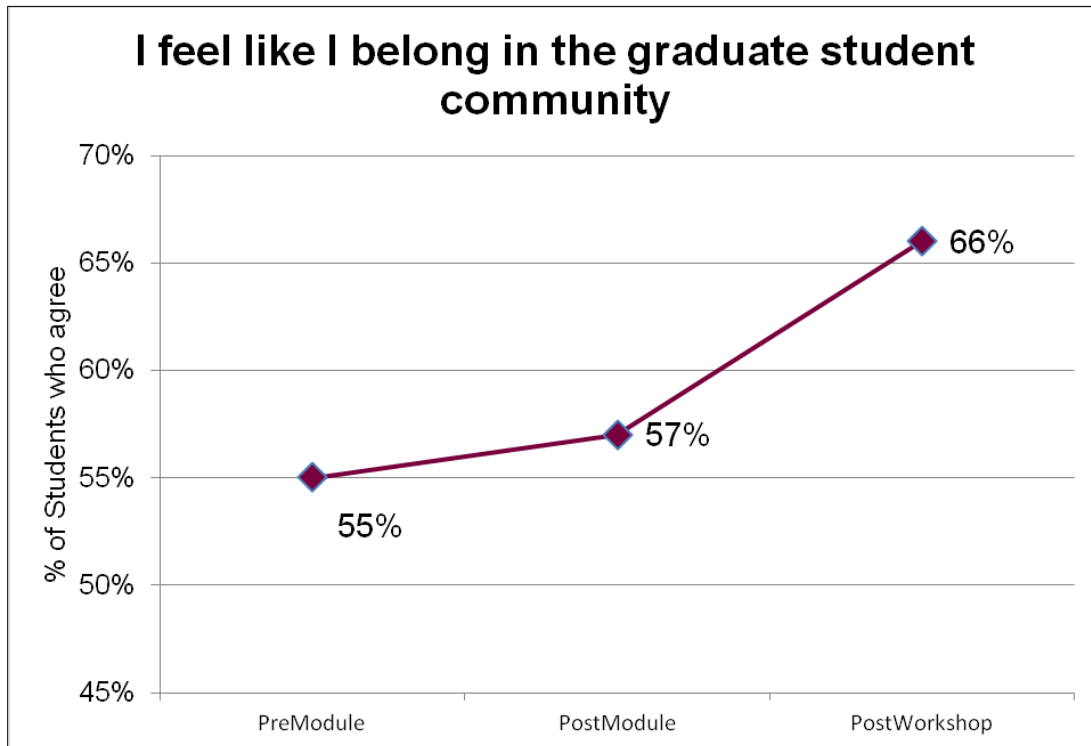


A sense of belonging at the university

The program also demonstrated an increasing sense of belonging as graduate students progressed. As seen in the chart below, at baseline 55% of graduate students felt a sense of belonging. This increased to 57% after the modules and 66% after the workshop. This cannot necessarily be attributed to participation in the workshop only, however we postulate and anecdotal feedback confirmed that particularly for students who are feeling isolated or may be experiencing emotional or mental health challenges who attend the workshop, it helped them feel less alone and 'normalized' some of the stresses and reactions they were experiencing, and also connected them to other students across the graduate community through meaningful dialogue.

"What I liked most about the workshop was the interaction between participants and organizers. To be honest, I felt a sense of belonging as everyone participated in the chat box, and I appreciated the diverse perspectives shared during the discussions"

Sense of belonging by each phase of the program



Program satisfaction

While not a primary outcome of the project, it follows that if current graduate students perceived benefits and were happy that they participated in the modules and workshops that future graduate students would be more likely to engage with the program and continue with additional workshops. Figure 4, below, displays some of the participant satisfaction data we gathered.

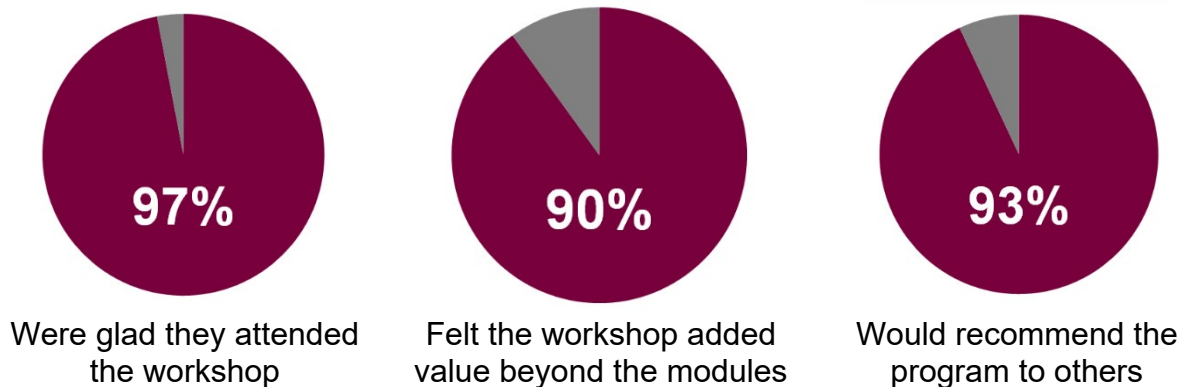
Overall, the results indicated very high rates of satisfaction, with 97% of respondents stating that they were glad they attended the workshop. Another important finding is that 90% of respondents felt that the workshop added value beyond the modules. This demonstrates the importance of synchronous learning, rather than just hosting online asynchronous training. Relatedly, when considering this data in conjunction with the feeling of belonging data shown above, it is clear that the workshops do more than just teach graduate students' rote methods but appears to have a meaningful social impact, beyond the learning content alone.

Furthermore, the result that 93% of participants would recommend the program to others is a good measure that the program was appreciated and valued by the graduate student community. As this program is something that was occurring external to the graduate student curriculum, the fact that most would recommend it to future students is a true testament to the program's importance and value.

"I do think every graduate student who in some way communicates with students should be participating in this."

Finally, it was clear there was trust in the workshop facilitators, with over 96% of respondents indicating that the facilitators were knowledgeable, credible, and truly cared about the wellbeing of the participants.

Percentage of participants that report satisfaction with the program



“I will face my mental health problems with different perspectives next time. I learned we are all connected and we need to understand each other more. “

Qualitative Results of Modules and Level I Workshop

Qualitative, open-ended responses were gathered from participants with each survey to deepen our understanding of their experiences with the program and to provide feedback otherwise not captured. Throughout this document there are quotes that highlight some of the participant comments. As part of our future data analysis, the qualitative data will be developed into themes for a deeper qualitative report.

In general, and similar to the quantitative, program satisfaction results and anecdotal verbal feedback offered throughout the programs, program participants were grateful and very positive about the experience throughout the modules and level one workshop.

“I would recommend that the program include a specific module focused on international students and their own mental health struggles. While I understand that the program has a more general and overarching approach, which I applaud, some issues faced by international students, as well as by Indigenous, trans, and queer people, do not translate very neatly into such terms. Therefore, I think it would be good to also talk about this and ways of dealing with such issues in a teaching and learning setting, including how to help international graduate students themselves.”

Summary of Results

The Level I Professor Hippo-on-Campus Graduate Student modules and workshops and Level II pilot workshops met a clear need for education and mental health literacy skill development among graduate students. With the support provided by the foundation, we were able to generously incentivize the program, which assisted in recruitment, engagement, follow-through, evaluations and satisfaction with the programs. This appears to be particularly relevant given that financial stress and time pressure are key challenges influencing the mental health and well-being of graduate students.

“It is interesting to see how the mental health of students is becoming such an important topic because when I was doing my bachelor's in my country, I passed through difficult situations, and I did not have someone to listen to me.”

Additionally, the group and online format, while challenging to organize and requiring of careful, professional facilitation and management to ensure engagement and psychological safety, appears to be appreciated by students, effective in improving skills and confidence, and may improve social connection and sense of belonging among graduate students across multiple programs and faculties, including domestic and international graduate students.

Anecdotally and as seen in qualitative comments, students were highly engaged and appreciative, and felt they took many learnings and directly applied them to themselves and in their interactions with other students. Particularly for international students, it appears that much of the content was novel and helped to de-pathologize and normalize their experiences of distress and difficulty and the stresses of graduate school.

In terms of the Level II workshop pilot, **Protecting and Enhancing Your Well-being and Mental Health in Graduate School**, it appears that offering two to three 90-120 minute online, 'lunch and learn' workshops to cover all of the content in a focused manner would be preferable to one lengthy Level 2 workshop. We would suggest dividing the content into the following 3 topics over two to three 1-to-1.5-hour sessions as follows:

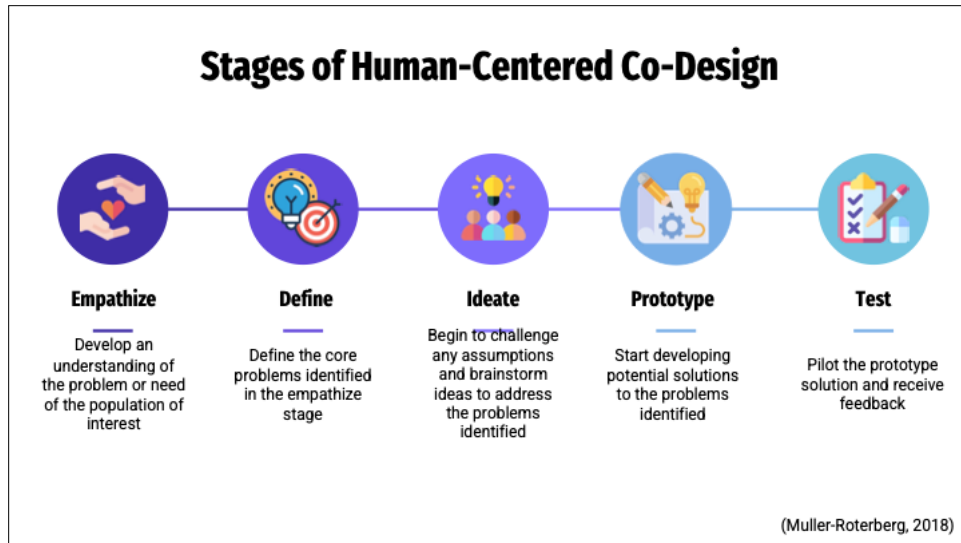
- Proactively Managing Emotions and Thoughts in Graduate School
- Strategies and Habits to Support Success in Graduate School
- Effective and Assertive Communication and Boundary-setting in Graduate School.

Continuing to require completion of modules in advance, use of pre-workshop surveys or assessments, and prioritizing scenarios, role-plays and practicing of skill-building coping practices within workshops are recommended as best approaches for future consideration. Incentives are highly valued but may be difficult to sustain, thus considering use of micro-credentials, embedding curricula into core academic or faculty- or program-specific offerings, and offering programming as elective, participation-only or credit courses should be considered. Further co-design and development of a Level 2 international student workshop is recommended.

Reflections on the Process and Experience

Use of Human-Centred Co-Design in Workshop Development:

The co-design approach to creating the content and process of both workshops, while labour intensive, has been very effective in developing engaging content that hit the mark and was well-received by participants. It also gave the facilitators confidence going into the workshops.



PhD Student as Primary Facilitator:

Having one of the two key developers and facilitators being a PhD student (EB) with direct, lived experience, closer in age and stage to many participants but also having professional mental health expertise, was mentioned frequently as being appreciated and was invaluable to ensuring continuous relevance.

Effective use of emails and social media:

The approach to recruitment for this type of non-academic workshop was critical to our recruitment success, as student group workshops can pose challenges. The social media presence of the Okanagan Office has been developed over many years, previously with the expertise of a communications person, and linkages had been established with many schools and programs. Establishing the social media plan in advance with every faculty required many weeks of forward planning, beginning with single comprehensive emails and follow-ups to graduate deans, grad administrators, and graduate student organizations which included all necessary information in one place and answers to common questions. The past positive personal experiences of faculty and staff in Professor Hippo workshops and in Okanagan programming increased recognition and trust, enabling trust and buy-in.

Proactive and rapid response by the administrative team and generous incentives

These were critical to the success of recruitment and extremely high follow-up and follow-through rates at every step of programming and evaluation. Graduate students are often time- and financially strapped and find it difficult to engage in non-academic activities. The use of incentives also meant that we could set clear, high expectations for engagement and participation in the workshop.

On-line groups using Google Jamboard

Google Jamboard (now discontinued, similar to FigJam) was highly effective, especially in the Level 1 workshop, at encouraging multiple forms of engagement and allowing for anonymous comments and questions.

Recruitment approach and language

Recruitment approach and language used for the Level I workshop focused on helping others (i.e., undergraduates or peers) appeared effective, and opened the door for the Level 2 workshop to be more self-care in focus, building on the premise, “you can’t pour from an empty cup” and must simultaneously care for yourself while you care for and support others.

The timing of training and evaluation

This training should coincide more closely with the academic cycle. The current project started in January and finished in the late spring, not providing time for participants to apply their learning.

Customized graduate student scenarios in Level II Workshop

In the Level II workshop, use of customized graduate student scenarios to prompt discussion appeared to be highly effective in engaging students and bringing the content to life. Some of the surveys/pre-activities appeared to be helpful additions, but it may be difficult to ensure completion in a different setting without highly motivated participants and incentives. Graduate students also appreciated brief practices (e.g., box breathing, 3 centre check in brief meditation) at the start of the workshop, which they felt helped to create a calm and focused environment at the outset.

Impact and Reactions

Graduate Deans

Early on in recruitment, one graduate dean expressed concern about recruiting students to a novel mental health-focused workshop, having not read detailed descriptions of the content, process and authors. Fortunately, once the facilitators were clearly identified and it was clarified that workshops were built on the team’s experiences with staff and faculty Professor Hippo workshops, that they were rigorously developed and co-designed, and were professionally facilitated and being evaluated, they quickly agreed to support. Skepticism is understandable and questioning is welcomed by our team, particularly as there are many untested programs and courses promoted in this field. Having ready responses, evidence to support our claims, clear safety guidelines, and a robust evaluation plan helped significantly in navigating these and other conversations.

Graduate student engagement and participation

Graduate student engagement and participation were incredibly high in the workshops. Many expressed appreciation and gratitude that this programming had been specifically developed for them, feeling often that their issues are distinct and that they are under-served, in contrast to undergraduates. Some self-disclosed stresses and mental health challenges they had personally experienced or witnessed during graduate school within workshops, including several disclosures of significant mental health histories and suicidality, disclosures which had to be carefully managed to ensure there was no excessive exposure

“One thing I will do differently as a result of this program is to prioritize self-care and mental well-being. I've realized the importance of taking time for myself and seeking support when needed. To make this change, I need to overcome the tendency to prioritize other tasks over my own well-being. Setting boundaries, practicing mindfulness, and seeking support from friends and family can help me prioritize self-care effectively.”

to traumatic content for other group members while being supportive of the student disclosing and ensuring learning. Students found this sharing to be important and powerful. This type of workshop requires a high level of comfort and skill by facilitators, including clinical experience, and clear educational objectives focused on knowledge and skill-building, versus self-disclosure, care, or treatment.

Mixed groups of graduate students

Having mixed groups of graduate students (i.e., all faculties, domestic and international) worked well and graduate students were respectful and supportive of one another, with clear ground rules having been set up prior to and on arrival.

"Many mental health issues of students, especially international students, arise from the institutional environment. Therefore, I believe that not only students but also staff, including academic and non-academic personnel, should receive training on how to interact with students to ensure they do not feel pressured or vulnerable."

International students

International students were particularly positive about having the workshops offered and were highly engaged and participative. Many articulated that this was new content and topics they had never been exposed to or discussed in the past.

Support for the rigorous evaluation

Support for the rigorous evaluation was high from both students and partners; this support was enhanced by the incentives provided.

Online workshops

Online workshops of this type are preferred by students, likely for a number of reasons (time, convenience, perceived anonymity), however without setting very clear expectations for participation with videos turned on, and multiple modes of participation these would have been unlikely to be successful and engaging. When students disengage or do not participate meaningfully, it can quickly undermine morale and trust in the process and in the facilitators.

Academic Setting

In an academic setting in a research-intensive university, ensuring offerings are supported by evidence, customized and appropriate for highly intelligent, articulate and skeptical young adults is a challenging and rewarding undertaking, requiring a high level of competence and confidence in curriculum development and teaching. It is our perception that this requires clinical and group facilitation skills and that a high level of facilitator credential (MD, PhD) assists in buy-in and credibility.

“I recommend hosting the seminar in the Fall so that Graduate students are prepared with these tools when they are beginning their TAs, rather than right before Summer, when they will likely have a 4 month hiatus before being able to use these skills.”

Changes and learning over project duration:

Initially we had planned to offer the program to teaching assistants (TAs) vs. graduate students, however the Dean of Graduate Studies requested that we change the focus, given challenges in working with unions and paying incentives to employees, as well as his perception that all graduate students, not only TA's, could potentially benefit. This was a good choice and has now allowed us to move the modules potential to be sustainably offered as part of the orientation activities in the Graduate School, versus being more narrowly offered only to TA's.

Initially we had also planned for a different name of the program – GrowGrads – however it became clear in discussions with partners that the name recognition and trust already established with faculty and staff with prior Professor Hippo-on-Campus programming would serve us well to continue

The focus on helping others and on developing the necessary skills to be a successful and high-performing graduate student as a way of framing these ‘mental health’ workshops appears to have been successful. Many students mentioned that they would not attend groups in a health and counselling centre or if they felt they were having to self-identify as struggling or being distressed and appreciated this framing.

“I am more comfortable reaching out to my students now. Fear was preventing me, now it's not.”

Non-mandatory educational programming is challenging and labour-intensive to offer and to ensure success. Embedding opportunities into curriculum or other core or mandatory activities appears preferable, however there are challenges in offering this content to all, as it is not seen as appealing or necessary by all graduate students and faculty.

Financial Reporting

Project Cost	
Item	Cost
Project Team	
Sr. CQI Coordinator	\$ 6,252.00
Admin Assistant Support	\$ 10,189.92
CQI Support & Writer	\$ 477.88
Project Support Assistant (Students)	\$ 350.00
Communications	\$ 776.62
Project Support (Wellness Educators)	\$ 370.13
Project Coordinators	
Administrative Project Lead	\$ 29,483.98
Research Project Lead	\$ 12,112.42
Incentives	
Gift Card Compensations	\$ 30,045.00
Project Total Cost	\$ 90,057.95

Detailed spendings in gift card compensations per study step:

	Pre-Module Survey	Post-Module Survey	Workshop	Workshop Post-Survey	3-Month Follow-Up Survey	Bonus Compensation	TOTAL
Total Cost	\$ 1,035	\$ 2,685	\$ 4,125	\$ 8,200	\$ 8,750	\$ 5,250	\$ 30,045

Conclusions

Overall, the program was very successful in meeting its goals of increasing mental health literacy and support for and by graduate students. Graduate students who participated in the program were extremely positive in survey, written and verbal feedback, and appreciated the financial incentives, which for many allowed them to take the time to attend. Our results clearly show that the modules were successful at increasing the confidence of graduate students in enacting the 6R's of the RSDD Protocol. Furthermore, workshop participants supported the idea that having time and space to work through scenarios and practice having conversations added value beyond the modules.

An additional point that strongly arose through the data was the need for specific modules and/or workshops targeted towards international students. There was an over-representation of international students (58.3%), demonstrating a clear need and desire for this type of training. We will be looking at differences between domestic and international students more closely as we continue to analyze the dataset.

With respect to program sustainability, we have started the process of creating a graduate student level online course that will be hosted by the McMaster School of Graduate Studies once approved. This will allow for the offering of our online modules through the orientation and training of incoming graduate students. The module will continue to be free for all graduate students.

We are also looking at how we might embed the workshops into curricula, especially in program areas that are related to mental health, including graduate work in health sciences and psychology. We are hopeful that we can create a course to teach mental health literacy and facilitation skills together, whereby we can continue to expand our ability to offer workshops as part of the training of new facilitators.

"This program exposed me to the diverse range of factors that contribute to mental health issues on campus. From academic stress and social pressures to financial concerns and societal stigma, I came to realize the multitude of interconnected factors that can influence an individual's mental well-being. This broader perspective helped me recognize the systemic nature of mental health challenges and the need for multifaceted approaches to address them effectively. "

"I'm glad programs like this exist to ensure that we are having these conversations and reducing stigma. It's important for people to feel heard and understood."

Further Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the generosity of the McCall MacBain Foundation, providing us with the necessary seed funding to begin this undertaking with graduate students at McMaster University. The programs met a clear need, we were able to successfully manage the funds, develop and deliver programs, and pre-post evaluations including a more distant measure at 3 months, suggest that a popular, feasible and effective program has been developed that is highly valued by participants. The Level II workshop holds promise for delivery with future groups of graduate students.

We wish to thank the graduate student participants, and all the graduate student supervisors and faculty who directed their students to our programs. A special thank you to Steve Hrlanovic, Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies and Andrea Cole in the School of Graduate Studies as well as the School of Graduate Studies administrative team who helped make this project happen.

We also thank Susan Tighe, Provost and AVP (Academic) for her leadership and support provided to allow for Dr. Munn's work on this project and to Paul O'Byrne, Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences for his leadership and support of the Okanagan Office of Health & Well-being.

"I'm glad programs like this exist to ensure that we are having these conversations and reducing stigma. It's important for people to feel heard and understood."

Catharine Munn would like to extend her personal thanks and appreciation to the entire team at the McMaster Okanagan Office of Health & Well-Being. It was only through close and constant collaboration and open communication with the entire team, including graduate student members, that we were able to offer this rigorous, optional programming, engaging hundreds of participants on a short timeline in a complex, time-pressured university climate at a time of fiscal challenge. Daniela Schindler played a pivotal role as project manager, coordinating also all the processes and administrative team members throughout all the project phases. Allan Fein for providing invaluable guidance and expertise as the quality improvement and research coordinator, and the sole male on the team. Emma Bruce excelled as co-design lead, content and curriculum developer, primary workshop facilitator, and supervisor of Master's level graduate students on the project, given her deep professional and personal knowledge of graduate students and the experiences of international students. Lindsay Crocco and Sam Bengall offered essential support and expertise as workshop co-facilitators. Harveen Saini assisted with the Level 2 workshop planning and delivery. Lynn Armstrong has offered invaluable supervision and administrative support and guidance at every step and to all working on this project as Administrator of the Okanagan Office. **Teamwork makes the dream work!**

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