

# Developing a Healthy Campus Strategy

What We Heard.



In February and March of this year, the working committee for the healthy campus strategy project invited the university community to begin to help shape a healthy campus strategy for the institution. The creation of this strategy reflects a strategic shift in thinking about how the university environment affects the wellbeing of students, faculty and staff. The strategy shares the aspirations articulated in the Okanagan Charter, an international charter for health promoting universities and colleges whereby “health promoting post-secondary institutions infuse health into everyday operations, business practices and academic mandates”.

More than 400 people participated in the initial consultations, sharing their thoughts on a vision for the strategy, priority areas, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing the institution on this front and suggestions for addressing those weaknesses and threats. Through six consultations and an online survey, more than 2000 comments were collected. The working group then reviewed, categorized and distilled those comments to common themes.

This is what we heard.

**In the context of the whole community (faculty, staff and students), we will have achieved a healthy campus when...**

- we have meaningful and relevant measures to monitor our progress.
- we have a “culture of caring”: faculty, staff and students love working and studying at the U of A and feel a sense of belonging and community in which everyone feels connected, included, valued, supported, safe and respected.
- all faculty, students and staff are knowledgeable about and have easy, timely, supportive access to a variety of prevention and treatment resources to support all aspects of their health and wellbeing.
- relationships are valued and characterized by respect, acceptance, civility, collaboration and cooperation. Competition for resources, positions and power is no longer encouraged or celebrated.
- health and wellness become a priority integrated into the core functioning of the community and strategies are long-term, responsive, flexible and adaptive to the current environment.
- healthy choice is the easy choice whether related to nutrition, physical activity, work/study and life balance or a healthy physical environment.
- health is clearly defined and embedded in all aspects of campus life including work life, academia, service provision, and community engagement. Healthy behaviour is fostered through social cohesion and leadership.

## **What should the priorities be to achieve a healthy campus over the next five years?**

Six priorities surfaced from the responses:

- Mental health
- Communication and promotion
- Training for faculty, staff and students
- Infrastructure that supports health and wellness
- Healthy eating options
- Enhancing access to and awareness of services for all students, staff and faculty

## **What are the strengths and opportunities we could leverage and the weaknesses and threats we face in achieving the healthy campus you described in question 1?**

### *Strengths (aspects of the internal environment affecting the strategy)*

The consultations identified a number of strengths within the institution that will support the healthy campus strategy. There is recognition that we can build upon the excellent existing infrastructure, services and initiatives. The university has an extensive knowledge base and engaged and passionate people who are willing to support this initiative. There is already increased dialogue and awareness about health, especially mental health and there is momentum to build upon. The fact that the development of a healthy campus strategy is highlighted in the Institutional Strategic Plan indicates a high level of institutional support.

### *Weaknesses (aspects of the internal environment affecting the strategy)*

There are challenges facing this initiative such as scarce resources in terms of time, energy and funding. The organizational structure leads to disconnection between faculties and campuses and duplication of services; as well, the size, complexity and diversity of the university present challenges to collaboration. Current communication is not effective; there is limited access to health information, no central repository of health information on the Ualberta website, scattered information regarding services, and poor promotion of current services.

On a much more significant level, participants identified the culture of the institution – characterized as predominantly reactive, resistant to change, highly competitive and apathetic – as a barrier to overcome. There is also a perception that leadership is not fully supportive and that for this to be successful all levels of leadership (the president and executive, the provost and vice-provosts, the deans and chairs, and unit managers) need to be engaged so there is follow through on the strategy.

***Opportunities (aspects of the external environment affecting the strategy)***

There are opportunities in the external environment that participants identified and keys to the success of the health campus strategy including a greater public awareness of the importance of a holistic approach to health and wellness and the fact that there are more efforts now to de-stigmatize mental illness than ever before. There is a growing momentum behind “healthy campuses” and health promoting universities and colleges which means that there are frameworks of best practice to draw upon in the development of a strategy specific to the U of A.

***Threats/Barriers (aspects of the external environment affecting the strategy)***

The predominant threat identified in the external environment is the economy and effects on the provincial budget which in turn affect the funding for the university; resource scarcity is a constant threat. The consultations also identified that stigma still exists related to mental health and can create barriers to people seeking services or prevention support.

## What can we do to address the weaknesses/threats in order to achieve a healthy campus for the U of A community?

Participants suggested:

**Education, Promotion and Communication:** Take and share responsibility for enhancing the awareness and the importance of maintaining health and wellbeing for all members of our communities through education and promotion of available and existing services.

**Curriculum/Programs/Services and Partnerships:** Develop a cohesive and collaborative approach to effectively use existing resources/services by leveraging staff, student and faculty expertise, and recognizing the diverse needs of all the constituents of the university.

**Funding/Resources:** Ensure appropriate and sustainable funding is allocated for health promotion initiatives at the university and that there is a clear understanding of the long-term benefits of the investment.

**Innovation, Best Practice/Strategic Planning:** Through continual community consultation and feedback, the university can design innovative, evidence-based, forward-thinking best practices relating to needs identified for health and wellbeing.

## Critical Success Factors

- Strategy must be built on best practices, validated research and key learnings from external communities, our own communities and health and wellness literature.
- Leadership must enact and mentor a campus culture of health that is transparent, exemplary in nature and recognizes our students, faculty and staff as individual people with unique health needs that require contextually relevant health and wellness supports.
- Good stewardship of existing financial and human resources and commitment to adequately fund affordable, accessible, sustainable and high quality services for students, faculty and staff is necessary. Staffing across the university must be at levels that allow for effective work/life balance.

## What's Next?

The working group will spend the next six to eight weeks writing the first draft of a healthy campus strategy using input from the consultations, data that defines the current state and research into the work of other organizations. Consultations on the first draft will be scheduled for the fall.