

## **Extending Campus Mental Health Services to Accompanying Partners of International Students**

**José F. Domene**

Federal government policy has framed international students as a preferred source of new immigration to Canada (Government of Canada, 2014; MacDonald, 2016) and many Canadian post-secondary institutions have increased efforts to recruit international students (Vasilopolous, 2016). This has contributed to consistent increases in the number of international students studying in Canada over the past decade (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2015). Some of these students are accompanied by their families; specifically, most accompanying partners are women who are married to international students (Doyle, Loveridge, & Faamanatu-Eteuati, 2016; Martens & Grant, 2008). Although some of these accompanying partners are students themselves, many of them enter the host country on a visitor visa, rendering them ineligible for many of the services that are provided to newcomers (Cui, Arthur, & Domene, in press). As a result, many accompanying partners report feeling virtually invisible in their new communities (Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012).

This lack of services is problematic in light of existing research revealing that this population can experience substantial mental health concerns. Specifically, this population has been found to be vulnerable to experiencing a variety of mental health problems and adjustment difficulties (Al Sabiae & DiNicola, 1995; Cho, Lee, & Jezewski, 2005; Kim, 2012; Martens &

Grant, 2008; Myers-Walls, Frias, Kwon, Ko, & Lu, 2011). Many accompanying partners also experience other issues that are amenable to counselling, including marital/family conflict, identity confusion, and social isolation (Chittooran & Sankar-Gomes, 2007; Sakamoto, 2006; Schwartz & Kahne, 1993; Vogel, 1986; Zhang, Smith, Swisher, Fu, & Fogarty, 2011). Over and above the problem of visa status as a barrier to access, many accompanying spouses lack knowledge about or experience difficulties accessing mental health services that are located off-campus (Kim, 2012; Schwartz & Kahne, 1993; Vogel, 1986). Furthermore, with the possible exception of couples counselling, many universities have policies that exclude non-student spouses from accessing campus-based mental health services (de Verthelyi, 1995; Myers-Walls et al., 2011). This creates a situation where the particularly vulnerable population of accompanying partners of international students is placed at greater risk of harm due to institutional policies and practices that were designed without any consideration of the increasing internationalization of Canadian campuses.

An argument can be made from a social justice and equity perspective that post-secondary institutions' policy of intentionally recruiting individuals from other countries to study in Canada creates an ethical responsibility to provide international students with adequate support services, including campus-based mental health services (Arthur, 2016). This argument extends to the situation of accompanying partners, particularly in light of the previously described psychological difficulties that can arise from traveling to a new country to support their spouse's or partner's education. Furthermore, although the body of literature is limited, some preliminary evidence suggests that campus-based mental health services may

be effective in addressing the difficulties experienced by accompanying partners. Specifically, two studies have found that support groups for accompanying partners struggling with adjustment problems were perceived to be beneficial by participants in these groups (Ojo, 1998; Schwartz & Khane, 1993). Although there is clearly a need for additional research on this topic, one argument for extending mental health services to accompanying partners is that it is potentially beneficial to do so, in addition to being an ethical responsibility.

There is also evidence to suggest that providing mental health services to accompanying partners is beneficial for international students themselves. For married international students, having their partners accompany them to the host country has been found to be associated with academic success (Wimberley, McCloud, & Flinn, 1992). However, these benefits are not likely to be experienced if the accompanying partner is experiencing psychological distress or adjustment problems. These difficulties are likely to spill over into the marital relationship, which can negatively affect international students' academic and psychological functioning (Buddington, 2002; Yi, Giseala, & Kishimoto, 2003; Myers-Walls, et al., 2011). Therefore, the argument can be made that extending mental health services to accompanying partners is one way to improve the academic success of international students themselves.

Extending campus-based mental health services to accompanying partners also has strong potential to provide benefits beyond the specific individuals who are involved in the situation. At the institutional level, doing so has implications for retention and recruitment. In terms of retention, providing accessible treatment options to accompanying partners who

experience difficulties following the move to Canada should reduce the likelihood that the couple will both decide to return to their home country prior to degree completion, due to the accompanying partner's distress and struggles. There has been no systematic study of this phenomenon, possibly because Canadian post-secondary institutions generally do not provide mental health services to non-student partners. However, the emerging evidence that problems experienced by accompanying partners negatively influence the functioning of international students (Buddington, 2002; Yi, et al., 2003; Myers-Walls, et al., 2011) suggests that providing treatment for the partners has strong potential to improve retention of international students.

The potential recruitment-related benefits of extending mental health services to accompanying partners is somewhat more speculative but is still worthy of consideration. Specifically, as post-secondary institutions increasingly engage in efforts to globalize and internationalize (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2015), it follows that there will be increased competition between Canadian institutions (and with other countries) to recruit international students. In this context, the notion that “we will take care of your whole family” can become an important marketing strategy<sup>1</sup> for attracting

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<sup>1</sup> To maximize the effectiveness of this strategy, a post-secondary institution should consider providing a range of services to support international student families, over and above the extension of mental health services. These additional services could include subsidized campus housing, convenient options for daycare, relevant employment/career services, advising related to immigration, and opportunities for accompanying partners to improve their English or French language skills.

international students who have spouses and children to a particular institution.

Finally, providing campus-based mental health services to accompanying partners of international students has potential long-term benefits to Canadian society as a whole. Federal position papers have highlighted the need for Canada to increase immigration as a way to address the aging population, and have specifically identified international students as a preferred source of immigrants (Government of Canada, 2014). This perspective has been reiterated by the current Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship and supported by changes to immigration policy that are designed to facilitate the transition from international student to permanent resident (MacDonald, 2016). However, international student families may be less likely to remain in Canada following graduation if the accompanying partner experiences adjustment, mood, or other mental health difficulties and fails to receive the support that they require to address these concerns. Therefore, if the goal of attracting international students to remain in Canada following degree completion is a worthwhile social goal,<sup>2</sup> it becomes important for post-secondary institutions to adopt policies and practices to increase the likelihood that these families will choose to become immigrants. This includes assisting accompanying partners to adjust to and thrive within Canada in all spheres of functioning, including mental health.

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<sup>2</sup> I say "if" because, although it may be a goal for the individuals who come to Canada to study and for the Canadian government, it must also be recognized that promoting the immigration of international students contributes to a "brain drain" in the home countries of these individuals (Gribble, 2008; Kapur, & McHale, 2005), which raises questions of social justice and equity on a global level.

In conclusion, the argument for extending mental health services to non-student accompanying partners of international students is supported by emerging evidence that they are at risk for (a) experiencing a range of adjustment and psychological problems and (b) encountering substantial barriers to accessing mental health services. Furthermore, there are substantial potential benefits for doing so not only for international students and accompanying partners, but also for post-secondary institutions and the larger Canadian society. Finally, it is important to recognize that international student offices at a growing number of Canadian post-secondary institutions have begun to provide services to accompanying partners (Martens & Grant, 2008; N. O'Shea, personal communication, February 8, 2016). Nonetheless, the kinds of support that international student offices are qualified to provide are unlikely to be sufficient for addressing significant mental health concerns. For all these reasons, it is important for campus mental health services to extend their mandates and develop innovative ways to support this neglected but vulnerable population.

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