



KING'S

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COVID-19 pandemic's impact on post-secondary student counselling services and health promotion strategies

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https://cdspress.ca/?page_id=6135

Land Acknowledgement

I respectfully acknowledge that King's University College campus is situated on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Lenapeewak, and Chonnonton peoples, all of whom have longstanding relationships to the land of Southwestern Ontario and the city of London. King's University College values the significant historical and contemporary contributions of local and regional First Nations, and all the Original Peoples of Turtle Island (also known as North America).



AGENDA

- Context & Purpose of Study
- King's Mental Health Wellness Framework
- Methods & Results
- Practice Implications
- Questions

Context of Study

- **COVID-19 pandemic** brought rising mental health concerns for post-secondary students on campus (Robson, 2020; Savarese et al., 2020)
- **Students' stress levels** increased in all areas (family, social, work, school), overwhelmed with transition to online learning, mental/physical distress due to changes in routine, isolation from family/friends (Robson, 2020)
- Several studies showed **higher prevalence of depression, anxiety, stress, and lower wellbeing** among university students after the onset of the pandemic (Batra et al., 2021; Dodd et al., 2021; Jiang, 2020; Lederer et al., 2021; Savarese et al., 2020)
- Pandemic forced **rapid transition** to virtual counselling services: 90% of Canadian post-secondary counselling centers pivoted to remote mental health services within 3 weeks of campus shutting down March 2020 (Nath, 2021)

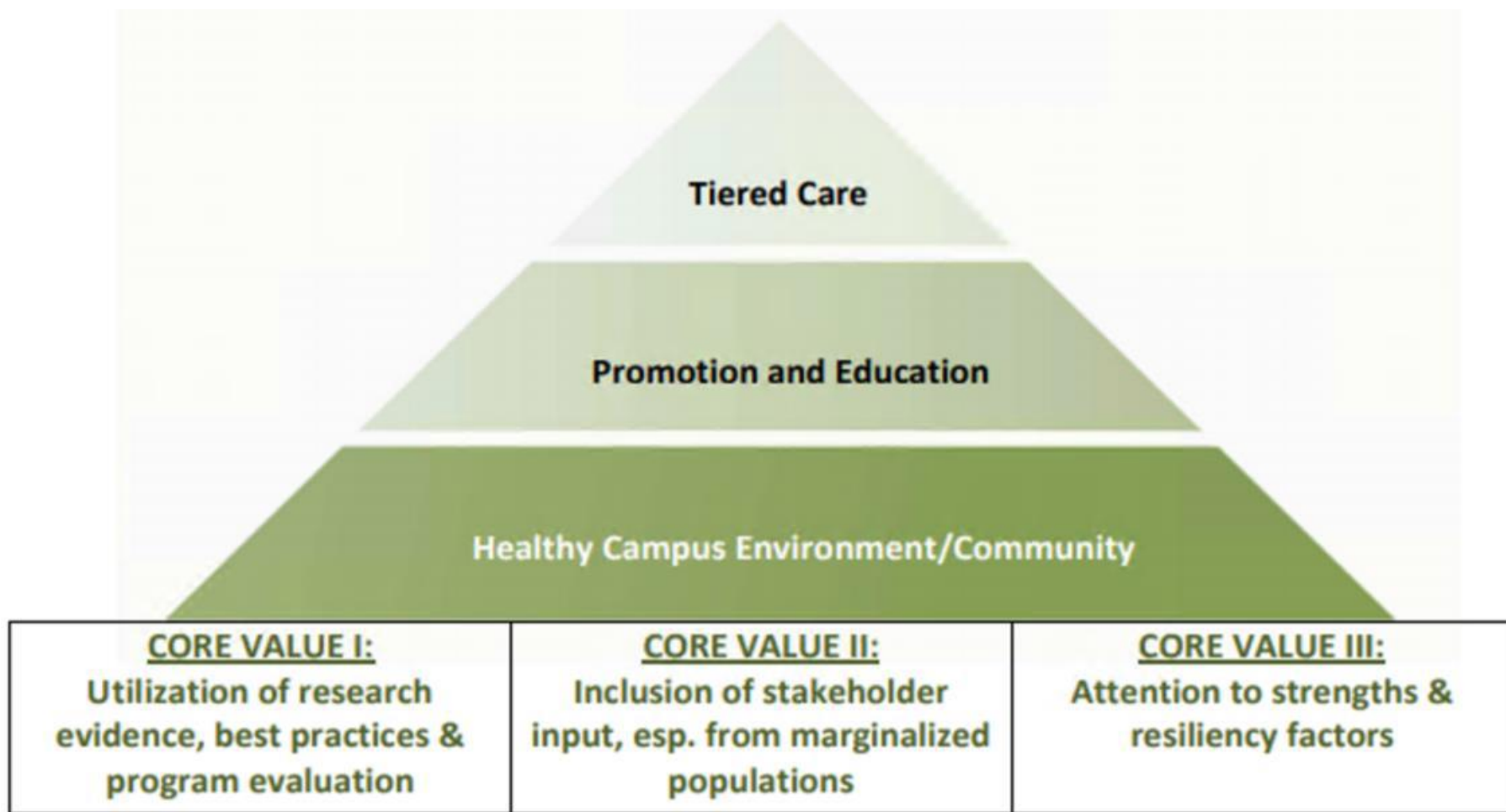
King's Context

- **King's**-liberal arts Catholic University College with Western University; student population primarily undergraduate students, with graduate Master of Social Work program
- **Accessibility, Counselling and Student Development (ACSD)** department at King's provides both walk-in and appointment-based counselling services, accessibility and accommodation support, and career counselling. March 2020 pandemic, all services transitioned to appointment-based virtual counselling (phone/zoom)

Purpose of Study

- **Comparative review** of post-secondary students' presenting issues and usage of counselling services both before/during pandemic period at King's University College, London, Ontario
- To better understand the **trends** in how students coped with stress before and during the pandemic, and to consider **service use needs** afterwards

King's Mental Health Wellness Framework



Methods

- **Research question:** *How are students coping during the pandemic?*
- **Secondary data analysis** of the ACSD database (2018-2021) using non-parametric and descriptive statistics by R. Csiernik
- Further illustrated with an **applied case study** by J. Bedggood (see Appendix A)
- **Database** included: number of students seeking counselling, total number of appointments provided, issues raised during individual counselling sessions
- **Presenting concerns** 8 categories: diversity, mood/emotions, physical wellness/addiction, relational concerns, resiliency/coping, university life, risk assessment, trauma/loss (see Appendix B, Table 1, for details)

Results

Table 1: Sex/Age

Significantly **more women than men** sought counselling each year (average women 78%; men 23%)

Greater proportion of **students over age 25** using counselling services, despite majority under 25

	Students Seeking Counselling by sex (%)			Total Enrollment by sex (%)		
	Male	Female		Male	Female	
2018-2019	22.9	77.1		43.3	56.7	
2019-2020	21.2	78.8		43.8	56.2	
2020-2021	24.2	75.8		44.5	55.4	
	Students Seeking Counselling by age (%)			Total Enrollment by age (%)		
	25 & under	>25		25 & under	>25	
2018-2019	77.6	22.4		88.9	11.1	
2019-2020	72.6	27.4		88.5	11.5	
2020-2021	75.1	24.8		88.6	11.4	

Figure 2: Students seeking counselling

Substantive drop (21.7% decrease) during pandemic restrictions in 2020-2021

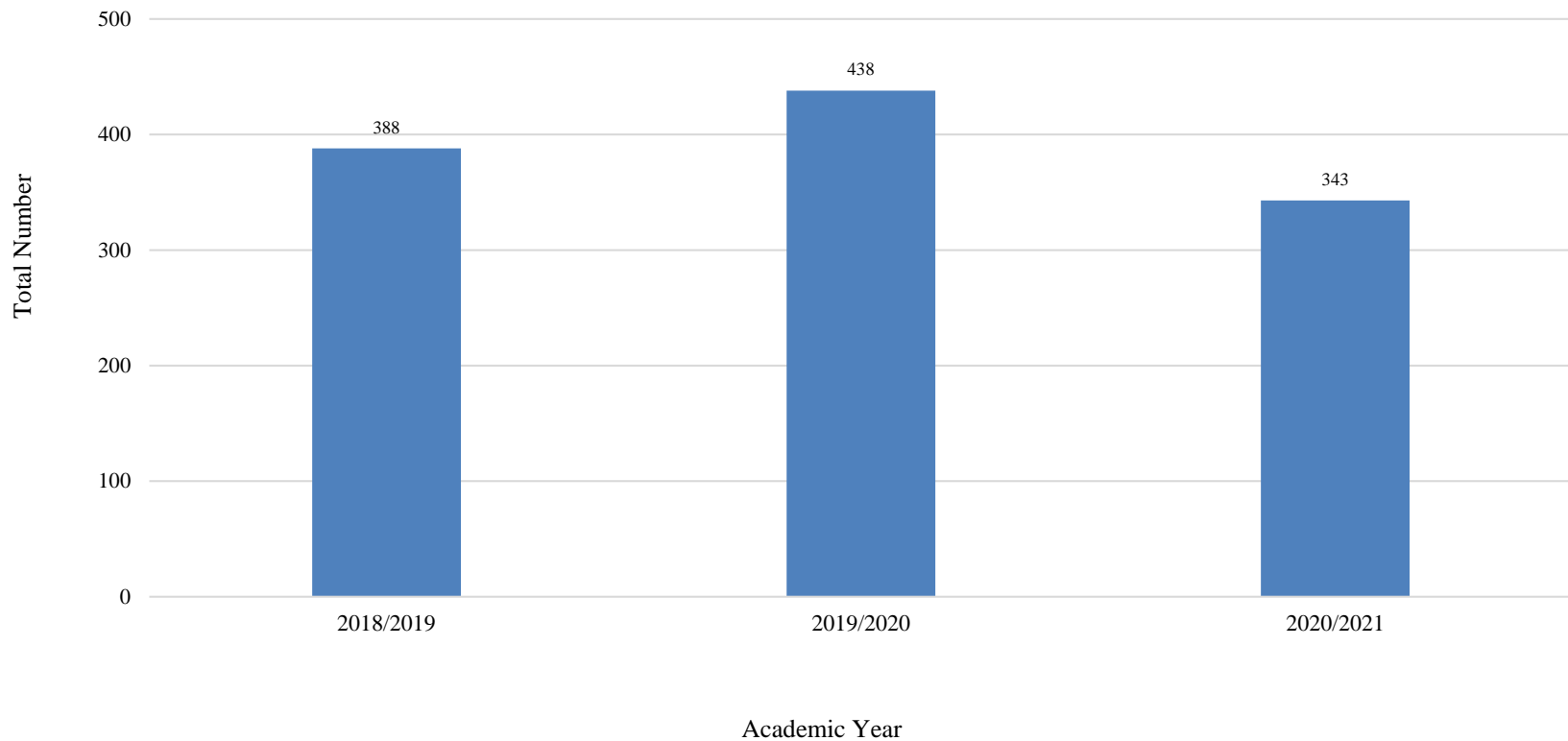


Figure 3: Total number of appointments/year

Substantive drop (25% decrease) during pandemic restrictions in 2020-2021

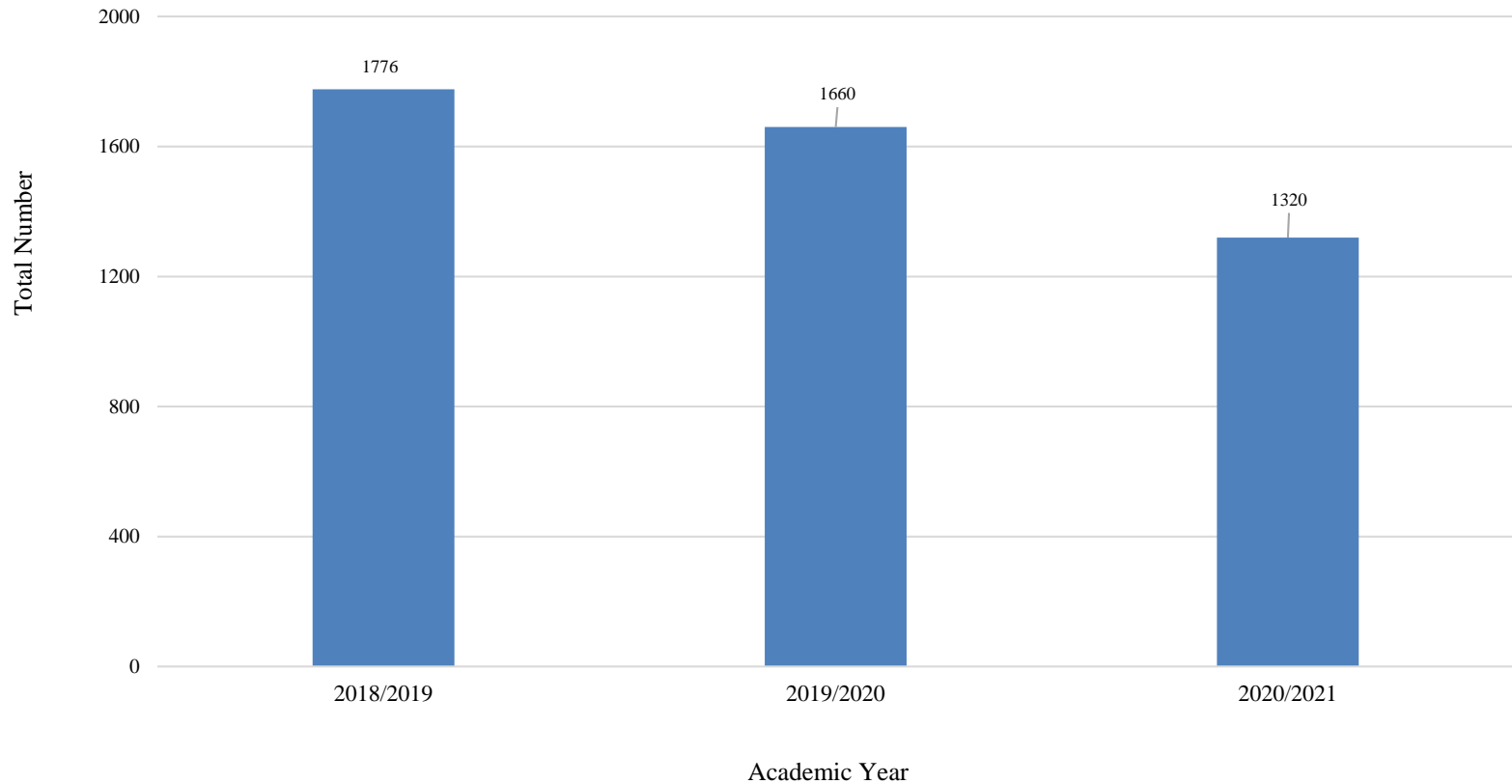


Figure 4: Issues raised in counselling

Dramatic increase in number of presenting issues during pandemic restrictions in 2020-2021

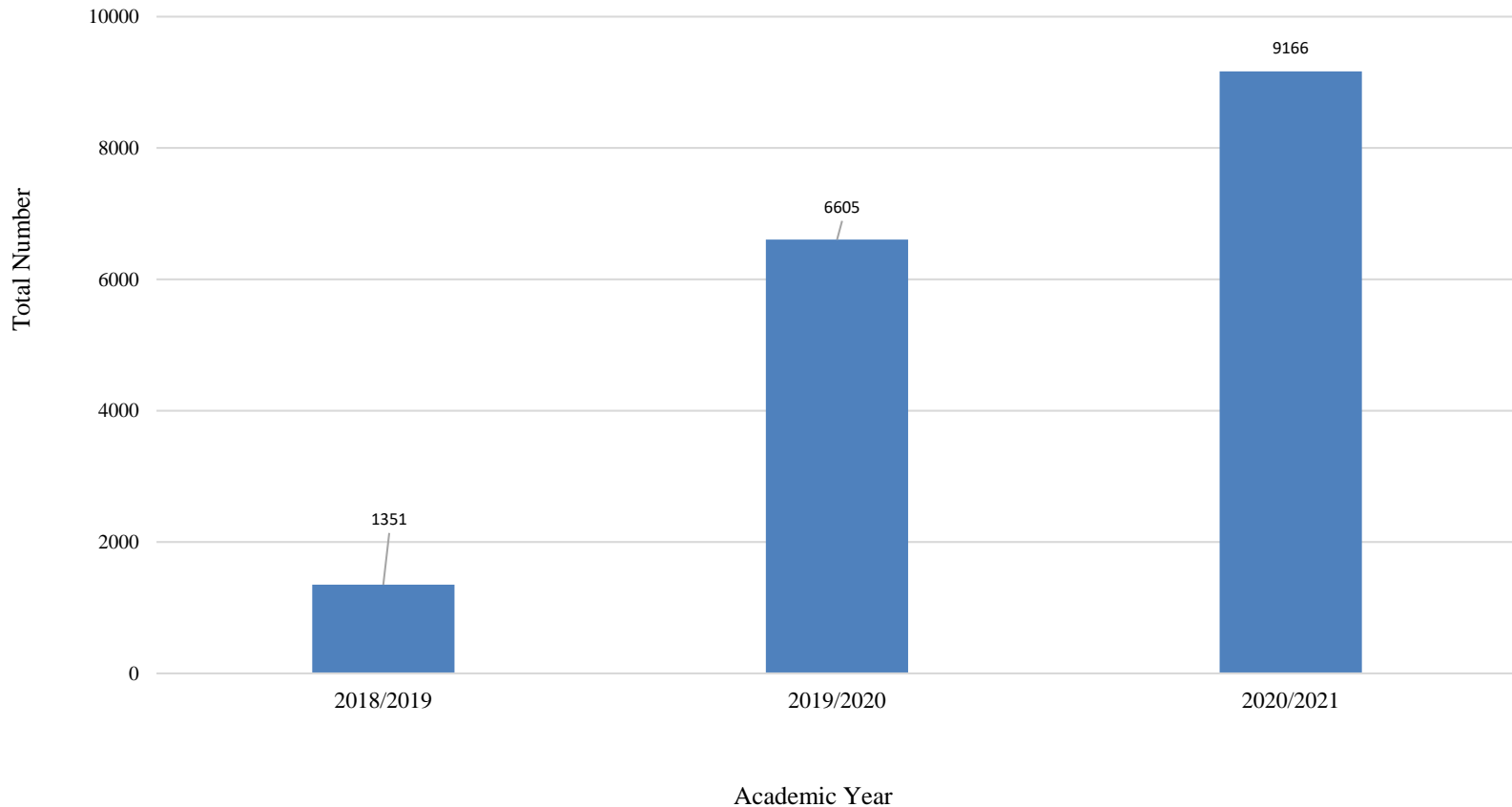


Figure 5: Student program utilization

Average number of **counselling sessions/student** decreased (from 4.6 in 2018-2019 to 3.8 in 2019-2021)

Number of **presenting issues/student** increased **drastically** (from 3.5 in 2018-2019 to 26.7 in 2020-2021)

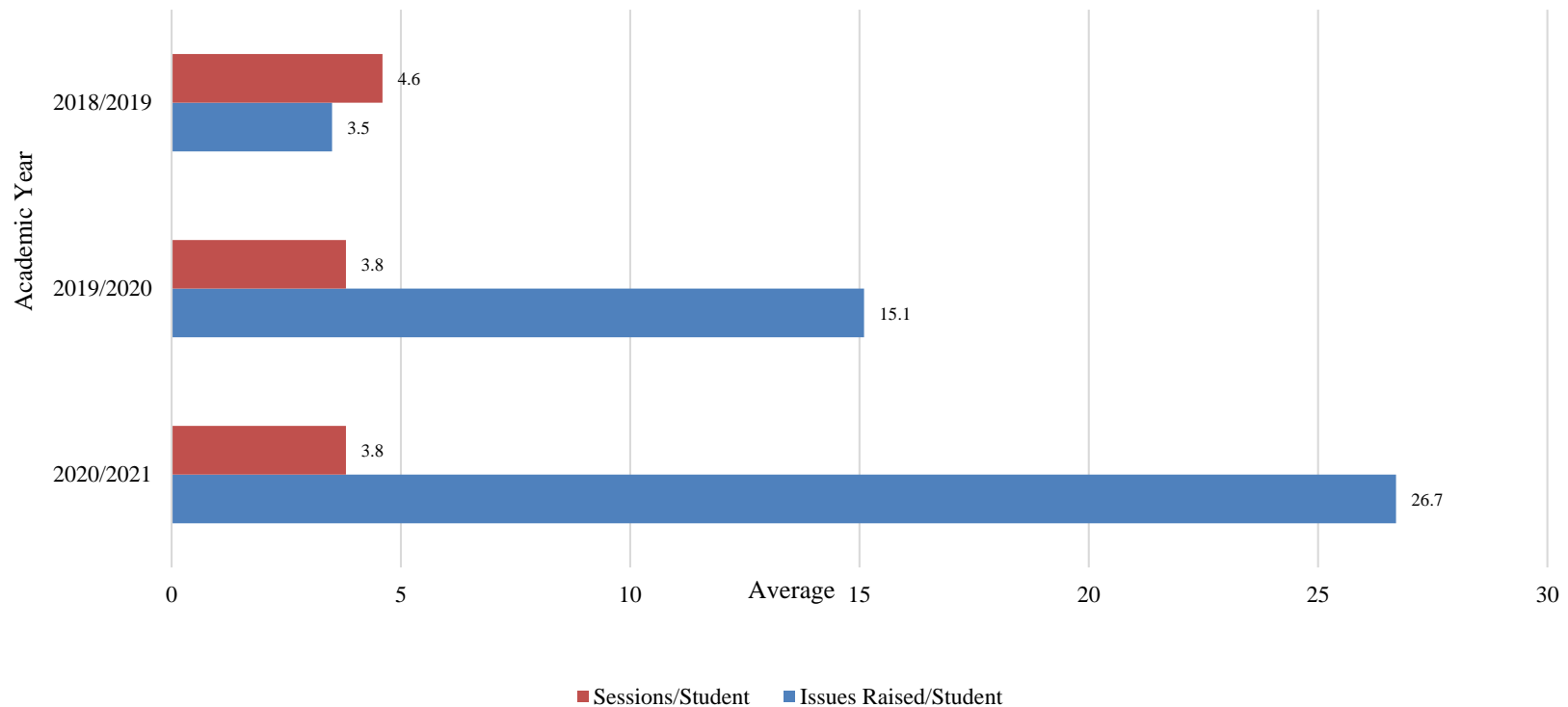


Table 3a: Most common presenting issues

2018-2019 mood/emotional issues (32.1%), university life (22.5%), resiliency/coping/stress (14.8%)

2019-2020 pandemic began, resiliency/coping/stress (21.2%), mood/emotional issues (16.1%)

2020-2021 full pandemic, resiliency/coping/stress (31.6%), university life (15.3%), mood/emotional issues (13.7%)

2018/2019	n	%	2019/2020	n	%	2020/2021	n	%
Mood/Emotions	433	32.1	Resiliency/Coping /Stress	1390	21.2	Resiliency/Coping /Stress	2892	31.6
University Life	304	22.5	Mood/Emotions	1053	16.1	University Life	1406	15.3
Resiliency/Coping /Stress	200	14.8	Physical Wellness/Addiction	1017	15.5	Mood/Emotions	1257	13.7
Relational Concerns	164	12.1	Relational Concerns	998	14.5	Physical Wellness/Addiction	1119	12.2
Trauma and Loss	124	9.2	University Life	889	13.6	Relational Concerns	1073	11.7
Physical Wellness/Addiction	67	5.0	Diversity	591	9.0	Diversity	765	8.3
Risk Assessment	48	3.6	Trauma and Loss	484	7.4	Trauma and Loss	553	6.0
Diversity	11	0.8	Risk Assessment	183	2.9	Risk Assessment	101	1.1
Total	1351	100	Total	6605	100	Total	9166	100

Table 3b: Total issues raised

Most prominent issues raised by students across **all three years** were **resiliency/coping/stress** (26.2%), **mood/emotional issues** (16.0%), **university life** (15.2%), **relational concerns** (13.1%)

Diversity category rose sharply from 2018-2019 (11, 0.8%) to 2020-2021 (765, 8.3%)

	n	%
Resiliency/Coping/Stress	4482	26.2
Mood/Emotions	2743	16.0
University Life	2599	15.2
Relational Concerns	2235	13.1
Physical Wellness/Addiction	2203	12.9
Diversity	1367	8.0
Trauma and Loss	1161	6.8
Risk Assessment	332	1.9
Total	17122	100

Practice Implications

- **Provide more outreach, support and resources to students during extraordinary times**, given reduction in number of students seeking counselling/attending appointments, dramatic increase/complexity of presenting issues
 - Advertise virtual counselling services on university webpages to raise awareness (Dodd et al., 2021)
 - Ensure service accessibility, reach out to students with exceptional circumstances (Liu et al., 2020)
 - Consider ‘hybrid’ and flexible service models (virtual/in-person/walk-in/online apps for local crisis services) (Batra et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020, Nath, 2021)

- **Target resources and supports to the most prominent issues**, given heightened incidence of students' presenting issues: resiliency/coping/stress, mood/emotions, university life, relational concerns
 - Monitor, promptly address mental health during crises (Jiang, 2020)
 - Identify students' strengths, promote resilience/skills to cope with future crises (Liu et al., 2020)
- **Faculty support of students' mental health/wellness**
 - develop positive relationships with students, role model wellness, watch for signs of struggling students, refer them to campus resources (Banerjee, 2020)
 - manage own stress to avoid creating a tense classroom environment, since the majority of faculty report increased workload stress (CICMH, 2020)

- **Faculty support** of students' mental health/wellness
 - be more flexible/compassionate regarding course delivery and evaluation to create a healthy classroom environment, reduces students' anxiety (Langille et al., 2020)
 - understand the multiple challenges for students of balancing online learning, family responsibilities, financial difficulties, etc. (Robson, 2020)
- **Prioritize vulnerable** student populations to ensure equitable service
 - include new policies and tailored interventions to address the specific needs of women (Batra et al., 2021)
 - find ways to track students with pre-existing mental health conditions, limited financial means, and international students (Liu et al., 2020)
 - use an equity framework and quality data to guide processes and decisions, prioritize and expand student support services, and provide students with clear information (Lederer et al., 2021)

Research Limitations

- Based on **3 years of available data** covering both pre/pandemic period, apparent trends should be **interpreted with caution**
- **Database modified all 3 years** (expanded presenting issue subcategories) to better meet staff's practice needs, question how much of differences due to these changes
- Major limit/research implication was **limited demographic information recorded**: only male/female and under/over age 25, not race, ability, sexual identification, religion, etc.
- Issues of **intersectionality** cannot be ascertained, recommend addressing these areas in future research on university counselling services for post-secondary students.

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Appendix A-Case Study

The following case study is an amalgam of concerns that are addressed by ACSD counsellors. It illustrates the increasing number and complexity of students' presenting issues seen in the ACSD counselling department both prior to and during the pandemic.

In October 2019, Perdita, an 18-year old Caribbean female, made an appointment with counselling services, wanting to talk about “feeling down and not myself,” and “not getting along with someone in my family.” During her first session, Perdita elaborated that as a first-year international student living away from home for the first time, she was having some difficulties with adjusting to the type and amount of work at university, but was coping. She was living with her aunt and two young adult cousins, and she discussed household routines and structures that were very different than her own home and how this was causing her distress. She reported conflicts with both of her cousins about TV and music, chores, and visits from friends. She said she missed her siblings and parents and sometimes wondered if she made a mistake coming to Canada. Perdita was seen for four sessions focused on normalizing homesickness and coping with change, problem solving issues in the home, communication and boundaries with her cousins, and self-care. The six presenting concerns reported by the therapist over four sessions were: life transitions; co-living conflicts; relationship issues; self-care; family culture; and homesickness.

One year later in October 2020, Perdita again reached out to her counsellor, reporting difficulty with school. She was having difficulty adjusting to online learning and establishing new study routines in her household where multiple people were home all day using the internet for school and work. The solutions for co-living she had co-created with her family members were no longer as effective in this context where they were extra stressed, including her aunt who was laid off from work due to the pandemic. Adding to this stress, her aunt commented that it “wasn’t working” having Perdita in the house because it felt too crowded. Perdita wondered if she should be looking for alternate housing arrangements, and the financial implications of this. An additional stressor was the fact that the family members differed in how strictly they were adhering to COVID safety protocols, which led to arguments and Perdita feeling unsafe. She told the counsellor that she was really missing her family at home and had not imagined that it would be so long between visits but had been advised that it was unsafe for her to travel due to the pandemic. She was also worried because two of her grandparents had contracted COVID-19, one of whom also had severe asthma, and her parents were downplaying the situation to not worry her. After presenting six issues a year prior, Perdita now had eleven reported by the therapist from the first session alone: academic stress; online learning; homesickness; physical health; caregiving/family health; housing; financial stress; pandemic; co-living conflicts; relationship issues; anxiety.

Appendix B-Table 1

Types of Counselling Issues

Diversity (7)	Mood/Emotions (6)
Family Culture	Anxiety
First Generation	Depression/Low Mood
Gender-Based Violence	Distress Tolerance
Gender Expression	Emotional Concerns
Identity – Self, Development	Existential Concerns
Mature Student	Mental Illness
Spirituality/Religion	
Physical Wellness/Addiction (12)	Relational Concerns (11)
Addiction – Processes	Breakup
Addiction – Substances	Bullying
Body Image	Co-Living Conflicts
Eating Problems	Dating/Sex
Engagement	Discrimination
Hygiene	Harassment
Physical Health	Intimate Partner Violence
Recreation	Loneliness
Self Care	Parenting
Self Injury	Relationship Issues – Family, Roommates, Partners, Friends
Sexual Health	
Sleep Problems	Stalking

Resiliency/Coping (23)	University Life (19)
Caregiving/Family Health	Academic Gains
Conflict with the Law/Court	Academic Probation
Coping and/or Coordinating Plan	Academic Stress
Financial Stress	Adjusting to University
General Stress	ADO – Letter of Support
Housing	Case Manager Involved
Life Transitions	Homesickness
Managing Disability	Motivation
Marginalization/Oppression	Online Learning
Motivation	Organization and Time Management
Paid Work/Volunteering	Placement
Pandemic	Procrastination
Perfectionism	Public Speaking
Personal Gains	Required to Withdraw
Procrastination	Stress Management
Public Speaking	Student Leader Debriefing
Resiliency	Test Anxiety
Self Esteem	Transition Concerns
Social Justice	Voluntary Withdrawal
Societal Gender Expectations	
Termination/Closing/	
Therapeutic Relationship	
Test Anxiety	
Risk Assessment (9)	Trauma and Loss (6)
Court Involvement	Abuse - Emotional
Knowing Someone who is Suicidal	Abuse - Physical
Police Involved/Contacted	Abuse - Sexual
Safety Planning	Grief and Loss
Self-Harm	Power and Control
Suicide Attempt	Trauma
Suicide Ideation	
Suicide of Friend/Family /Partner/Other	



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