From Intention to Action (FITA): An Outcome-Based Supportive Program for Students in Post-Secondary

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Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

HIDC: High Incidence Disabilities in Higher Education Conference
30-31 Mar 2017
Marriott Courtyard Toronto, Toronto, Canada
March 20 & 21, 2017
Where do we come from?
From Intention To Action (FITA)

**Vision**: To develop a multi-campus *system* that:

1. Provides evidence based services with positive impacts on mental health & academic functioning
   - *Increased retention/graduation rates & tuition fees*
2. Uses practicum graduate students in mental health programs
   - *Structural resource that can develop over time, similar to interns and residents in medical school*
3. Over time, more distressed students receive much needed supports
   - *Reduce suffering & increase academic functioning, life-time earnings*
Action Steps to Building Capacity

• Post secondary Mental Health needs are increasing

- Issue: Chronic Underfunding

- Response, thus far:
  - 24/7 help line (e.g., Good2Talk in Ontario)
  - Online resources and apps for students
  - Anti-stigma campaigns
  - Webinars, training for faculty, staff and students
  - Campus peer support and mentoring programs
  - Resilience programs

• Present need: revise all policies to support students in need
Roadblocks to Seeking Professional Help

• Long wait lists
  • For initial session and between sessions

• Limited number of sessions (4-6)
  • “Lacking sufficient distress”
    • “suicide card”-priority

• No guarantee of continuity of care
  • Prohibitive penalties if “no-show”

• Enforcement of rules is perceived as intimidating and unwelcoming

• Few off-campus resources
  • Application processes and complicated priorities
FITA’s Successes

Past 5 years: Provided over 11,000 counseling hours
Served: Over 1000 students
Expansion: 3 Universities in ON, and 1 community college

Mandate

- Unique combination of professional assessment and supervision framework with service delivery offered through emerging professionals (interns).

- Marriage of professional service & direct counselling support EXCEEDS peer support model.

- Importantly: Expands upon mental health treatment capacity in post-secondary education where existing mental health services are overburdened.
FITA’s Focus

• Help the most vulnerable student population
  • Bottom 1-2 %
• Improve students’ psychological wellbeing
  • Increase grades and retention rates
• Train a new generation of counselors and psychotherapists
• Provide early and swift intervention
  • Transition support
• Cost-efficient mental health model
  • 50 % of services provided by supervised interns
FITA’s Origins

• Disability Service Offices: Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities

• The Nancy Factor
  • Therapeutic alliance: It turns out that humans still matter

• Assessment

• Student commitment = student engagement
Impact of LOTF Intervention

• LOTF: Learning Opportunities Task Force for Students with Disabilities

• Transitions: 7 year longitudinal follow-up
  • Impact on Graduation Rates

• Carleton – our home University – PMC & FITA
It was a Dark and Stormy Night

• We wanted to know:
  
  • Would other struggling students (no diagnosis required) benefit from similar levels of self-knowledge and support?
  
  • Could we improve student academic success & help students in crises?

• FITA was developed to answer these questions
Accommodation Process

• Mental health disabilities
  • Increased number of students

Directives from the Ontario Human Rights Commission

• Impact on Disability Service Offices (DSOs)
• Impact on FITA
  • Anticipating issues
  • Augmenting and supporting DSOs
Engagement: A Different Paradigm
FITA: Recruitment

"Direct support tailored to my needs."

"It picked me up and got me organized."

"Taught me how to deal with situations better."

"I had someone on campus who was there to help."

"Talking about my issues without fear of judgment."

"Helped me stay focused and accountable to someone other than myself."

"It helped me plan my teen and coordinate my life."

"Very friendly and helpful."

"I was able to be motivated about my academic and personal life."

Carleton University

fitA

www.carleton.ca/fita | fitaction@carleton.ca
613-520-2600 x1108

A student's life isn't simple. We know that sometimes it's hard, but we're here to help.

We help with issues like:
- Stress
- Examinations
- Self-esteem
- Interpersonal relationships
- Learning strategies

You can also reach us via e-mail at: fitaction@carleton.ca

We welcome students throughout the year.
FITA Welcome Video

fitA
from intention to Action

I felt heard
they listen
I learned about myself
Go-To PERSON
I better know my strengths + challenges
Could talk about anything
On my terms
I liked my counsellor

PAST STUDENTS
FITA: Our People-Our Strength

- 2nd year counseling graduate students
  - Balancing expertise with student relatability
- New energy each year
  - Up to date practices and regulations
- Diverse areas of expertise
  - Training future counsellors/psychotherapists
- Increased quality of enrolment in universities where FITA interns are selected from
  - Quality internship
  - Job marketability
- Cost efficient*
FITÁ Intake: A Continual Process

- Referral – call/email chat with Team Leader
  - If No: Referral letter
  - If Yes: Interview
    - MBTI
    - Application
    - Coordinator matching
      - 1st session
        - Sessions 2-12
          - Continue, or
          - Cut back, or
          - Exit

Online Testing
Testing Session
Feedback
FITA: Student Responsibilities

- Apply to the program
- Directive element
- Commitment
- Sign contract and attend 12 sessions
- If unable to make commitment → Referral
  - Tutorials, peer assisted student support (PASS), learning strategies, & the student academic success centre.
- Average number of sessions attended:
  - 11-12 (over the last 5 years)
**FITA: Frequent Presenting Problems**

- Anxiety, Depression, & ‘dormant’ LD/ADHD
- Bereavement
- Break-ups
- Extreme pressure to succeed (e.g., international students)
- Financial issues & related work demands
- Lack of motivation (program, career)
- Medical conditions (often stress related)
- Perfectionism (extreme)
- Shame & low self-esteem
- Social stressors and isolation
- Stressful living situations
FITAS: Assessment & Measures

**Features:** On-line & 90 minutes face to face

**Measures**

**OQ.45:** Mental Health Screening (at intake and every month)

**WJ:III Brief & Nelson Denny:** Language (read & write) and math

**Strong Interest Inventory:** Vocational Interests (on-line)

**Myers-Briggs Type Indicator:** Personality Preferences (on-line)

**Learning and Study Strategies Inventory:** Study Skills (on-line)

**Psych Screening:** BASC III: (computer scored)
FITA: The Feedback Session

• Following assessment all students meet with FITA psychologist
  • Receive copies of assessment results
  • Signed letter of initial goals
  • Assigned coordinator
  • Given contact info of psychologist
  • Can reach out if under serious difficulties
FITA: Examples

• Assessment & Feedback session helps anticipate and manage problems

• Examples:
  • Failing Math → Peer tutor referral
  • Very high levels of depression → MD referral
  • Overworked and over-stressed → encouraged to reduce workload
  • High levels of somatic symptoms → detailed health history
FITA’s: Support Networks

- Campus Safety
- Career Services
- Case Coordinator
- Disability Services Office
- Equity Services
- Health and Counseling Services
- International Student Support Office
- Peer Assisted Student Support & Learning Support Services
- Registrars Office
- Student Academic Success Centre (advising)
- Vice-President of Students and Enrollment
- Writing Tutorial Service
FITA’s Home: The MacOdrum Library
FITA’s Main Tenet

• Higher Mental Health = Higher Grades & Retention

• The Evidence:
  • Depression & comorbid with anxiety, have a significant negative impact on GPA
  • Depression significantly predicts drop-out rates
    • Anhedonia in particular (Eisenburg, et al, 2009)
  • Treatment was associated with a significant protective effect on academic performance (Hysenbegasi, et al, 2005)
  • Poor mental health: suppresses positive impact of factors leading to academic success (DeBerardet et al. 2004)
How Might Depression Impact Academics?

- Anhedonia undermines brain’s reward system
- Withdrawal/avoidance → Productivity drop
- Stress → Cortisol → Memory → (drop in test scores)
  - Hippocampus → volume & function decrease with depression
- Sleep loss undermines adaptability & learning; increases anxiety
- Depression → Less sustained effort → Less academic self-determination
- Poor concentration → Effective planning & time management
Depression and ‘Cold Cognition’ Deficits

- Attention domain (concentration, focus)
- Memory (forgetfulness)
- Executive function (indecisiveness)
- Psychomotor speed (slow processing)

Students’ misattribution of these deficits:
  - Laziness
  - Inability
  - Moral failing/disappointment/shame
  - Especially prevalent among international students
FITA: Our Students

• Overwhelmed Students
  • Mental Health scores: At least 1 SD below normal range
  • Most frequently anxious and/or depressed
  • At bottom 1\textsuperscript{st} - 2\textsuperscript{nd} % of the population in terms of mental health

• At-Risk Students
  • Insufficient GPA requirements to graduate
  • Face possible suspension at next Academic Performance Evaluation.

• Both Overwhelmed & At-Risk for suspension
FIT: Preliminary Results

Time period: 2011-2012

FIT students: All on Academic Warning

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<th>Major GPA</th>
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<th>Overall GPA</th>
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<td>FIT:Action Students</td>
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- ** Fall Term
- n.s. Winter Term
- *** Winter Term
**FITA:** Mental Health Scores

Time period: **2012-2015**

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### Both AR & OW

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FITA: GPA

Time period
2012-2015

Only Academic Risk

Both AR & OW

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FITA: Impact on 7-year Graduation Rates

• Students on Academic Warning
  • Graduation rates: 23% below the university average
  • 55% of those on AW graduate over 7 years

• The FITA factor
  • In 2011-2012 FITA students had a 7 year graduation rate that was within a fraction of a percent from our overall university graduation rate of 68%
Overwhelmed Students: Working Alliance Inventory Short Form (WAI-S)

Alliance
- Total
- Goals
- Tasks
- Bond

Outcomes
- Increase in Mental Health
  - $r = .34$
- Increase in GPA
  - $N = 34, p < .02$
Students at Academic Risk: WAI-S

Alliance

Total
Goals
Tasks
Bond

Outcomes

Increase in Mental Health
Increase in CGPA

N=17, p < .02

r = .53
r = .55
Overwhelmed AND Academic Risk: WAI-S

Alliance: Total, Goals, Tasks, Bond

Outcomes: Increase in Mental Health, Increase in CGPA

N=28, p < .02
FITA: Outcomes

1. **Therapeutic Alliance:** predicts expected increases in mental health and academic performance for all groups

2. **Alliance Task:** Unique predictor in mental health increases

3. **At Risk students:** Mental health increases correlate with academic performance
**FITA**: Mental Health Changes

Time period: 2015-2016

Large treatment effect; significant**

*based on Mental Health Composite Scores from the Short-Form Health Survey (SF36)

**t(89)=7.948, p < .0005; d=9.3
FITA Students Vs. non-FITA Students

FITA STUDENTS SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASED THEIR MENTAL HEALTH VS. COMPARISON GROUP

*F(1,140) = 22.13, p > .0005
** t(51) = .539, p = .592, d = .037
ACADEMIC FUNCTIONING QUESTIONNAIRE

Subscales:
- Study habits
- Integration
- Academic self-esteem
- Goodness of Fit

Self-ratings in all subscales were higher \((p < .0005)\) at the post-FITA stage.
FITA STUDENT SATISFACTION SURVEY:

- WHAT DID YOU FIND MOST HELPFUL?

Having someone to talk to

- Connecting personal issues to academic problems
- Increased awareness of self, and problem-solving tools
- Blend of personal and academic counseling
- Good relationships with the counselors
- Exploring strengths and weaknesses
FITA STUDENT SATISFACTION SURVEY:

- WHAT DID YOU FIND LEAST HELPFUL?

Nothing/Can't think of anything

Would like to have more time in program

Sometimes the topics covered are too simplistic

Scheduling/timing issues
## GPA Changes in FITA Subgroups

**Time period**: 2015-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Mean 1 ± SD</th>
<th>Mean 2 ± SD</th>
<th>Sample (n)</th>
<th>Mean diff.</th>
<th>T-score (t)</th>
<th>Sig. (p)</th>
<th>Effect size (d)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AR</td>
<td>4.553 ± 1.130</td>
<td>5.251 ± 1.134</td>
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<td>AO</td>
<td>4.492 ± 1.623</td>
<td>5.095 ± 1.443</td>
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FITA: Transferability

• Can FITA be transferred to other Universities?
  • Depends on resources, space, staff experience or unique student characteristics.

• Things to consider:
  • Unique characteristics of that setting
  • Leadership style
  • Organizational supports
FITAt another large Canadian University

• Pre-Post Changes on the BASC-III College Self-Report
  • Global indicator of serious emotional disturbance
    • Particularly internalizing disorders
    • Elevated signal the presence of serious emotional disturbance
      • Impact on thoughts & feelings of the individual

• Students: N=55
  • N=34 completed 10 or more sessions
## FITA Transferability: BASC-3

Pre-Post (2015-2016) Changes

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<th>T-score equals 70 or Above</th>
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<th>T-score 60 -69</th>
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**FITA**: At a Large Canadian Urban College

- **FITA** student mental health entry score = 5\(^{th}\) Percentile
  - Small sample (n = 11)
- At the end of program they scored within 1 SD of mean
  - 21\(^{st}\) percentile
- No changes in pre-post GPA
  - Students were recruited to address mental health, not GPA
- Students’ poor mental health → drop in GPA → drop out
  - Maintaining good grades → better mental health
**FITA** Pilot # 2: At a Canadian Urban College (small sample size)

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<th>Effect size (d)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MCS</strong></td>
<td>33.2 ± 13.62</td>
<td>42.26 ± 10.16</td>
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<td>.75 (medium-large)</td>
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</table>

*Medium-large treatment effect; significant*

**Based on Mental Health Composite Scores from the Short-Form Health Survey (SF36)**

**t(10)=2.915, p = .015; d=.75**
FITA: Implications of GPA change for 3 Groups

- Students on Academic Warning
  - Normal mental health scores
  - Moved off of academic warning
  - Stayed in a 4-year (honors) program

- Overwhelmed students & on Academic Warning
  - Significant improvements in both GPA & Mental Health
  - Moved from certain suspension to 3-year General degree program

- Students not on academic warning with below average mental health scores
  - No drop in GPA & Significant increase in Mental Health
FITA: Conclusions

- Changed environment for distressed students
  - Improved mental health → Greater educational access
  - Greater success in life

- Cost effective in improving mental health
  - Same as medical interns supporting hospital system

- Changes result from developing therapeutic alliance over time
  - Time is an important variable - people need sufficient treatment over time to make changes

- Regardless of diagnosis
  - Improved functioning of distressed students
  - Greater psychological well-being & academic success
The Effects of a Combined Academic and Personal Counselling Initiative for Post-Secondary Student Retention

Cynthia Bilodeau¹ and John Meissner²

Abstract
This study investigated the effectiveness of a combined academic and personal counselling initiative on student performance and emotional well-being outcomes of 289 at-risk students at a Canadian University. Criterion for risk included academic struggles, mental health distress, or both. The program was developed to be tailored to individual needs, and students participated in weekly counselling sessions over the course of 1 academic year. Results showed significant overall increases in student grade point average (GPA), academic functioning, and mental health well-being, demonstrating the program's effectiveness in addressing the differential needs of students. Implications of the results are discussed.

Keywords
academic counselling, student mental health, retention, academic functioning
Is FITA Right for You?

- Students SET for success

• **Scalable**
  • Tested with n=30, n=100 & n=250 students

• **Effective**
  • Consistent & significant improvements
    • GPA, psychological wellbeing and study skills
  • Well liked by students

• **Transferable**
  • Same results with different supervisors, coordinators & students in different departments

• Contact us if you wish to discuss the FITA program in more detail

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Questions?