



FIT: Action Program Executive Summary

The FIT: Action (FITA) program was created and implemented by the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (PMC), with the support of the Carleton University Office of the Associate Vice-President (Students and Enrollment) and is sponsored by the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU) Mental Health Innovation Fund. FITA seeks to support psychologically vulnerable and overwhelmed students with the aim of improving their sense of stability, mental wellbeing and academic standing, which is associated with improvements in mental health. Students commit to 12 consecutive weekly meetings with their assigned FITA coordinators to address both academic and personal issues. They are provided with an assessment battery consisting of psychological and learning-based tests with face-to-face and written feedback to follow. FITA makes use of graduate level interns who have completed the first year of their counselling program and seek practical counselling experience under supervision from FITA's project leader.

Previous years' (2011-2012 and 2012-2013) research results show that:

- FITA students facing possible suspension made significant improvements in major and overall grade point averages while a comparison group on Academic Warning did not.
- Students demonstrated significant improvements in study skills.
- Students returning to FITA for a second year continued to make improvements in overall grade point average on top of the significant grade improvements made the previous year.
- FITA students who scored below the average range on a Mental Health Composite measure (SF-36 MHC) demonstrated significant improvements in psychological well-being after attending 10 or more meetings with their coordinator.

Current (2013-2014 research):

FITA sought to recruit the *most vulnerable students* applying to our program. Students entering the program this year reported significantly weaker SF-36 (MHC) scores, a measure that correlated with lengthier measures of depression. As a group they scored below the normal range compared to the general population. On the BASC-2 College Self report, incoming FITA students showed significantly more symptoms of depression, anxiety, social stress, internalizing problems, somatization, emotional symptoms, inattention-hyperactivity, school maladjustment and lower self-esteem than the FITA cohort of the previous year. In 2013-2014 more than 250 students met with their coordinators with a median of 12 sessions for a total of over 3000 sessions. As FITA is a flow-through program, these students came into and left the program at various points throughout the year. *Despite working with a more distressed group of students during a challenging year, the FITA program replicated the successes of the previous two years:*

- Pre-Post comparisons showed significant improvements in Mental Health Composite (SF36 – MHC) scores despite this year's cohort being more severely symptomatic than previous FITA cohorts. The most severely distressed students made the greatest improvements.
- Qualitative ratings of the program were high with 97.5 % of students saying that the program met their needs, 100% saying that they would refer FITA to a friend, and write-in comments indicating broad acceptance of FITA and appreciation for its ongoing support.

- All FITA students showed significant improvements in study skills, increased the time spent in studies by 4+ hours per week, and demonstrated more skills associated with graduation.

-

Subgroups of FITA students:

- Different groups within FITA had different results with grades and Mental Health Composite scores that indicate that FITA met students' needs *in relation to each individual's situation*.
- Students on Academic Warning (AW), as in previous years of the FITA program, had significantly improved major and overall GPAs. This same group, which had a higher proportion of males, was in the average range on the SF36 MHC and showed less distress than students who had self-referred as being 'overwhelmed.' For the AW students, change came in the form of improved grades, while mental health scores did not vary but remained in the average range.
- Students returning to the FITA program from the previous year showed significant improvements in overall GPA in addition to having shown improvements the previous year. This record of grade improvements was also seen with our previous years' cohorts.
- An outreach to high school guidance counsellors, resource and student success teachers yielded a referral of 24 students directly from Grade 12 into University. This group completed the year with average grades that met program requirements.
- Students who self-referred because they felt overwhelmed, tended to be female and had better grades than the AW group, and were the most distressed subgroup. This group made significant (P=.002) improvements in psychological well-being as measured by the SF-36 MHC that accounted for difference in pre-post changes for the entire group. These students did not show significant improvements in grades nor were they at risk of not meeting requirements because of their grades.

Positive changes take place with effort over time: The ongoing effects of a therapeutic alliance

- As was described in last year's report, students demonstrated significant improvements in psychological well-being after attending 10 or more meetings with a coordinator. Students with fewer meetings showed movement toward improvements, but at a level that was not yet statistically significant. The greatest positive changes emerged with students from the 'Overwhelmed' group --who were predominately female, entered the program with the lowest mental health scores, and were in the most need of psychological support.
- In 2013-2014, FITA students attended a median number of 12 sessions; students flowed into and out of FITA with ongoing intakes and exits throughout the year. Students who attend 12 sessions, as is outlined in their contracts, achieve the benefits of a therapeutic alliance with their coordinator that builds over time.

Conclusion: Research results present a reliable profile of outcomes over three years in terms of (a) improved psychological well-being for the most distressed students, (b) improved major and overall GPAs for students on Academic Warning, (c) improved study skills overall and (d) high ratings of students' trust and acceptance of FITA.

Current initiatives: Pilot Projects of the FITA program will start this fall at the University of Toronto (St. George) and Humber College to assess transferability, build a supportive consortium, and develop further resources for Ontario Colleges and Universities.

Dr. John A. Meissner, C.Psych,
FITA Project Leader