

fitA

from intention to Action

FIT: Action Annual Report

2014-2015

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Carleton
UNIVERSITY



FITA 2014-2015 Executive Summary

From Intention To Action (FIT: Action; FITA) is an intensive counselling program that was developed for students at Carleton University *who are at risk for academic failure that is often related to poor mental health*. The FITA program is currently on track to enter its fifth year of student support programming excellence after being successfully developed through Carleton's Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (PMC) and supported by the Carleton University Office of the Vice-President (Students and Enrollment). In addition to these supports, a two-year grant from the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU) Mental Health Innovation Fund has helped FITA to consistently demonstrate the effectiveness of the program model and expand this model to other colleges and universities.

FITA seeks to provide support for psychologically and academically overwhelmed students by improving their sense of stability, mental wellbeing and academic standing. Students are asked to commit to 12 consecutive weekly meetings with their assigned FITA coordinator, during which both academic and personal issues are addressed. Students are provided with an assessment battery consisting of psychological and learning-based tests that incorporate face-to-face and written feedback from a registered psychologist. FITA engages graduate level interns who have completed the first year of their counselling program and are seeking practical counselling experience. Interns benefit from the guidance and wisdom of supervisors drawn from FITA's project and team leaders. This year we saw 225 students who averaged just over 11 meetings each for a total of 2,525 sessions, and ranged from first year to graduate level with a 1:3 male to female ratio.

In the 2014-2015 academic year the FITA program effectively supported different student needs.

Significant overall improvements were seen in pre-post **mental health scores that predicted significantly improved grades** in a regression analysis. *The differential subgroups of FITA student were: (1) at academic risk with average mental health scores, (2) at academic risk with below average mental health scores, and (3) with below average mental health scores and not at risk of suspension.* Groups within FITA had a differential impact on achievement and Mental Health Composite scores that indicate that FITA met students' needs *in relation to the specific needs of each of the 3 above groups.*

(1) Students with a good level of psychological well-being who were on Academic Warning (AW) or in the "No Decision" category (with grades that would trigger an academic warning) demonstrated significantly improved grades in a pre-post evaluation. When matched with a similar (AW) group of students by grade, program, year in university, and gender, the FITA students did not show a significantly higher grades than the comparison group. More importantly, however, they obtained grades above 5.0 (on Carleton University's 12 point scale) that would allow them to continue in a 4 year program for most majors. The matched comparison group with identical starting (pre) grades did not clear this hurdle and would have been required, for all majors, to drop down to a 3 year general program or be suspended.

2) Students who scored below the normal range on the SF-36 Mental Health Composite and who were also in academic jeopardy significantly ($p < .00$) improved grades (to meet 3 year B.A. requirements) when their earlier performance would not meet university degree standards) *and improved mental health scores with a large effect size*

demonstrated. This double-jeopardy group made significant gains in all areas. (3) Students who scored below the average range on measures of mental health (but had otherwise adequate grades) showed significant ($P < .00$) improvements in well-being (+ 1 s.d.) to the extent that a moderate effect size resulted. This group of psychologically vulnerable students *did not show a decline* in grades that would have been expected based on past research literature e.g., Eisenburg et al., (2009).

Transitions from High School to University

We engaged in an outreach with high school guidance counsellors, resource and student success teachers in an effort to encourage referrals of students to FITA who may otherwise be vulnerable during the transition into post-secondary education. This outreach resulted in the admission of 24 first-year students into the FITA program. As with our 2013-2014 school year, all students completed the academic year with grades that met program requirements and none were on academic warning at the end of the year.

Evaluation results demonstrate the robustness of the FITA model over 4 academic years.

This program model has been offered with different supervisors and interns to different students across 3 separate departments in Carleton University since 2011. Over these years students have demonstrated:

- Significant improvements in major and overall grade point averages
- Improved study skills and increase in time spent on studies
- Improved mental health in students with below average mental health (SF-36) scores. The most severely distressed students assessed over the last 3 years made the greatest improvements
- Continuing success in supporting vulnerable incoming first year students referred by their guidance counselors over the last 2 years. All met GPA requirements for 'good standing' at the end of their 1st year

FITA Initiatives:

- Pilots of the FITA program will begin this fall at the University of Toronto (St. George) and Humber College. We are developing a shared information and support consortium.
- We completed the development of a manual entitled *FITA Manual: Translating Institutional Mental Health Intention into Program Action* and have distributed this manual both upon request and through the publication portals of the Canadian Association of Colleges and Universities Student Services (CACUSS) and the (Ontario) Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health
- Interest in developing FITA pilots has been demonstrated in colleges and universities within and outside of Ontario.
- We hope to make contributions to the academic literature with wider dissemination of FITA program findings. We are working in conjunction with Dr. Cynthia Bilodeau at St. Paul University to achieve this.
- Working Alliance Inventory scores from the previous year were analysed and showed that (WAI-SF) 'bond' scores between coordinators and students *predicted improved mental health* while "task" agreement *predicted grades*.

Submitted June 20, 2015

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