



**Indspire**

Indigenous education, Canada's future. | L'éducation des autochtones, L'avenir du Canada.



# Understanding the Interrelationship of Mental Wellness Factors: A Study of Indigenous Post-Secondary Student Experiences

AYSON, G., SIDOROVA, J., DENDEWICZ, D., BUDHATHOKI, R., & DEGHANSAL, N.



## AUTHORS

---

**Gladys Ayson**, B.A. Hons., Ph.D.

**Jen Sidorova**, Ph.D.

**Destiny Dendewicz**, B.A.,  
*Tla'amin Nation*

**Rita Thapa Budhathoki**, M.A., M.R.P.E.

**Nima Dehghansai**, B.A. Hons., M.Sc., Ph.D.

## PEER REVIEWERS

---

### Internal:

**Stephanie Cunningham-Reimann**, MPH, Cert. KMb

### External:

**Ashley Jeanne Gauthier**, B.Sc. Hons., Grad Cert. Technical Writing,  
Employment and Social Development Canada,  
*Anishnabeg (Kitigan Zibi)*

**Setenay Evsen**, B.A., M.A., Ph.D. Candidate

## FIRST AUTHOR GLADYS' POSITIONALITY

---

Gladys Ayson is a non-Indigenous researcher of Filipino and Indian descent, born and raised in Toronto, Canada. In her role with Indspire, she draws on a deep commitment to cultural sensitivity, humility, and reciprocity. With over 13 years of post-secondary experience, as both an undergraduate and graduate student, Gladys brings the perspective of a first-generation Canadian university student from a visible minority background. Grounded in her lived experience and academic journey, she approaches research with a drive for impact and a commitment to meaningful knowledge sharing.

## COVER DESIGN—CONNECTIONS BY ALANAH JEWELL

---

Alanah Astehtsi' Otsistóhkwa<sup>?</sup> (Morningstar) Jewell (she/her) is a mixed French-First Nations artist. She is Bear Clan from Oneida Nation of the Thames, grew up off-reserve, and currently lives in Kitchener, Ontario. Alanah is an illustrator, painter, and muralist, and organizes local Indigenous Art Markets through @IAmKitchener on Instagram. She received an Honours BA in Sociology from Wilfrid Laurier University and had dreams of attending law school or pursuing a master's degree in the years following graduation. However, life took a turn when she decided to pursue art as a hobby in 2019; she quickly developed a love for creating and felt that she could pursue art part-time. Illustrating and painting soon became her life's work, and through this she has been able to connect with other Indigenous creators, participate in community, and express culture, love, and connection.



## FOREWORD: BALANCING MENTAL WELLNESS AND INDIGENOUS STUDENT SUCCESS

It is our privilege to present this report regarding balancing mental wellness and Indigenous student success. Across Canada, Indigenous learners consistently identify mental health challenges as one of the most significant barriers to achieving their educational goals. These challenges are not isolated experiences, rather, they are shaped by history, society, family, and ongoing inequities, systemic gaps, and environments that too often fail to understand Indigenous realities, identities, cultures, and ways of knowing.

At Indspire, we walk alongside Indigenous students as they pursue post-secondary education. We understand that success cannot be measured by credentials alone. A balanced state of mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being contributes to the health of both individuals and communities. Through initiatives such as *Pathways to Wellness* and in collaboration with partners including CAMH, Jack.org, and We Matter, we are working to strengthen culturally grounded supports. Yet, students continue to highlight where meaningful gaps remain.

In 2022, Indspire released *Indigenous Learners' Mental Health Needs*, a foundational literature review that examines what is known and what remains insufficiently understood about Indigenous students' mental wellness. While the research identified persistent individual, socio-cultural, and systemic barriers, it also highlighted a critical gap: limited research directly centred on the voices and lived experiences of Indigenous post-secondary learners themselves.

In response, and in partnership with the Mental Health Commission of Canada, Indspire launched a multi-phase research initiative to ground future action in student realities. Through a national *Mental Wellness Survey* and a series of student learning circles, Indigenous learners shared not only the pressures they face but also their strengths, insights, and clarity about what meaningful support looks like. These were not transactional research exercises. They were spaces of trust, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.

The four reports presented here provide a national landscape analysis of available resources, detailed survey findings, and direct lived experiences from Indigenous students across the country. They offer both evidence and direction, identifying persistent barriers and illuminating pathways toward belonging, resilience, and thriving.

This work is an invitation and call to action for institutions, governments, and partners to build culturally grounded, responsive, and accountable systems. Affirming the importance of supportive learning environments will allow Indigenous students to thrive and lead into a bright future.

*Meegwetch,*



**Jocelyn W. Formsma**, H.B.Soc.Sci, J.D.  
*President and CEO, Indspire*



## FOREWORD: HONOURING COLLABORATION AND INDIGENOUS WELL-BEING

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) is honoured to support Indspire in this important research focused on the mental health and well-being of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students in post-secondary.

The MHCC champions the National Standard for *Mental Health and Well-being for Post-Secondary Students* (the Standard) — a voluntary, flexible framework to help institutions create supportive, holistic, and student-centred approaches to mental health. Since its release in 2020, campuses across the country have made meaningful strides to adapt their systems to better meet the needs of their students.

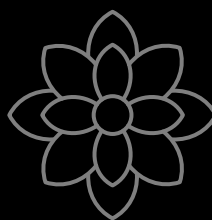
At the same time, student realities have become increasingly complex. Indigenous students carry strength, knowledge, and deep connections to community that enrich the post-secondary environment, yet these experiences often unfold within systems that are based on colonial foundations. Many continue to experience challenges tied to the ongoing experiences of colonization, racism, and cultural disconnection, highlighting the importance of fostering campus environments where Indigenous ways of knowing and being are practiced, supported, and celebrated as an asset.

It has been clear to us since the release of the Standard that further guidance is needed to reflect the distinct perspectives and priorities of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students. This series of reports is a step in that direction. Through these reports, Indigenous students share powerful insights about the kind of supports and systems they need to feel seen, respected, and able to thrive throughout their post-secondary journeys. Without their voices, meaningful support of Indigenous students in post-secondary would be unattainable.

The MHCC is grateful to Indspire for their leadership in this work and to the students who courageously shared their stories. Their voices are the heart of these reports. We are committed to being accountable to these voices to foster more inclusive and culturally safe environments for Indigenous students, and we encourage readers to join us in reflecting on their own responsibility in advancing this important work.



**Lili-Anna Pereša,**  
President and Chief Executive Officer,  
Mental Health Commission of Canada



# INDSPIRE'S MENTAL WELLNESS RESEARCH PROGRAM

## Research Program

Mental health is a foundational element of students' ability to thrive academically. To better understand the mental wellness landscape for Indigenous post-secondary students, Indspire's Research and Impact Department (R&I) conducted a literature review, which identified individual, socio-cultural, and systemic barriers along with key facilitators that influence students' mental wellness (Bunting, 2022). Most notably, the review highlighted a significant gap in research that focuses on the mental wellness of Indigenous learners.

To address this gap, R&I partnered with the MHCC to launch a two-phased research program aimed at deepening the understanding of Indigenous students' mental wellness and identifying effective supports throughout their post-secondary journeys. This initiative led to the development of a series of four interrelated research reports.



### Phase 1: Mental Wellness Survey

To address the limited documentation of mental wellness experiences of Indigenous learners, R&I developed and administered the *Mental Wellness Survey* to former recipients of Indspire's Building Brighter Futures program. The survey explored key factors influencing Indigenous students' mental wellness, including cultural connectedness, sense of belonging, and the support services provided by their post-secondary institutions.

The *Mental Wellness Survey* invited students to share their experiences in their own words—identifying barriers to accessing support services and assessing whether those services met their needs. The findings, disseminated across three reports, emphasized the importance of fostering a strength-based discourse that centres Indigenous student voices in shaping mental wellness supports.

### Phase 2: Learning Circles

To enable Indigenous learners to share their experiences of mental wellness in post-secondary contexts, the second phase of the research program involved a series of learning circles with current and former students. These discussions sought in-depth insights into students' lived experiences related to mental wellness during their academic journeys, as well as their perspectives on the strengths and limitations of institutional support. Findings from the learning circles emphasized the need for holistic support, including professional development opportunities, life skills training, and healing support. A guiding analogy was developed to outline pathways for post-secondary institutions to strengthen mental wellness supports for Indigenous learners.

## Indspire's R&I Mental Wellness Reports



### Phase 1

#### Understanding the Interrelationship of Mental Wellness Factors— A Study of Indigenous Post-Secondary Student Experiences

Authors: Ayson et al., 2026



### Phase 1

#### Exploring the Impact of Key Demographic Variables on Indigenous Students Well-being and Support Service Utilization

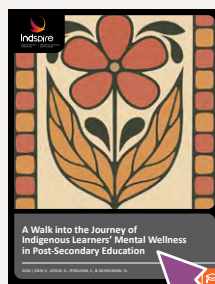
Authors: Budhathoki et al., 2026



### Phase 1

#### Indigenous Student Voices on Mental Health and Indigenous Supports: Barriers and Benefits

Authors: Sidorova et al., 2026



### Phase 2

#### A Walk Into the Journey of Indigenous Learners' Mental Wellness in Post-Secondary Education

Authors: Gray et al., 2026

## Reflections

This body of work fills a critical knowledge gap in understanding the factors that influence Indigenous students' mental wellness throughout their post-secondary journey. It highlights the ongoing harm that colonization has on Indigenous students and the barriers placed on their educational attainment. Importantly, this research brings forward the voices, experiences, and perspectives of Indigenous learners to inform how institutions and policymakers approach mental wellness in post-secondary education.

## Looking Ahead

Drawing on insights gathered across both phases, we will synthesize the findings into an informed, evidence-based position statement that outlines recommendations for the sector. This statement, along with the four interrelated research reports, will serve as a guiding resource for post-secondary institutions, government bodies, and community organizations working to strengthen mental wellness supports for Indigenous students across Canada.



## ABOUT INDSPIRE

Indspire is a national Indigenous registered charity that invests in the education of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people for the long-term benefit of these individuals, their families, and communities. In partnership with Indigenous and private- and public-sector stakeholders, Indspire educates, connects, and invests in Indigenous people to help them achieve their highest potential. Indspire provides resources to students, educators, communities, and other stakeholders who are committed to improving success in education for Indigenous youth. Since 1996, Indspire has awarded over \$250 million through more than 70,000 bursaries and scholarships to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth, making it the largest funder of Indigenous post-secondary education outside of the Canadian federal government.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to begin by acknowledging and thanking our *Building Brighter Futures* program recipients who shared their experiences with us and provided valuable insight into the experiences of Indigenous students across Canada. We also wish to acknowledge Indspire's staff, funding partners, and other stakeholders, whose support has enabled us to provide thousands of bursaries, scholarships, and awards each year to students pursuing post-secondary education and training. At Indspire, it is important for us to provide space for Indigenous communities to feel seen, represented, and celebrated. The success experienced by Indigenous students, and the ways they use their education to demonstrate reciprocity in giving back to their communities, are truly inspiring and tell the story of how brighter futures can be built when we work in partnership.

*Chi-Miigwetch* for all of the hope and encouragement that you all bring.

## RESEARCH SPONSORS



Mental Health  
Commission  
of Canada

Commission de  
la santé mentale  
du Canada

This project is funded in part by the  
Government of Canada

Canada



SUNCOR  
ENERGY  
FOUNDATION

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>9</b>	<b>ABSTRACT</b>		
<b>9</b>	<b>KEY TAKEAWAYS</b>		
<b>10</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	Background	10
		The Current Study	12
		Purpose	12
<b>13</b>	<b>METHOD</b>	Research Questions	13
		Methodology	13
<b>15</b>	<b>RESULTS</b>	Factor Analysis	15
		Descriptive Findings	15
		Correlation Analyses	29
<b>30</b>	<b>DISCUSSION</b>	Significance	30
		Factors Impacting Mental Wellness	30
		Limitations and Future Directions	32
<b>34</b>	<b>IMPLICATIONS</b>		
<b>34</b>	<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>		
<b>35</b>	<b>CONCLUSION</b>		
<b>36</b>	<b>REFERENCES</b>		
<b>40</b>	<b>APPENDIX: MENTAL WELLNESS SURVEY ITEMS FOR KEY VARIABLES</b>		

## ABSTRACT

The mental health of Indigenous post-secondary students continues to be largely overlooked in the literature, despite elevated socio-economic pressures. Literature suggests cultural connectedness and sense of belonging are critical to the mental wellness of Indigenous Peoples (Bunting, 2022). Through survey administration, the current study investigates the contemporary landscape of mental wellness among Indigenous post-secondary students, expanding on key factors including: general health, stress level, cultural connectedness, sense of belonging, and access to support services at their institution. Findings showed students' mental health to generally be "Fair", indicating a need for targeted support initiatives. General health, cultural connectedness, and sense of belonging, positively correlated to students' mental wellness, while stress level negatively correlated to mental wellness. Accessing mental health and Indigenous services did not relate to mental wellness, however accessing Indigenous services positively correlated to cultural connectedness. Findings from this work advance understanding of mental wellness for Indigenous post-secondary students within Canada.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- There are significant relationships between mental wellness and general health, cultural connectedness, sense of belonging, and stress level.
- 32% of respondents reported having a mental health condition. Most respondents reported their mental health to be "Poor" or "Fair" (52%).
- 28% of respondents accessed general mental health services. Of them, 51% of respondents reported mental health services to meet their needs.
- 51% of respondents accessed Indigenous services. Of them, 76% of respondents reported these services met their needs.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

In recent years, Indspire's Research and Impact Department (R&I) has investigated the landscape of mental wellness for Indigenous students (Bunting, 2022; Earle & Herkimer, 2022). Literature suggests post-secondary students' mental health needs arise from combined academic and socio-economic pressures (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Li et al., 2022). For Indigenous people, the role of colonization and ongoing colonialism is considerably linked to negative mental health outcomes (Fredericks et al., 2024; Gone, 2013; Pidgeon, 2016). Hop Wo et al., (2020) illustrates how intergenerational trauma is related to higher ratings of depression, stress, and suicide compared to non-Indigenous populations. Despite growing attention to mental health needs among post-secondary students, research on factors specifically related to Indigenous students' mental health is limited.

### Key Factors in Mental Wellness

Recent research highlights two factors playing a vital role in the mental well-being of Indigenous peoples: cultural connectedness and a sense of belonging (Bunting, 2022). Cultural connectedness is defined as a connection to one's own culture, understanding of one's own culture, and engagement with one's own culture (Snowshoe et al., 2017). Mounting research has shown cultural connectedness to play a pivotal role in Indigenous students' mental health and well-being (Masotti et al., 2020; Snowshoe et al., 2017), particularly when individuals face intergenerational trauma due to colonization and residential schooling (Gray & Cote, 2019). Indspire's research with former Building Brighter Futures recipients revealed frequent reports of cultural disconnection among Indigenous students in post-secondary education (D'Antimo et al., 2025). In a recent report by D'Antimo and colleagues (2025), Indigenous students in teacher education programs identified cultural disconnection as the largest barrier to their progression. Cultural disconnection is especially prevalent in students who relocate from reserves or rural communities to urban settings to pursue post-secondary education (D'Antimo et al., 2025; McKeown et al., 2018; St. Germaine & D'Antimo, 2023).

Sense of belonging can be defined as the level at which an individual feels connected to a community and their place within it (Kitchen et al., 2012). Indigenous youth have identified social support to be important to their well-being (Heid et al., 2022). Social support can mediate the effects of academic stressors for students by building stronger self-esteem and self-efficacy (Bunting, 2022; Li et al., 2022). Yet, many Indigenous students report experiences of isolation throughout post-secondary (Herkimer, 2022; St. Germaine & D'Antimo, 2023), particularly those who relocate from their home community to an urban setting for school (Bunting, 2022; D'Antimo et al., 2025). Moreover, Indigenous students' everyday lives are significantly impacted by microaggressions, overt racism, and institutional barriers in post-secondary settings (Bailey, 2016; Bunting, 2022; D'Antimo et al., 2025; Herkimer, 2022).

## INTRODUCTION

Such prejudice can hinder students' sense of belonging to academic environments. Without the foundation of "belonging," students are more vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness, all of which impede effective learning (Harper & Thompson, 2017; Hop Wo et al., 2020). Acknowledging the importance of student well-being to academic outcomes, most post-secondary institutions offer support services across a spectrum of needs (Li et al., 2022). However, a one-size-fits-all approach does not target the specific needs of Indigenous students.

### Support Services Offered in Post-Secondary Institutions

Within post-secondary contexts, research illustrates student high need for mental health services (Dietsche, 2012; Li et al., 2022). Despite this, students generally do not use support services offered by post-secondary institutions (Dietsche, 2012). For example, St. Germaine (2022) points to structural accessibility and stigma as factors impacting service utilization. Moreover, Indigenous students face additional barriers to access and use of support services (St. Germaine & D'Antimo, 2024; See Sidorova et al., 2026 from this report series). For Indigenous post-secondary students, general mental wellness support may not be reflective of their specific needs. Evidently, some psychologists and support providers continue to unconsciously support the ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples, as it is grounded in colonial epistemologies (Ouellette, 2020). Thus, to provide adequate mental health support to Indigenous students, it is important for programming to be trauma-informed, reflecting local Indigenous worldviews and histories.

To move culturally rooted commitments into concrete action, institutions can draw on established frameworks to guide decision-making on program structure and resource allocation, including the *Okanagan Charter* (International Conference on Health Promoting Universities & Colleges, 2015) and the *National Standard for Mental Health and Wellbeing for Post-Secondary Students* (the Standard; Canadian Standards Association, 2020). Many universities and colleges across Canada have adopted these frameworks or introduced their own institutional framework. Furthermore, there has been a shift toward offering Indigenous-specific support services. As of 2022, over 80% of universities in Canada offer academic and general counselling to Indigenous students, reflecting a growing institutional focus toward supporting student wellbeing (Universities Canada, 2023).

## The Current Study

In response to the research gap in Indigenous post-secondary students' mental well-being, Indspire sought to contribute to the understanding of critical factors related to students' mental wellness. In doing so, Indspire's R&I department developed the *Mental Wellness Survey*, launched in early 2023. The survey, administered to Indspire's Building Brighter Futures award recipients, gathered both quantitative and qualitative data to understand their mental wellness during post-secondary. Specifically, the survey measured respondents' self-reported cultural connectedness, sense of belonging, stress level, and access to support, and investigated the relationship these have to their overall mental wellness. Importantly, this survey centres the experiences and voices of Indigenous students and seeks their feedback on the mental wellness support offered by their post-secondary institution.

## Purpose

The research in this report is part of a broader initiative to better understand the mental wellness of Indigenous post-secondary students, published across a series of four reports. Specific to this report is understanding the landscape of students' mental wellness, cultural connectedness, sense of belonging, access to support services, and the interrelationship of these factors. Findings from this research will be used to develop recommendations to improve institutional support of Indigenous student mental wellness.

## METHOD

### Research Question

This report seeks to explore the landscape of Indigenous students' mental wellness, general health, cultural connectedness, sense of belonging, stress level, and access to support services. It also attempts to understand how these factors relate to one another, providing important context for understanding the interconnected nature of influences on student mental wellness.

### Methodology

The *Mental Wellness Survey* was administered in March 2023 and used a non-probability purposive sampling method to include First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Building Brighter Futures recipients from 2020 – 2022. The survey was administered via email using SurveyMonkey. Employing a mixed-method design, the survey gathered both quantitative and qualitative data through 35 items and took roughly 20 – 25 minutes to complete.

### Participants

The *Mental Wellness Survey* was sent to 10,104 previous Building Brighter Futures recipients who received awards from 2020 – 2022. A total of 2,989 participants responded to the survey, representing a 30% response rate. Ninety-one percent of respondents provided complete responses. Twenty-three participants identified as living outside of Canada were removed from subsequent analyses in this report, as they were deemed to be outside the national context. Thus, a final sample of 2,966 participants remained for analysis. The number of respondents ( $n$ ) varied across analyses due to the inclusion of both complete and partial responses, as well as the use of skip logic in the survey design. For any results with fewer than the 2,966 participants, the sample size is noted.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS v.31. Prior to analysis, survey data were screened for outliers, typographical errors, and inconsistencies to ensure data quality and accuracy.

### Factor Analysis

As a newly developed measure of mental wellness, it is important to ensure the items in the *Mental Wellness Survey* support the predefined theoretical structure of examining different mental health variables. Thus, a post-hoc confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to understand whether items in the *Mental Wellness Survey* reflected the intended latent constructs of mental wellness, cultural connectedness, and sense of belonging.

## METHOD

---

### Descriptive Analysis

The quantitative data collected from the *Mental Wellness Survey* was analysed using descriptive statistics. Scores for mental wellness, cultural connectedness, and sense of belonging were calculated by averaging the responses to each item (scored from 1 to 5 on a 5-point Likert Scale); a higher score indicated a strong expression of that construct (e.g., an average score of 4.5 on mental wellness items represents strong mental wellness). Key insights are reported in the following areas:

- 1) Mental Wellness
- 2) General Health
- 3) Cultural Connectedness
- 4) Sense of Belonging
- 5) Stress Level
- 6) Accessing Mental Health Services
- 7) Accessing Indigenous Services

### Correlational Analysis

A series of bivariate Spearman correlations were run to understand the interrelationship of all the variables of interest listed above. For example, understanding whether increases (or decreases) in mental wellness relate to increases (or decreases) in general health, cultural connectedness, sense of belonging, stress level, or accessing services.

### Ethical Considerations

Indspire seeks to frame research in a way that empowers Indigenous communities, using a strength-based approach that emphasizes resilience and positive cultural practices. All individual information shared by survey participants remained confidential with the project's core research team, and responses were anonymized prior to analysis. Participants were informed that, by voluntarily participating in the survey, they were giving Indspire consent to use their responses for research purposes that benefit Indigenous students. Participant data is held on a secure cloud drive with two-step verification and password protection, accessed only by the research team. To maintain confidentiality, only aggregate data is presented. More information on how participant data is used at Indspire can be found in our [Privacy Policy](#).

## RESULTS

## RESULTS

## Factor Analysis

The confirmatory factor analysis identified which items from the *Mental Wellness Survey* loaded onto each construct: mental wellness, cultural connectedness, and sense of belonging. Items with factor loadings greater than 0.30 or less than -0.30 were retained for the analysis of their respective construct. Six items related to mental wellness, five items to cultural connectedness, and six items to sense of belonging were retained. The survey items representing each construct (mental wellness, cultural connectedness, and sense of belonging) can be found in the [Appendix](#).

## Descriptive Findings

## Demographics

The demographic information contained information pertaining to respondents' Indigenous identity, gender identity, and area of residence. Most respondents identified as First Nations, female, and urban residents, with the highest representation from Ontario and Alberta (see Figures 1 – 4).

Figure 1:

Indigenous Identity of Survey Respondents

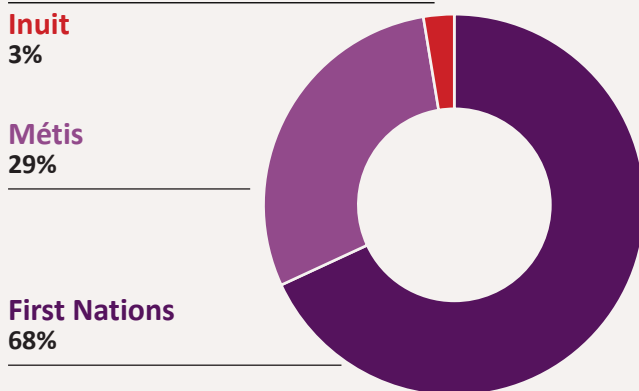
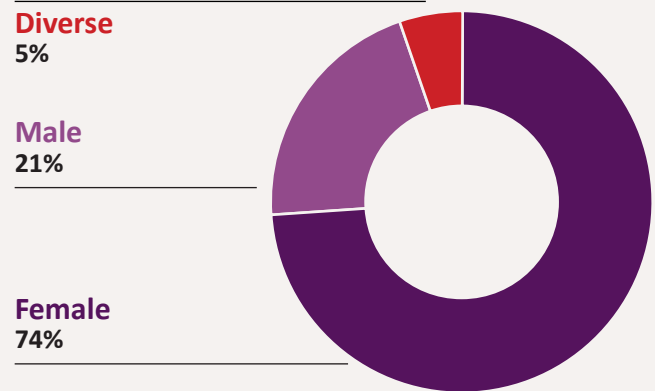
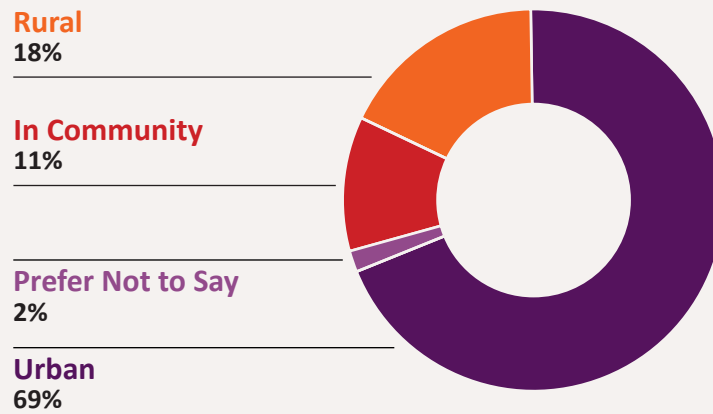
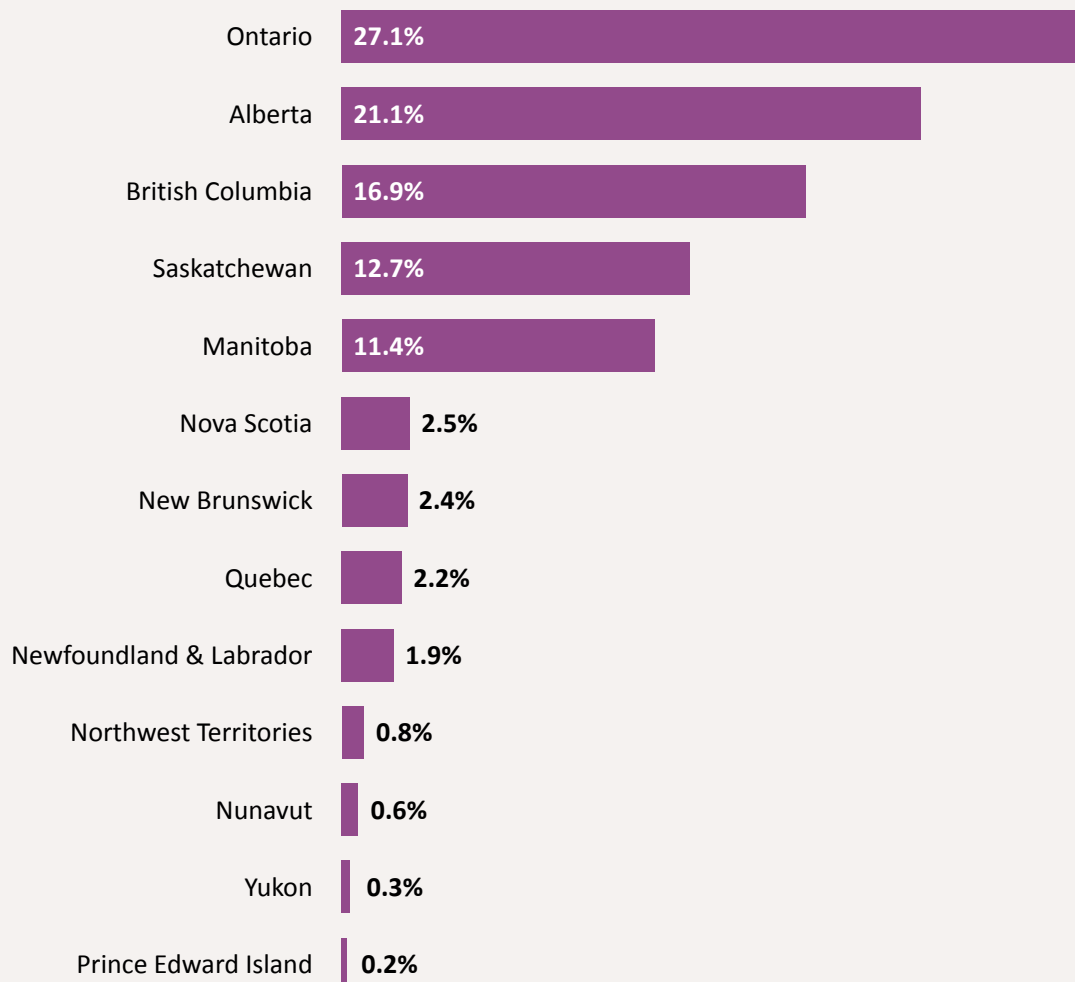


Figure 2:

Gender Identity of Survey Respondents

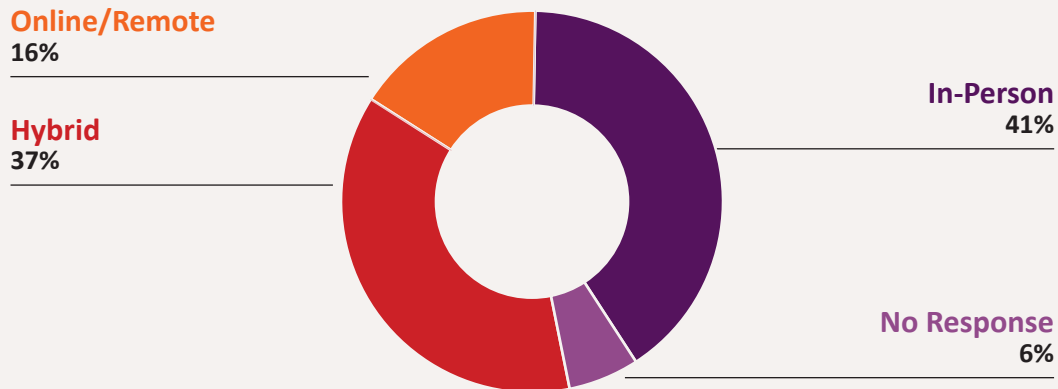


**Figure 3: Area of Residence of Survey Respondents****Figure 4: Province of Residence of Survey Respondents**

## RESULTS

Respondents also provided insights to the primary form of post-secondary institution attendance: in-person, online/remote, or hybrid (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Mode of School Attendance**



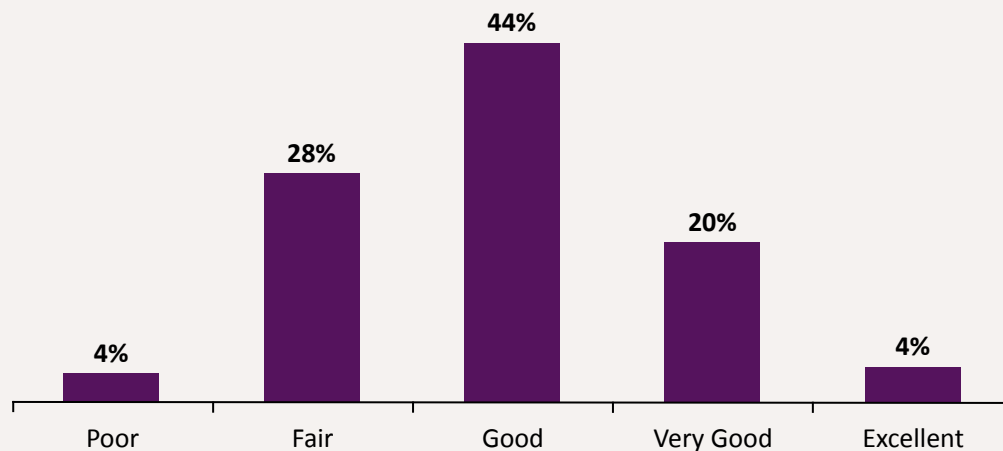
## General Health

Respondents were asked to describe their general health, including the presence or absence of disabilities or medical conditions, and how completing daily tasks is affected by their health needs.

Respondents were asked to rate their general health on a 5-point Likert scale from *Poor* to *Excellent*. Most respondents (44%;  $n = 1,301$ ) reported their general health to be *Good*. Less than a quarter (25%,  $n = 709$ ) of respondents reported their general health to be *Excellent* or *Very Good* while over a third (32%,  $n = 935$ ) of respondents reported their general health to be *Fair* or *Poor* (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6: General Health Rating of Survey Respondents**

*How would you rate your general health?*

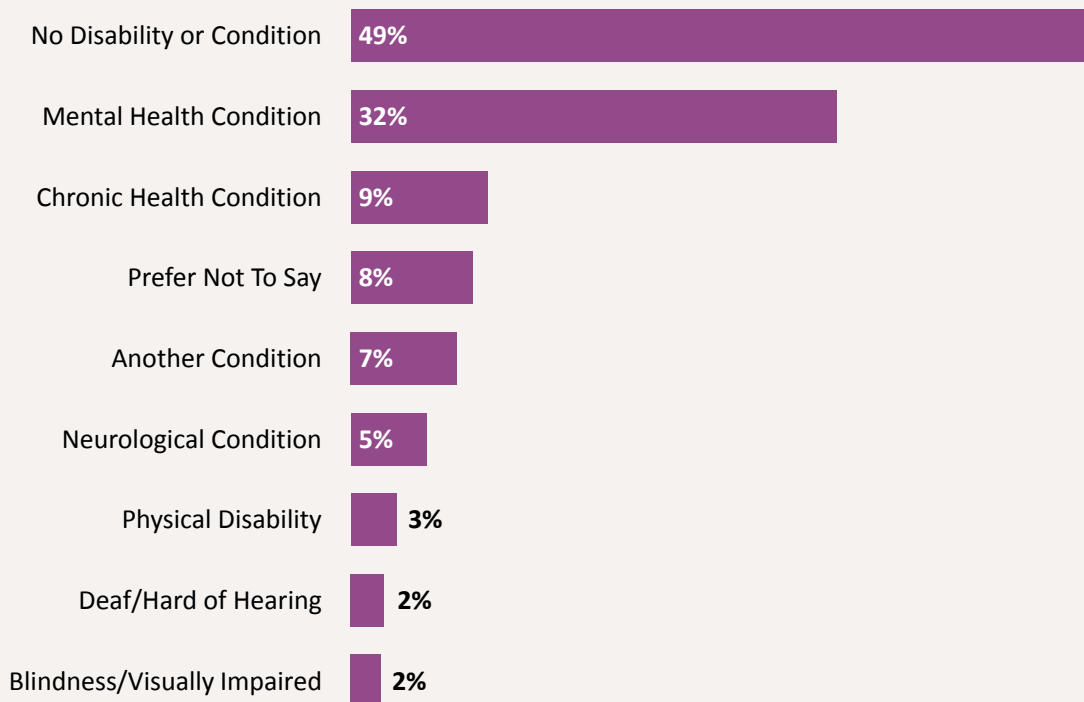


**Note:**  $n = 2,945$  respondents to this question.

## RESULTS

Respondents were asked to identify any medical conditions they had. Nearly half of the respondents (49%,  $n = 1,450$ ) reported to have no medical conditions (e.g., physical disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment, mental health condition, neurological, and chronic health). Mental health conditions were the most prevalent condition, with over one third of respondents (35%,  $n = 948$ ) reporting to have this type of condition. Figure 7 outlines a full breakdown of reported medical conditions.

**Figure 7: Reported Medical Condition of Survey Respondents**

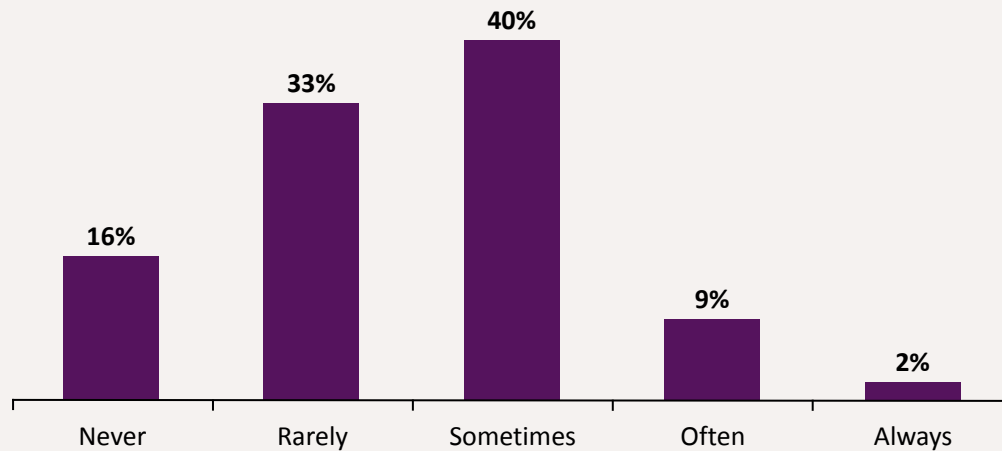


Respondents reported whether their health needs interfered with important tasks. Most respondents (73%,  $n = 2,149$ ) reported their health needs to *Sometimes* or *Rarely* interfere with important tasks. A small proportion of respondents (11%) reported their health needs *Often* or *Always* interfered with tasks (Figure 8 shows a full breakdown of responses).

## RESULTS

**Figure 8:** Respondents' Health Interference with Important Tasks

*Do your health needs interfere with doing the things you need to do?*

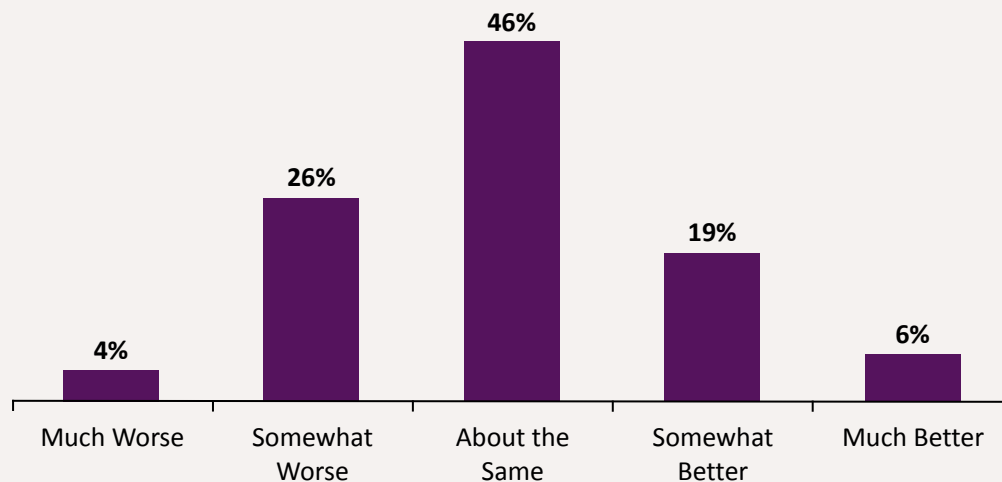


**Note:** *n* = 2,945 respondents to this question.

Respondents reported on their perception of their health compared to people their age. While nearly half of respondents (46%, *n* = 1,348) reported their health to be similar to others their age, close to one third (30%, *n* = 888) reported their health to be worse (see Figure 9 for a complete breakdown).

**Figure 9:** Respondents' Perceived Health Compared to Others Their Age

*How do you feel your health is compared to most people your age?*



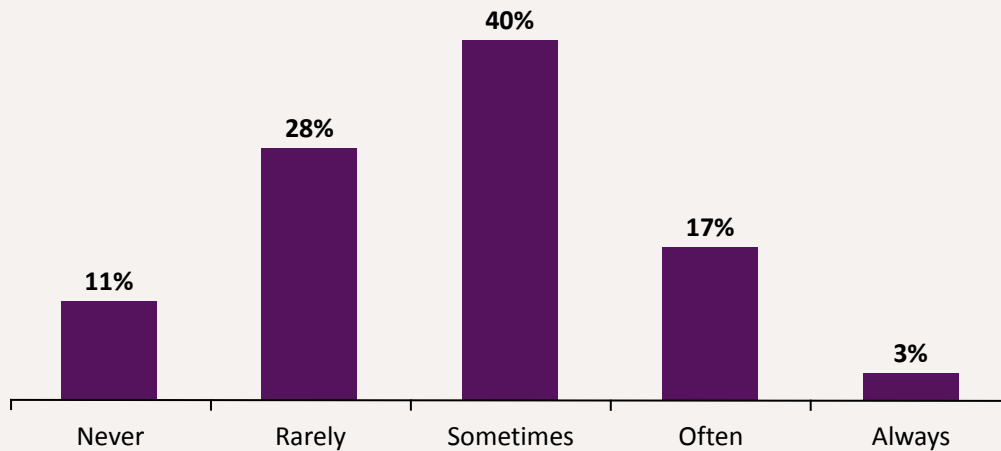
**Note:** *n* = 2,945 respondents to this question.

Respondents were asked how often their health has worried them in the last three months. Most respondents (69%, *n* = 2,027) reported their health to *Rarely* or *Sometimes* worry them (see Figure 10).

## RESULTS

**Figure 10:** Frequency of Health Concerns in Survey Respondents

*During the past three months, how often has your health worried you?*



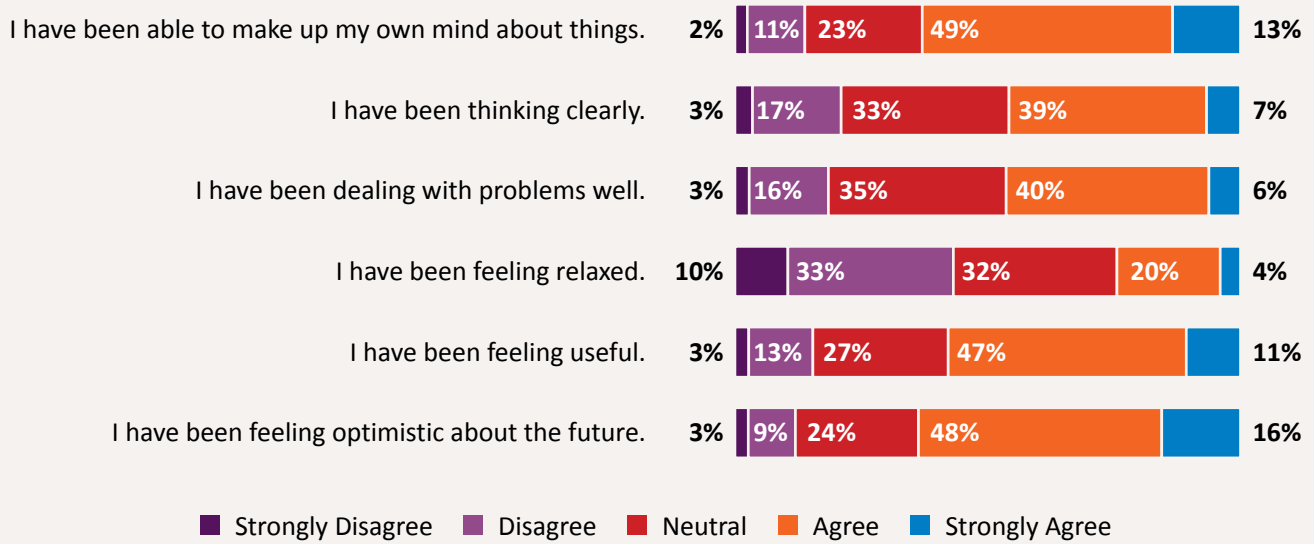
**Note:** n = 2,945 respondents to this question.

## Mental Wellness

This section provides responses related to respondents' self-rated mental well-being. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement to various statements related to mental wellness. Most respondents (72% – 75%) felt *Neutral* or *Agreed* to being able to make up their own mind about things, thinking clearly, dealing with problems well, feeling useful, and feeling optimistic about the future. However, 65% of students *Disagreed* or felt *Neutral* about feeling relaxed. Figure 11 shows the full breakdown of agreement responses to the mental wellness statements.

**Figure 11: Respondent Agreement to Mental Wellness Statements**

*Please indicate your agreement with the following statements.*

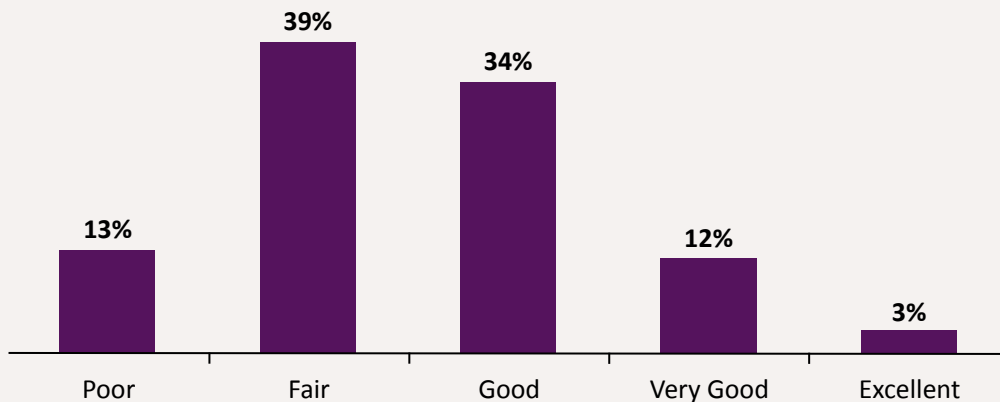


**Note:** n = 2,876 respondents to these questions.

Respondents were also asked to rate their current mental health on a 5-point Likert scale from *Poor* to *Excellent*<sup>1</sup>. More respondents reported their mental health to be *Poor* or *Fair* (52%) compared to those who reported it to be *Good*, *Very Good*, or *Excellent* (49%; see Figure 12 shows the full breakdown of responses).

**Figure 12: Self-Rated Mental Health of Survey Respondents**

*How would you rate your mental health?*



**Note:** n = 2,876 respondents to this question.

1 This measure was not included in the calculation of the overall Mental Wellness score. This is because it is on a different response scale from the other questions within this measure.

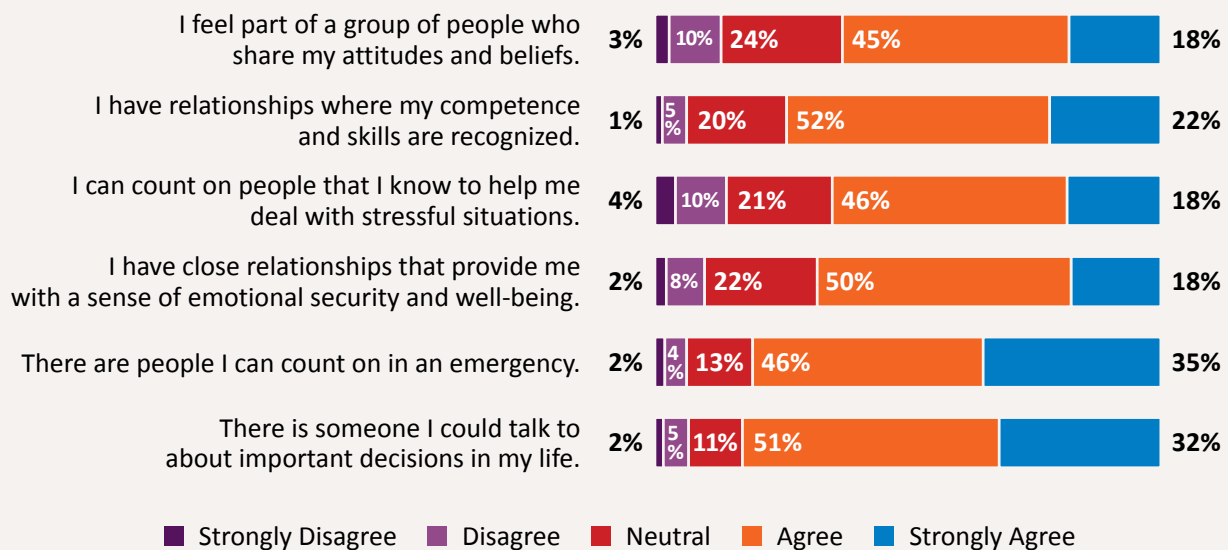
## RESULTS

## Sense of Belonging

This section displays respondents' sense of belonging during their post-secondary schooling. Specifically, respondents rated their agreement with statements related to feeling a sense of belonging. To allow for a more general interpretation of sense of belonging, statements of belonging and support were not specific to any community (e.g., Indigenous or post-secondary). Most respondents (63% – 83%) *Agreed* or *Strongly Agreed* to all statements, indicating strong sense of belonging among respondents. Figure 13 shows the breakdown of responses to each sense of belonging statement.

**Figure 13: Respondent Agreement to Sense of Belonging Statements**

*Please indicate your agreement with the following statements.*



**Note:** n = 2,826 respondents to five statements.

*"I can count on people that I know to help me deal with stressful situations" had 2,876 respondents.*

To understand their sense of belonging to their post-secondary community, respondents also reported whether they felt accepted and supported at their post-secondary institutions<sup>2</sup>. Of 2,826 responses, the majority (81%) reported to feel accepted and supported by their post-secondary institutions, whereas 19% reported they did not.

2 This measure was not included in the calculation of the overall sense of belonging score. This is because it is on a different response scale from the other questions within this measure.

## RESULTS

## Cultural Connectedness

This section addresses responses related to cultural connectedness (i.e., being connected to their Indigenous identity and culture) during learners' post-secondary experience. Although the majority of respondents (81% – 82%) *Agreed* or *Strongly Agreed* that they feel good about their identity and culture and take pride in their community/nation, a smaller proportion (41% – 56%) reported participating in cultural practices, experiencing a strong sense of belonging to their community, and having a clear sense of identity (see Figure 14).

**Figure 14:** Respondent Agreement to Cultural Connectedness Statements

*Please indicate your agreement with the following statements.*



**Note:** n = 2,801 respondents to these statements.

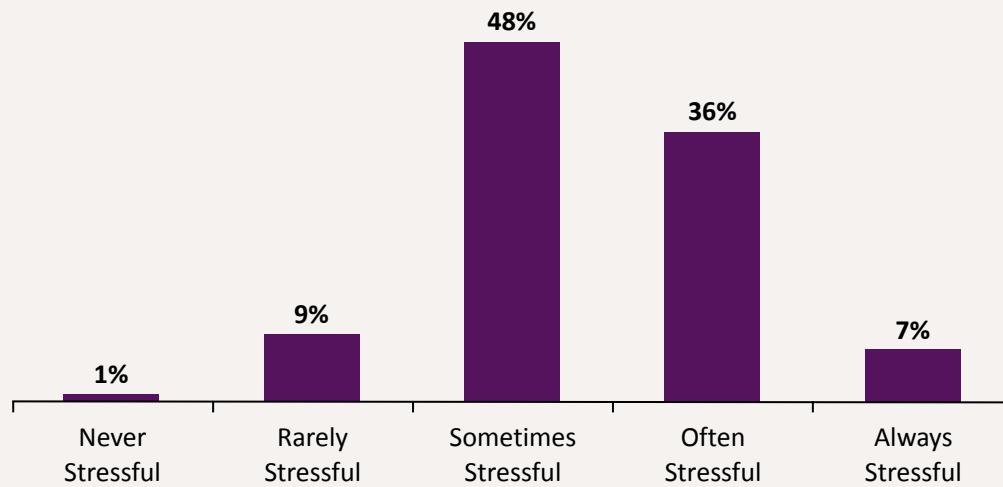
## RESULTS

### Stress Level

Respondents self-reported their stress level and the extent to which stress interferes with their daily lives. Respondents were asked to describe their level of stress on most of their days (see Figure 15). Most (84%) reported most days to *Often Stressful* or *Sometimes Stressful*.

**Figure 15: Respondent Stress Level on Most Days**

*Thinking about the amount of stress in your life, how would you describe most days?*

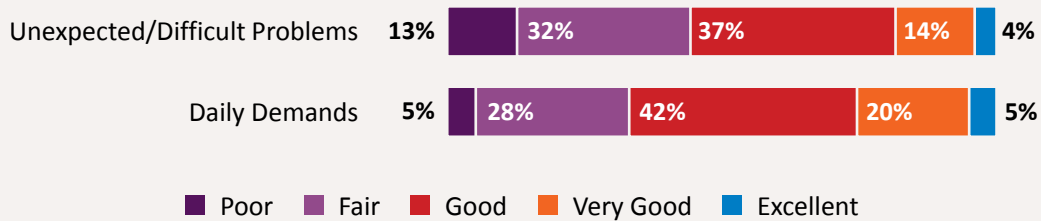


**Note:** n = 2,876 respondents to this question. Percentages equal 101% due to rounding effect.

Respondents were asked to rate their ability to handle unexpected problems and daily demands on a 5-point Likert scale from *Poor* to *Excellent* (see Figure 16). Most respondents (69% – 70%) rated their ability to handle unexpected problems and daily demands to be *Fair* or *Good*. A smaller percentage of respondents (18% – 25%) rated their ability to be *Very Good* or *Excellent*.

**Figure 16:** Respondents’ Self-Rated Ability to Handle Problems and Daily Demands

*How would you rate your ability to handle...*

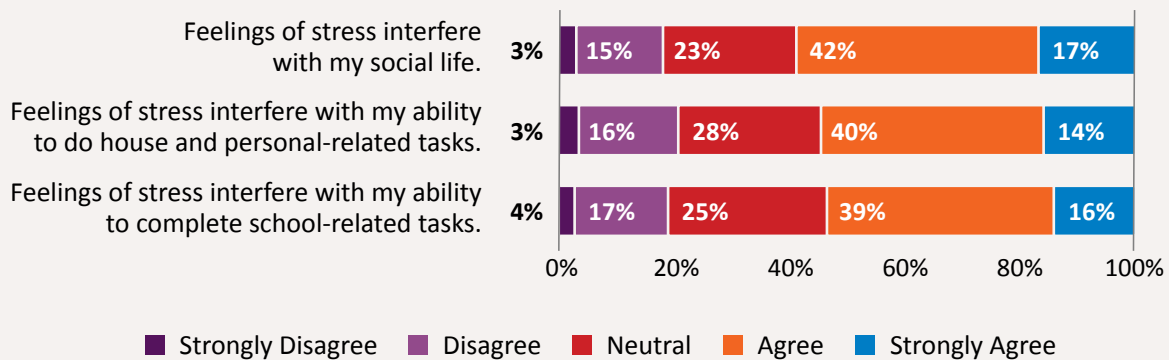


**Note:** n = 2,876 respondents to these questions.

Respondents rated their agreeability to three statements related to the interference of stress in different aspects of their lives (see Figure 17). Nearly half of respondents (39% – 42%) *Agreed* that stress interfered with their social life, ability to do house and personal-related tasks, and school-related tasks.

**Figure 17:** Respondents’ Agreement to Statements Related to Stress

*Please indicate your agreement with the following statements.*



**Note:** n = 2,876 respondents to these questions.

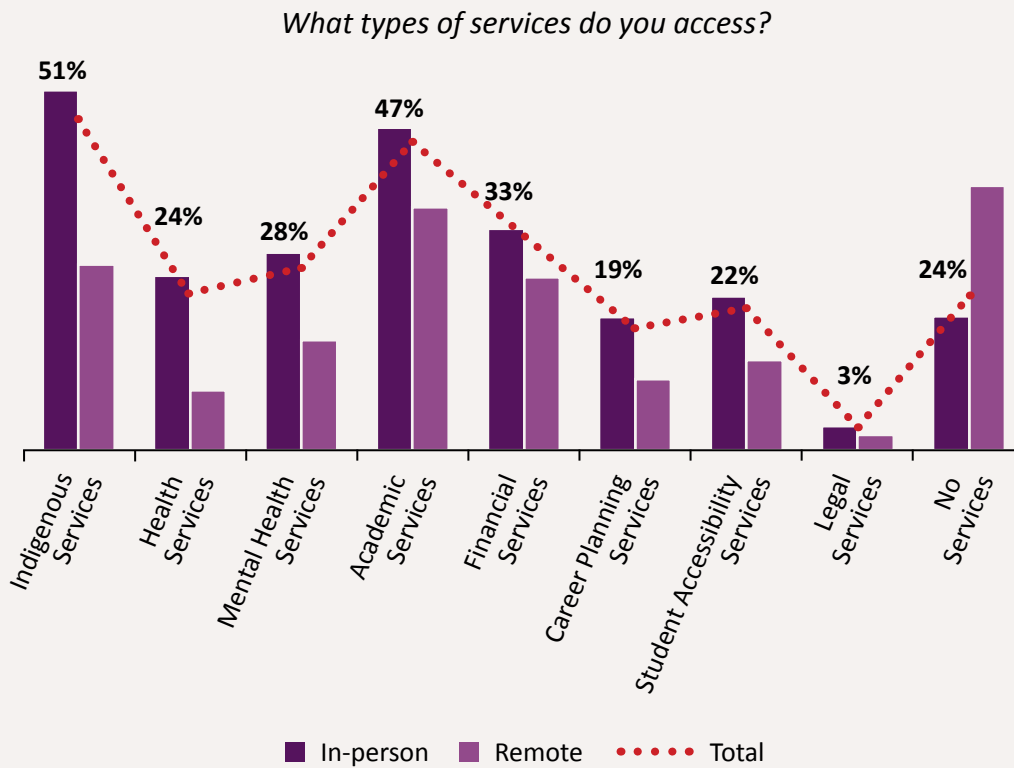
## RESULTS

### Accessing Post-Secondary Institution Support Services

Respondents reported their access to various support services offered by their post-secondary institution. For survey items related to respondents' access to support services, responses were split by respondents' mode of attendance: "In-Person" (inclusive of in-person and hybrid students; 83%) and "Online" (17%).

Respondents selected from a list of support services they potentially might have accessed at their post-secondary institutions (see Figure 18). Multiple selections were permitted. Overall, a higher proportion of in-person/hybrid students reported accessing services compared to online students. Notably, 28% of all respondents reported to access mental health services, whereas 51% reported to access Indigenous services.

**Figure 18: Services Accessed In Post-Secondary Institutions**

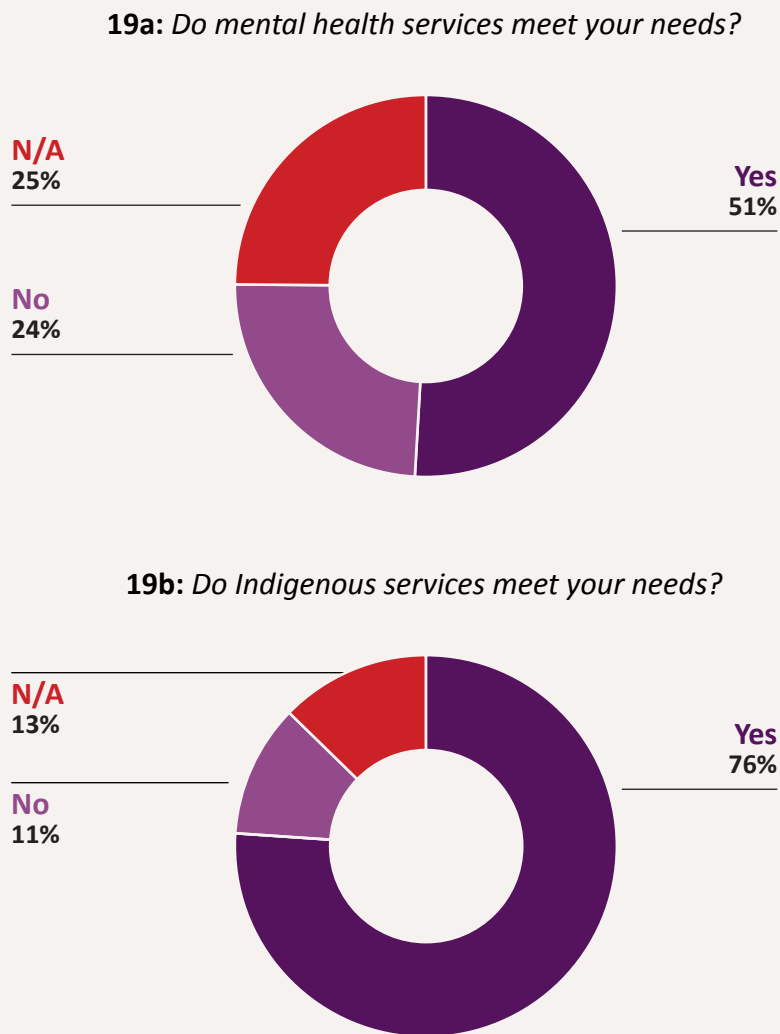


**Note:** n = 2,253 in-person respondents and n = 457 remote respondents.  
Percentages represent the proportion of total respondents.

## RESULTS

Respondents who had accessed mental health services were asked to report whether these services met their needs (see Figure 19a). Of 760 respondents who accessed mental health services, 387 (51%) reported that the services met their needs. Those who accessed Indigenous services were also asked to report whether the services met their needs. Of 1,371 respondents who accessed Indigenous services, 1,043 (76%) reported that the services met their needs (see Figure 19b).

**Figure 19:** Student Rating on Whether Mental Health and Indigenous Services Met Their Needs



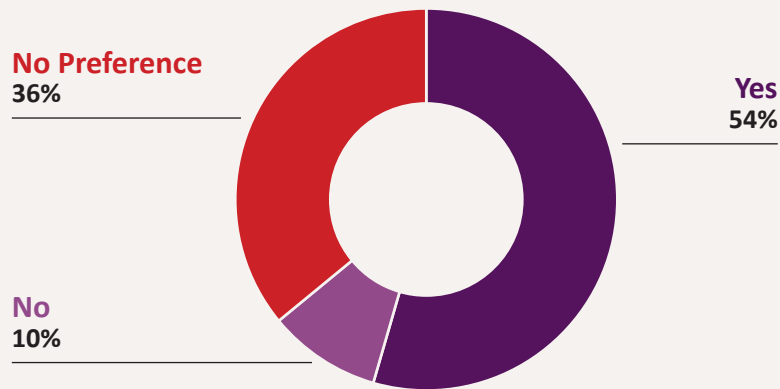
**Note:** Graph 19a is of n = 760 respondents who reported accessing mental health services and graph 19b is of n = 1,371 respondents who reported accessing Indigenous services.

## RESULTS

Respondents also reported whether they would prefer access to Indigenous-specific mental health supports. Of 2,801 respondents, 1,526 (54%) preferred Indigenous-specific mental health supports, whereas 1,007 (36%) did not have a preference (see Figure 20).

**Figure 20:** Preference for Indigenous-Specific Mental Health Supports

*Would you prefer Indigenous-specific mental health supports?*



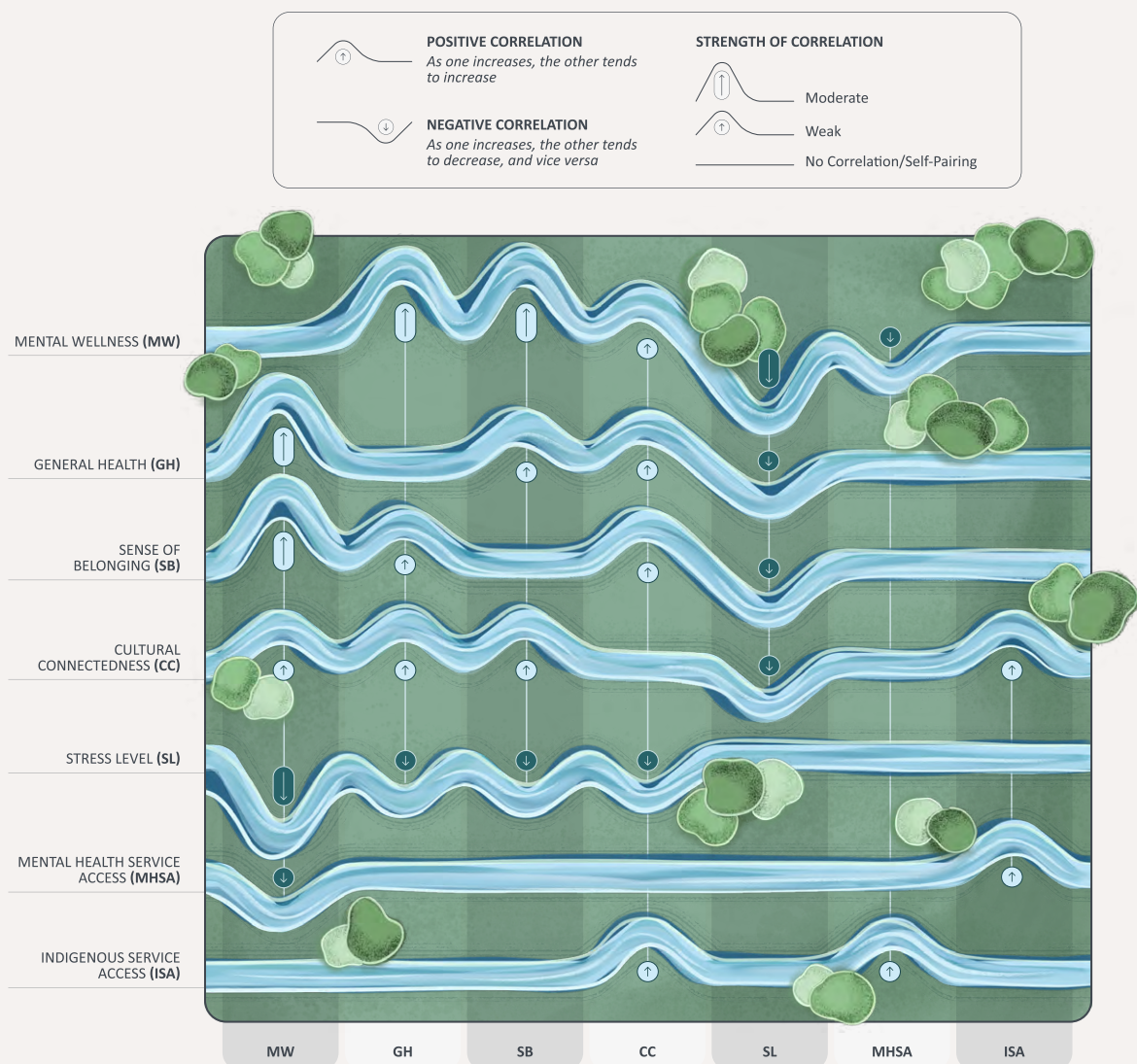
**Note:** n = 2,801 respondents to this question.

## RESULTS

## Correlation Analyses

A series of bivariate Spearman correlations were conducted to understand the relationship between the variables of interest. Figure 21 outlines the relationships between all variables with significant relationships ( $p < .05$ ) categorized as weak ( $r$  between .3 and -.3) or moderate ( $r$  between .3 to .6 and -.3 to -.6). Respondents' mental wellness scores positively correlated to self-rated general health, cultural connectedness, and sense of belonging. Mental wellness scores also showed a weak, negative correlation to accessing mental health services. Accessing Indigenous services positively correlated to cultural connectedness and accessing mental health services. Cultural connectedness was also positively correlated with sense of belonging. In contrast, students' self-rated stress level was negatively correlated to mental wellness, general health, cultural connectedness, and sense of belonging.

**Figure 21: Correlation Rivers: Significant Relationships Between Variables of Interest**



## DISCUSSION

### Significance

Findings from this report advance understanding of the mental wellness landscape for Indigenous post-secondary students within Canada. This will inform a position statement designed to guide future institutional policy and advance reconciliation in post-secondary contexts. Fifty-two percent of respondents reported their current mental health to be *Poor* or *Fair* while 35% of respondents reported to have a mental health condition, 30% reported their general health to be worse than others their age, and 84% reported most days to be *Often* or *Sometimes* stressful. These findings highlight the need for accessible and effective mental health support among Indigenous post-secondary students.

### Factors Impacting Mental Wellness

Respondents' individual differences in cultural connectedness and sense of belonging play a statistically significant role in their mental wellness, where increases in cultural connectedness and sense of belonging positively correlate to increases in mental wellness. This supports findings from Bunting (2022), who identified cultural connectedness and sense of belonging as important sociocultural influences on mental wellness. This is also supported by the *First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework*, which identifies “belonging” as one of the core outcomes of wellness, supported by community and essential services and “culture” as a crucial foundation from which policies, strategies, and frameworks related to mental wellness are developed (*First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework*, 2015). Findings from this study extend the importance of cultural connectedness and sense of belonging to Métis and Inuit mental wellness, although these groups were comparatively underrepresented in our sample relative to First Nations respondents. Notably, the sense of belonging measure in this study did not specify to which community (e.g., post-secondary or Indigenous) respondents feel support and “belonging” to. However, it can be suggested that most respondents feel sense of belonging to their post-secondary community, with 81% reporting to feel accepted and supported by their post-secondary institution. It is possible that cultural connectedness and sense of belonging to their Indigenous community are prominent disparities. Cultural connectedness positively correlated to accessing Indigenous services, which suggests that respondents use these services to enhance (or maintain) their cultural connectedness. This may be why respondents showed clear preference in accessing Indigenous services over mental health services, as discussed in the following section.

Findings from this study also highlight two additional variables that significantly relate to Indigenous students' mental wellness: general health and stress levels. Specifically, those with higher general health showed higher mental wellness, whereas those with higher daily stress levels reported lower mental wellness. These findings contribute to the emerging understanding of Indigenous mental wellness and emphasize the importance of supporting students' physical well-being to enhance mental wellness.

## DISCUSSION

This is important, as Indigenous people receive less health care in general compared to non-Indigenous people (Carrier et al., 2022). Enhancing Indigenous mental wellness requires a holistic approach—supporting physical well-being, cultivating cultural connectedness and a sense of belonging, and ensuring equitable access to mental health services.

### Support Services

Findings showed a low rate (28%) of access to mental health support services in post-secondary. This is in line with previous literature suggesting Indigenous people face barriers to accessing mental health support (Bunting, 2022; King et al., 2009; Kirmayer et al., 2003; Nelson & Wilson, 2018). Respondents' mental wellness showed a weak negative correlation to accessing mental health services, suggesting that those with lower mental wellness are more likely to access mental health services. This is likely because such services are typically sought out by those who are struggling with their mental health. Yet, it is notable that accessing mental health services did not relate to an increase in mental wellness, suggesting these services do not provide the support necessary to improve Indigenous students' mental wellness. Insights from related literature suggest the cultural irrelevancy of mental health services for Indigenous students (Fredericks et al., 2024; Hop Wo et al., 2020; McKeown et al., 2018; St. Germaine & D'Antimo, 2023). Past research has highlighted that non-Indigenous therapists and other service providers face challenges in understanding Indigenous Peoples' lived experiences, as therapy is often grounded in colonial epistemologies (Mosley et al., 2019; Ouellette, 2020). For example, they may struggle to understand "diagnosable" behaviors such as substance abuse, anxiety, and depression to be the result of colonial trauma. Indigenous students have discussed the benefit of accessing a counsellor who understands the connection between colonization, intergenerational trauma, education, and mental health (D'Antimo et al., 2025; St. Germaine & D'Antimo, 2023). Thus, to provide adequate counselling support to Indigenous students, it is important for therapists to understand Indigenous worldviews, histories, and the embedded colonial forces that disproportionately impact Indigenous peoples. Another possibility is that mental health services decreased (but did not eliminate) students' mental health difficulties, which may explain the weak negative correlation observed ( $r=-.05$ ). Indeed, qualitative feedback on respondents' satisfaction with mental health services points to their positive impact on well-being, while indicating that the shortcomings of these services largely stem from barriers to access (see Siderova et al., 2026 from this report series).

Further highlighting the need for culturally relevant support, a higher proportion of respondents reported their needs to be met from Indigenous services (76%) compared to mental health services (51%). Further, over half of all respondents reported a preference for Indigenous-specific mental health support. The likely appeal to Indigenous-specific services is the connection to Indigenous identity, history, and culture. Despite high satisfaction, respondents' access to Indigenous services had no direct relationship to their mental wellness. This finding comes as a surprise given Indigenous services provide a means for

## DISCUSSION

cultural connection, community, and holistic support which should positively impact Indigenous students' mental wellness (Fredericks et al., 2024; Hop Wo et al., 2020; St. Germaine & D'Antimo, 2023). However, accessing Indigenous services positively correlated to students' cultural connectedness, suggesting that those who accessed Indigenous services were more likely to have higher cultural connectedness. Thus, accessing Indigenous services may have an indirect impact on students' mental wellness through its relationship to cultural connectedness. Ongoing evaluation of support services would provide insight into how to effectively promote students' mental wellness. This represents one of several future research directions that could be pursued based on the study's findings and highlights the need to consider limitations and opportunities for further inquiry.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Findings from this report address critical knowledge gaps in the mental wellness of Indigenous students using a pan-Indigenous approach inclusive of Métis and Inuit students. While the findings provide novel empirical evidence, our sample consists solely of students from Indspire's Building Brighter Futures program and the generalizability of our findings should be interpreted with caution. It is also important to note that First Nations are the most prevalent respondents in this sample (68%) compared to Métis (29%) and Inuit (3%). Researchers have criticized the use of a pan-Indigenous approach, noting this negatively impacts Métis and Inuit populations who are often underrepresented in comparison to First Nations (Bernett et al., 2023; Delgado & Forsythe, 2025). Although the Métis, Inuit, and First Nations peoples share historical trauma related to attempted assimilation into mainstream Canada through education, there are important distinctions between and within the identities. For example, there are variations in constitutional, legal, and treaty rights among the different Indigenous peoples in Canada. Moreover, respondents come from diverse regions across Canada, including remote locations where access to services may be limited. Thus, predominant representation of First Nations in this sample risks overemphasizing the needs of First Nations while minimizing the unique experiences and needs of Métis and Inuit respondents. This limitation is addressed in a subsequent report within this series (Budhathoki et al., 2026) which presents disaggregated quantitative findings from the *Mental Wellness Survey* to identify variations between Indigenous identities.

Although the results demonstrate a significant and empirical relationship between mental wellness, general health, cultural connectedness, sense of belonging, and stress level, we cannot infer the direction of these relationships nor assume causality. For example, findings indicate that increased cultural connectedness correlates to higher mental wellness. However, it is unclear whether higher cultural connectedness leads to higher mental wellness or vice versa. Similarly, cultural connectedness was significantly correlated with accessing Indigenous services, but it is unclear whether accessing supports boosted cultural connectedness or whether students with higher cultural connectedness were more likely to seek out Indigenous support services. Future directions could work toward developing a predictive model inclusive of these variables to further understand their relationship with mental wellness.

## DISCUSSION

Future research might also consider how colonization and students' trust in institutions influence the constructs investigated in this report. Indigenous cultures are traditionally collectivist, in that identity is linked to one's belonging to a group (Loppie & Wein, 2022). When colonization began across Turtle Island, Indigenous communities faced attempted assimilation, primarily targeting their sense of belonging and cultural connectedness through law and policy (Hop Wo et al., 2020; St. Germaine, 2022). Policies and procedures (e.g., the Indian Act, Residential Schools, and Sixties Scoop) enforced a colonial, individualistic approach to community dynamics, rather than the collectivist systems Indigenous communities practiced from time immemorial (D'Antimo et al., 2025; Hop Wo et al., 2020; St. Germaine, 2022). Therefore, colonization and ongoing colonialism must be recognized as key factors influencing mental wellness among Indigenous post-secondary students, shaping the variables examined in this research (Herkimer, 2022; Hop Wo et al., 2020; St. Germaine & D'Antimo, 2023).

Students' coping strategies might also impact mental wellness. Post-secondary can be stressful for students, reflecting a time of transition, self-directed discipline, and new experiences. Indeed, a significant portion of the respondents reported feeling some level of stress on a daily basis. Experiences of regular stress could exacerbate reliance on maladaptive coping strategies, such as substance abuse. Hop Wo and colleagues (2020) reported that Indigenous post-secondary students "are at an increased risk for psychological distress, common psychiatric diagnoses of depression and anxiety, suicidal ideation and substance use including binge drinking." (p. 269). However, it is imperative to note that, prior to colonization, alcohol was virtually absent from Indigenous communities in North America (Abbott, 1996). European settlers introduced alcohol and modelled binge drinking to coerce community members into unfair trades and treaties (Cole et al., 2023). This resulted in alcohol misuse by some Indigenous individuals which led to harmful, negative stereotypes that Indigenous Peoples are genetically prone to alcohol abuse, despite no scientific grounding to these claims (Cole et al., 2023; Mail, 2002). While Indigenous peoples are actually less likely to consume alcohol than other racialized groups, some research indicates that those who do consume alcohol are more likely to drink in larger quantities, compared to the general population (Cole et al., 2023; Emerson et al., 2017; Szlemko et al., 2006). Alcohol misuse with Indigenous individuals can be related to multiple overlapping risk factors, including colonization, structural oppression, social exclusion, and stereotypes of Indigenous people (Brown et al., 2021). A research inquiry might be raised around understanding the mental wellness experiences of Indigenous post-secondary students with maladaptive coping strategies, such as alcohol misuse, given the additional layer of stress that post-secondary brings to an Indigenous person's life. Continued research into Indigenous student mental wellness is imperative for developing adequate and relevant supports that promote success in post-secondary education.

## IMPLICATIONS

Transformative change requires collaboration across multiple sectors. Moving forward, it is crucial to collaborate with various stakeholders, including federal, provincial, and territorial governments, non-profit organizations, and the private sector, to develop comprehensive and sustainable supports for Indigenous post-secondary students. By fostering these collaborations, post-secondary institutions can ensure that support services are both culturally appropriate and adequately accessible, ultimately improving the academic and personal well-being of Indigenous students. With these implications in mind, it is crucial to move toward recommendations that could transform the existing academic environment to better accommodate the needs of Indigenous students, particularly in terms of mental health.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on findings from the broader landscape of Indigenous student mental health and related factors, Indspire's Research and Impact Department offers the following recommendations:

- Enhance awareness and availability (e.g., increased hours of service) of the mental health services available on campus to increase use among students.
- Mandatory training for service providers, particularly counsellors and mental health support workers, on the mental health conditions linked to colonialism (e.g., colonial trauma) to provide culturally competent care for Indigenous students.
- Prioritize inclusive cultural planning such as potlucks, workshops, and movie nights that help Indigenous students connect with local communities and Nations and engage in cultural practices and traditions.
- Increase avenues of connection for their Indigenous students so that they may build a community within their schools.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from this report demonstrate a relationship between students' mental wellness, cultural connectedness, and sense of belonging. This aligns with existing research on the challenges Indigenous students face in post-secondary contexts, including cultural disconnection, isolation, and inadequate access to support. For meaningful social inclusion of Indigenous peoples in post-secondary settings, Indigeneity must remain at the core of the transformation, centered and grounded in the local territories and nations upon which colleges and universities reside (Pidgeon, 2016). Despite feeling proud of their Indigeneity, students may struggle to find spaces where they can reconnect with their Indigenous cultures. Many Indigenous students hesitate to reach out to existing mental health services in post-secondary institutions due to feelings of invisibility, discrimination, or misunderstanding within these services. This reluctance may also stem from a lack of awareness about available mental health support or that these services do not adequately address students' distinct mental health and emotional needs. Findings from this report advocate for the importance of enhancing students' cultural connectedness and sense of belonging during post-secondary and providing culturally relevant mental health supports. Such initiatives would significantly benefit students' mental wellness, facilitating their successful completion of their post-secondary program.

## REFERENCES

- Abbott, P. J. (1996). American Indian and Alaska native aboriginal use of alcohol in the United States. *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research: Journal of the National Center*, 7(2), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.5820/aian.0702.1996.1>
- Bailey, K. A. (2016). Racism within the Canadian university: Indigenous students' experiences. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39(7), 1261–1279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1081961>
- Bernett, P., Spence, S., Wilson, C., Gurr, E., Zentner, D., & Wendt, D. C. (2023). Canadian school psychology and Indigenous Peoples: Opportunities and recommendations. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 38(1), 10–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08295735231151281>
- Brown, R. A., Dickerson, D. L., Klein, D. J., Agniel, D., Johnson, C. L., & D'Amico, E. J. (2021). Identifying as American Indian/Alaska Native in urban areas: Implications for adolescent behavioral health and well-being. *Youth & Society*, 53(1), 54–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X19840048>
- Budhathoki, R., Ayson, G., D'Antimo, S., & Dehghansai, N. (2026). *Exploring the impact of key demographic variables on Indigenous students' well-being and support service utilization*. Indspire.
- Bunting, J. (2022). *Indigenous learners mental health needs* (p. 21). Indspire. <https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2022-Indigenous-Learners-Mental-Health-Needs-Report-English.pdf>
- Canadian Standards Association. (2020). *Mental health and well-being for post-secondary students* (No. CAN/CSA-Z2003:20; p. 61). CSA Group. <https://www.csagroup.org/store/product/CSA%20Z2003:20/>
- Carrier, L., Shin, H. D., Rothfus, M. A., & Curran, J. A. (2022). *Protective and resilience factors to promote mental health among Indigenous youth in Canada: A scoping review protocol*. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-049285>
- Cole, A. B., Lopez, S. V., Armstrong, C. M., Gillson, S. L., Weiss, N., Blair, A. L., & Walls, M. (2023). An updated narrative review on the role of alcohol among Indigenous communities. *Current Addiction Reports*, 10(4), 702–717. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40429-023-00520-4>
- D'Antimo, S., Ayson, G., & Dehghansai, N. (2025). *Institutional and systemic barriers in Indigenous teacher education*. Indspire. <https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2025-Barriers-in-Indigenous-Teachers-Education-English.pdf>
- Delgado, L., & Forsythe, L. (2025). Creating a sense of belonging in the academy: An example of a Métis-centred space. *Engaged Scholar Journal: Community-Engaged Research, Teaching, and Learning*, 11(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v11i1.70878>

## REFERENCES

- Dietsche, P. (2012). Use of campus support services by Ontario college students. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 42(3), 65–92. <https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v42i3.2098>
- Earle, M., & Herkimer, J. (2022). The importance of Indigenous languages: An investigation of sense of belonging and mental health among students and non-students. *Indspire*. <https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2022-The-Importance-of-Indigenous-Languages-Report-English.pdf>
- Eisenberg, D., Downs, M. F., Golberstein, E., & Zivin, K. (2009). Stigma and help seeking for mental health among college students. *Medical Care Research and Review: MCRR*, 66(5), 522–541. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077558709335173>
- Emerson, M. A., Moore, R. S., & Caetano, R. (2017). Association between lifetime post-traumatic stress disorder and past year alcohol use disorder among American Indians/Alaska Natives and non-Hispanic Whites. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 41(3), 576–584. <https://doi.org/10.1111/acer.13322>
- First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework: Summary report*. (2015). Health Canada. [https://thunderbirdpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FNMWC-Summary\\_EN\\_WEB2023frameworks.pdf](https://thunderbirdpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FNMWC-Summary_EN_WEB2023frameworks.pdf)
- Fredericks, B., Barney, K., Bunda, T., Hausia, K., Martin, A., Elston, J., & Bernardino, B. (2024). The importance of Indigenous centres/units for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: Ensuring connection and belonging to support university completion. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 43(4), 859–872. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2023.2258825>
- Gone, J. P. (2013). Redressing First Nations historical trauma: Theorizing mechanisms for Indigenous culture as mental health treatment. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 50(5), 683–706. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461513487669>
- Gray, K., Ayson, G., Ferguson, S., & Dehghansai, N. (2026). *A walk into the journey of Indigenous learners' mental wellness in post-secondary education*. Indspire.
- Gray, A. P., & Cote, W. (2019). Cultural connectedness protects mental health against the effect of historical trauma among Anishinabe young adults. *Public Health*, 176, 77–81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2018.12.003>
- Harper, A. O., & Thompson, S. (2017). Structural oppressions facing Indigenous students in Canadian education. *Fourth World Journal*, 15(2), 41–66. <https://doi.org/10.63428/86ga7e23>
- Heid, O., Khalid, M., Smith, H., Kim, K., Smith, S., Wekerle, C., Bomberry, T., Hill, L. D., General, D. A., Green, T. J., Harris, C., Jacobs, B., Jacobs, N., Kim, K., Horse, M. L., Martin-Hill, D., McQueen, K. C. D., Miller, T. F., Noronha, N., ... Wekerle, C. (2022). Indigenous youth and resilience in Canada and the USA: A scoping review. *Adversity and Resilience Science*, 3(2), 113–147. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42844-022-00060-2>

## REFERENCES

- Herkimer, J. (2022). *Story as knowledge: Experiences of early leaving & persistence from Indigenous post-secondary students* (p. 31). Indspire. <https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2022-Story-as-Knowledge-Experiences-of-Early-Leaving-Report-English.pdf>
- Hop Wo, N. K., Anderson, K. K., Wylie, L., & MacDougall, A. (2020). The prevalence of distress, depression, anxiety, and substance use issues among Indigenous post-secondary students in Canada. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 57(2), 263–274. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461519861824>
- International Conference On Health Promoting Universities & Colleges (7<sup>th</sup>: Kelowna, B C.). (2015). *Okanagan charter: An international charter for health promoting universities & colleges*. <https://doi.org/10.14288/1.0132754>
- King, M., Smith, A., & Gracey, M. (2009). Indigenous health part 2: The underlying causes of the health gap. *Lancet*, 374(9683), 76–85. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(09\)60827-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(09)60827-8)
- Kirmayer, L., Simpson, C., & Cargo, M. (2003). Healing traditions: Culture, community and mental health promotion with Canadian Aboriginal Peoples. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 11(1\_suppl), S15–S23. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1038-5282.2003.02010.x>
- Kitchen, P., Williams, A., & Chowhan, J. (2012). Sense of community belonging and health in Canada: A regional analysis. *Social Indicators Research*, 107(1), 103–126. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-011-9830-9>
- Li, P., Yang, J., Zhou, Z., Zhao, Z., & Liu, T. (2022). The influence of college students' academic stressors on mental health during COVID-19: The mediating effect of social support, social well-being, and self-identity. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10, 917581. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.917581>
- Loppie, C., & Wein, F. (2022). *Understanding Indigenous health inequalities through a social determinants model*.
- Mail, P. D. (2002). *Alcohol use among American Indians and Alaska Natives: Multiple perspectives on a complex problem*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.
- Masotti, P., Dennem, J., Hadani, S., Banuelos, K., King, J., Linton, J., Lockhart, B., & Patel, C. (2020). The culture is prevention project: Measuring culture as a social determinant of mental health for Native/Indigenous Peoples. *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research (Online)*, 27(1), 86–111. <https://doi.org/10.5820/aian.2701.2020.86>
- McKeown, S., Vedan, A., Mack, K., Jacknife, S., & Tolmie, C. (2018). Indigenous educational pathways: Access, mobility, and persistence in the BC post-secondary system. *British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED586113.pdf>

## REFERENCES

- Mosley, D. V., Gonzalez, K. A., Abreu, R. L., & Kaivan, N. C. (2019). Unseen and underserved: A content analysis of wellness support services for Bi + People of Color and Indigenous People on U.S. campuses. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 19(2), 276–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299716.2019.1617552>
- Nelson, S. E., & Wilson, K. (2018). Understanding barriers to health care access through cultural safety and ethical space: Indigenous people's experiences in Prince George, Canada. *Social Science & Medicine*, 218, 21–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.09.017>
- Ouellette, K. A. I. L. (2020). *Students' experiences of Indigenous community-driven postsecondary wellness education as a means towards individual & collective wellness* [Master of Education, University of Lethbridge]. <https://hdl.handle.net/10133/5758>
- Pidgeon, M. (2016). More than a checklist: Meaningful Indigenous inclusion in higher education. *Social Inclusion*, 4(1), 77–91. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v4i1.436>
- Sidorova, E., Ayson, G., Budhathoki, R., & Dehghansai, N. (2026). *Indigenous student voices on mental health and Indigenous supports: Barriers and Benefits*. Indspire.
- Snowshoe, A., Crooks, C. V., Tremblay, P. F., & Hinson, R. E. (2017). Cultural connectedness and its relation to mental wellness for First Nations youth. *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 38(1), 67–86. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10935-016-0454-3>
- St. Germaine, N. (2022). *Barriers and facilitators for accessing Indigenous supports* (p. 20). Indspire. <https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2022-Barriers-and-Facilitators-for-Access-Indigenous-Supports-Report-English.pdf>
- St. Germaine, N., & D'Antimo, S. (2023). *An introspective look into barriers and facilitators to accessing post-secondary Indigenous support* (p. 29). Indspire. <https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2023-Introspective-Look-into-Barriers-and-Facilitators-Report-English.pdf>
- Szlemko, W. J., Wood, J. W., & Thurman, P. J. (2006). Native Americans and alcohol: Past, present, and future. *The Journal of General Psychology*, 133(4), 435–451. <https://doi.org/10.3200/GENP.133.4.435-451>
- Universities Canada. (2023). *Advancing reconciliation and Indigenization at Canadian universities* (p. 4). Universities Canada. UC-2023-Survey-Indigenous-Education-Reconciliation-EN.pdf

## APPENDIX: MENTAL WELLNESS SURVEY ITEMS FOR KEY VARIABLES

Statements were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*.

### Mental Wellness Statements

- I have been thinking clearly.
- I have been feeling optimistic about the future.
- I have been dealing with problems well.
- I have been feeling useful.
- I have been able to make up my own mind about things.
- I have been feeling relaxed.

### Cultural Connectedness Statements

- I have a strong sense of belonging to my Indigenous community or Nation.
- I have a clear sense of my Indigenous identity or culture and what it means to me.
- I participate in cultural practices and/or traditions of my Indigenous community or Nation.
- I feel good about my Indigenous identity, culture, and/or background.
- I have a lot of pride in my Indigenous community or Nation.

### Sense of Belonging Statements

- There is someone I could talk with about important decisions in my life.
- There are people I can count on in an emergency.
- I have close relationships that provide me with a sense of emotional security and well-being.
- I can count on people that I know to help me deal with stressful situations.
- I have relationships where my competence and skills are recognized.
- I feel part of a group of people who share my attitudes and beliefs.

## APPENDIX: MENTAL WELLNESS SURVEY ITEMS FOR KEY VARIABLES

Pattern Matrix<sup>a</sup>

Survey Item	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
There is someone I could talk to about important decisions in my life.	0.889				
There are people I can count on in an emergency.	0.880				
I have close relationships that provide me with a sense of emotional security and well-being.	0.837				
I can count on people that I know to help me deal with stressful situations.	0.795				
I have relationships where my competence and skills are recognized.	0.760				
I feel part of a group of people who share my attitudes and beliefs.	0.723				
I have been feeling close to other people.	0.427	0.416			
I have been able to make up my own mind about things.		0.780			
I have been feeling optimistic about the future.		0.777			
I have been dealing with problems well.		0.768			
I have been feeling useful.		0.756			
I have been thinking clearly.		0.756			
I have been feeling relaxed.		0.629			
I have a strong sense of belonging to my Indigenous community or Nation.			0.852		
I have a clear sense of my Indigenous identity or culture and what it means to me.			0.830		
I participate in cultural practices and/or traditions of my Indigenous community or Nation.			0.809		
I feel good about my Indigenous identity, culture, and/or background.			0.730		
I have a lot of pride in my Indigenous community or Nation.			0.700		
How would you describe your sense of belonging to your local community?			0.381		
During the past three months, how often has your health worried you?					-0.818

<sup>a</sup> Rotation converged in six iterations.

(continued...)

## APPENDIX: MENTAL WELLNESS SURVEY ITEMS FOR KEY VARIABLES

Pattern Matrix<sup>a</sup> (...continued)

Survey Item	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
How would you rate your general health?				0.803	
Do your health needs interfere with doing the things you need to?				-0.790	
Feelings of stress interfere with my social life.					0.871
Feelings of stress interfere with my ability to complete school-related tasks.					0.844
Feelings of stress interfere with my ability to do house and personal-related tasks.					0.842
Thinking about the amount of stress in your life, how would you describe most of your days?		-0.325			-0.481

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Rotation converged in six iterations.

*Notes: Component 1 represents sense of belonging. Component 2 represents mental wellness.*

*Component 3 represents cultural connection. Component 4 represents general health.*

*Component 5 represents stress level. Items in grey were removed from analysis due to cross-loading.*



# Indspire

Indigenous education,  
Canada's future.

L'éducation des autochtones.  
L'avenir du Canada.

## Head Office

Box 5, Suite 100  
50 Generations Drive  
Six Nations of the Grand River  
Ohsweken, ON N0A 1M0

**1-855-INDSPIRE (463-7747)**

Fax: (866) 433-3159

## Toronto Office

555 Richmond St. W.  
Suite 601  
Toronto, ON M5V 3B1

[indspire.ca](http://indspire.ca) | [@Indspire](https://www.instagram.com/indspire)

