



EIGHT BEST PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN POST-SECONDARY MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Student engagement involves the meaningful and timely involvement of postsecondary students as experts with lived experience in the processes and decisions that affect them and their community.

In collaboration with post-secondary student advisors and researchers, the Inlight engagement team co-developed a list of best practices for student engagement to guide mental health research conducted in the post-secondary environment. This process was led in partnership with a Student Advisory Committee composed of current graduate and undergraduate students at the University of Toronto. The best practices outlined in this resource are based on learnings from previous research and research-adjacent activities and guided by community-engaged research principles.

Each best practice includes a brief description and several reflection questions that might be helpful when considering how you might apply it to your current work. How you apply these practices to your work will depend on your specific project, resources for engagement, and the students you are engaging.

ABOUT INLIGHT

This resource was produced by the Inlight Student Mental Health Research Initiative, an Institutional Strategic Initiative of the University of Toronto committed to improving student mental health and wellness outcomes by investing in high-quality, impactful research and driving scalable research innovations.

CITING THIS RESOURCE

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ENGAGE THE RIGHT STUDENTS AT THE RIGHT TIME

Engage students who are content experts in the research topic. Students may be experts through lived experience or through volunteer, academic, or advocacy work.

For example, in a research project about the design of accessibility services for student mental health, consider engaging students who have experience using accessibility services. When identifying potential student partners, consider principles of equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility.

Engage students in a timely manner, so their feedback and expertise can be integrated meaningfully in the project's direction. Factor in time for student feedback, review, and implementation. By engaging students early and often, researchers can avoid tokenism, delays, and other barriers to the project timeline.

QUESTIONS

- Which students have firsthand knowledge or experience in this topic?
- Which students might be affected by project outcomes?
- Who will be affected by opportunities or outcomes that result from this project?

DEFINE AND CO-DEVELOP THE STUDENT ROLE

When planning for student engagement, consider the entire research process from ideation to knowledge translation. As discussed in the previous section, engaging student partners in a variety of research roles throughout the project, researchers can support authentic and fulsome student engagement. Where possible, work with students to co-design their roles. Students can help identify opportunities for engagement in your project that you might not have considered and ensure roles align with student needs, interests, and availability. By defining the student role early, researchers can identify the right supports to accomplish the project goals.

QUESTIONS

- How long are students involved?
- How often are they involved?
- What are they working on?
- What are they responsible for?
- What titles will student advisors have as part of the project team?

MAKE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT A TEAM RESPONSIBILITY

All project team members should have a strong understanding of student engagement principles and practices, and the value it brings to research. This ensures student engagement becomes part of the research process, rather than extra work.

When student engagement becomes part of the regular way of working, the research team is empowered to identify opportunities to better integrate student voices. To generate team buy-in, consider training and learning opportunities that demonstrate the importance and impact of student engagement on the research process and outcomes.

When student engagement is a shared responsibility and everyone understands their role in supporting student engagement, the research team can avoid problems like miscommunication or missed opportunities.

QUESTIONS

- How will the project team work with student advisors?
- What training or supports do project team members require for understanding the student role?

QUESTIONS

- Whom do students consult when they need support during the research process?
- What coordination or mentorship supports will student engagement activities require?
- How will you ensure the engagement lead has the right information to identify opportunities for student engagement?

IDENTIFY AN ENGAGEMENT LEAD

An engagement lead is the research team's primary contact and support person for all facets of student engagement. The engagement lead supports students and team members involved in student engagement activities and ensures student engagement is considered and integrated into project timelines and goals.

For example, this person might facilitate student meetings or consultations, prepare students for research meetings or activities, and debrief with them afterwards, or help collate, present, and implement student feedback.

The engagement lead helps to facilitate (but cannot replace) student perspectives.

QUESTIONS

- How might student experiences and perspectives differ on this research topic?
- What are the different roles students might take in this project?
- How can the team engage students with different perspectives, while ensuring all students feel equally supported and valued?

ENGAGE MULTIPLE STUDENT ADVISORS

One student should not be expected to be the sole voice of the student experience. To understand and learn from diverse student perspectives, work with multiple students across a project.

Student-advisor roles are unique. They are not participants or learners. They are based on lived experiences relevant to the research topic.

By engaging multiple students, researchers also support the sustainability of engagement across the project, even as student availability or interest changes. Students can act as supporters and allies for each other, thereby increasing confidence and comfort with their roles in the research process.

QUESTIONS

- What expectations do researchers have for student advisors?
- What expectations do students have for researchers?
- How and when will you plan to talk about how student engagement is going?

SET EXPECTATIONS AND REVISIT THEM OFTEN

For student engagement to be successful, everyone must have a shared understanding of the goals and intended outcomes. At the beginning of the project, collaborate with students and researchers to establish shared expectations and principles for how the team will work together (sometimes called a "group agreement").

In the context of mental health research, this can be particularly important given the potentially sensitive and personal nature of the topic. A group agreement can help establish open communication and accountability early in the project, which will allow everyone to participate fulsomely and safely.

Once the team has established a group agreement, make sure to revisit and re-evaluate it regularly. Frequent check-ins can help avoid miscommunication and ensure everyone feels the experience is positive and effective.

PRIORITIZE CLEAR, EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND FOLLOW-UP

It matters what (and how) the team shares about the research mandate and opportunities for student engagement. All communication with students must prioritize student understanding and safety, and recognize the importance and validity of their experiences. When it comes to lived experience roles, clarity is crucial around where and how the project will use student stories and perspectives.

Follow up on student feedback and share its impact on the research. Capture and share how student input shapes the project's designs, findings, and dissemination. If it is not possible to implement student suggestions, share why it was not feasible and how it might shape future research. Effective and open communication provides an important learning experience for students and researchers.

QUESTIONS

- Who will communicate with students?
- How can the team work with students to co-design project communications and materials?
- How accessible is the language the team uses to talk about the project?

RECOGNIZE STUDENT CONTRIBUTIONS

Lived experience is an important type of evidence and expertise. As with any expert, it is essential to honor and recognize student contributions to research. Recognition should be meaningful to the students and their goals. For example, it could include honoraria, stipends, co-authorship, or volunteer hours.

QUESTIONS

- What resources do you have for supporting student engagement?
- What does meaningful recognition look like for the students you currently work with or plan to engage?

QUESTIONS? CONTACT US!

For more information about this resource and student engagement at Inlight, contact studentmh.research@utoronto.ca.