



CANADA
Environmental Scan of
University Therapy Dog Programs

Background & Purpose

An **Animal Assisted Intervention** (AAI) “is a goal oriented intervention that intentionally includes or incorporates animals in health, education and human service (e.g., social work) for the purpose of therapeutic gains in humans” (Jegatheesan, 2013, p. 1). There are two key forms of AAIs.

Animal Assisted Activities (AAA) “provide opportunities for motivational, educational, recreational, and/or therapeutic benefits to enhance the quality of life [of humans]. AAAs are delivered in a variety of environments by specially-trained professionals, paraprofessionals, and/or volunteers in association with animals that meet specific criteria. Key features include absence of specific treatment goals; volunteers and treatment providers are not re-

quired to take detailed notes; visit content is spontaneous” (Delta Society, n.d., as cited in Kruger & Serpell, 2006, p. 23)

A 2014 review of studies identified an increasing empirical base for AAAs, and the need for further research (Borrego et al., 2014).

Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) is “a goal-directed intervention in which an animal that meets specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process. AAT is directed and/or delivered by a health/human service professional with specialized expertise and within the scope of practice of his/her profession. Key features include specified goals and objectives for each individual and measured progress” (Kruger & Serpell, 2006, p. 23).

A 2015 systematic review of randomized control trials of AAT on psychosocial outcomes identified the benefits for a range of individuals, and the need for further research (Maujean, Pepping & Kendall, 2015).

Underlying all forms of AAIs is recognition of the potential benefits of the animal-human interaction or bond (Cirulli, Borgi, Berry, Francia & Alleva, 2011) on human wellbeing, and increasing attention is unavoidably being paid to the benefits of the interaction on animal wellbeing and welfare as well (Jegatheesan, 2013).

This Fact Sheet shares the findings of an environmental scan of Canadian universities offering AAIs with canines (dogs).

Therapy Dog Programs in Canada

A variety of organizations offer therapy dog services to university campuses on a volunteer or fee for service basis in Canada, including Therapy Dogs International, Therapeutic Paws of Canada, St. John Ambulance, Pet Partners (Delta Society Canada) and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). In addition to these national programs there are numerous therapy dog ser-

vices that operate in specific provinces at the provincial and/or local levels, with a few including COPE Service Dogs (Ontario), PATS Pets (British Columbia), Chimo Animal Assisted Wellness and Learning Society (Alberta) and Blue Ribbon Therapy Dogs (Quebec).

The majority of therapy dog programs are volunteer based. Generally understood amongst the various programs is that the

dogs offer love, support and joy to students during stressful times. Common across the programs is that interaction with the therapy dog is facilitated by a human handler.

The handlers and dogs are both tested for program suitability, with a focus on the dog’s temperament. Similar testing and handler screening processes exist across the programs country-wide.

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Methodology

An environmental scan to determine the presence and aims of therapy dog programs at Canada's 78 publically funded universities was undertaken in the summer of 2014 (June to August). Selection criteria for universities was inclusive, and included anglophone, bilingual and francophone institutions. It did not however include privately-funded universities, online universities or post-secondary applied colleges.

An English language email invitation was sent to each university in June, 2014; it was first targeted to student health and wellness/counseling centres, and if no response was received, then it was directed to student life services or

student union associations. One attempt at follow-up via email or phone (in English) took place.

The environmental scan collected information on whether a therapy dog service was offered in the past year, the reason for offering it, who initiated it, and whether therapy dog organizations were involved.

Of the 78 universities contacted in the initial survey 58 responded. In 2015 additional research was undertaken to determine if there was any evidence of therapy dog programs operating at any of the non-responding universities in the media. Information about campus dog therapy events was located on-line which provided evidence of programs

being offered but limited detailed information about the programs. In the end, information was collected directly from 58 publically funded-universities about the existence of therapy dogs on their campus and on-line information was collected from an additional 9 universities. ***In 2014/15 approximately 67 universities in Canada offered a therapy dog program to students.***



What was Found

The majority of universities contacted for this survey had hosted a formal therapy dog event on their campus or planned to do so in the near future. This information suggests that universities are considering animal assisted interventions as one strategy to address student stress.

The earliest documented date of a therapy dog program being offered on a Canadian campus is in 2006 at the University of Fraser Valley, where a school

counsellor worked with one of Canada's first registered therapy dogs in order to help students de-stress and relax. Since this time there has been considerable growth in therapy dogs on campuses.

The most prominent reason for offering the therapy dog service on campus was student mental health, and specifically during examination periods. The majority of the programs were initiated by counseling or student



wellness services and the student union.

Canines associated with therapy dog organizations were almost exclusively accessed for the events, with the exception of one university which reported incorporating other types of therapy animals. The universities did vary, however, in how they offered the therapy dog service, ranging from a permanent therapy dog as part of student advising to a group visiting program.

Few of the universities reported to be evaluating the impact of the therapy dog program they offered.

PAWSing Student Stress: Findings from Studies

Student mental health is a growing concern on university campuses and animal assisted interventions have become part of the response. The practice of offering AAIs, and specifically AAAs on university campuses is increasing rapidly in North America (Adamle, Riley, & Carlson, 2009; Huss, 2012). There is an absence in measuring the outcomes of AAIs (Borrego et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, some studies on offering AAAs during examination periods have been conducted and concluded that therapy dogs are helpful for relaxation and de-stressing (Baun, Oetting, & Bergstrom, 1991; Huss, 2012; Shiloh, Sorek, & Terkel, 2003). In a review of American campuses, Bell (2013) found that "several institutions have seen the correlation between their stressed-out students and the benefits derived from therapy animals and have implemented programs to integrate the two" (p. 2). A study by Adamle et al. (2012) also found that therapy dog visits could be beneficial to college freshman during their first year away from home to "temporarily fill the absence of previous support systems and be a catalyst for establishing new social relationships" (p. 545). Huss (2012) similarly found that AAAs can "help students who are homesick" (p. 446). A Canadian study of the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program at the University of Toronto campus offered a review of the lessons it learned in offering an "overwhelmingly positive [program]; students were very appreciative" (Bell, 2013, pp. 1).

The first evaluation of an AAA on three Canadian university campuses was published in 2015. A pilot study of the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program found that the dogs offer students love and support, which are the program goals. Immediate and three-month follow-up outcomes of the program were measured. With a sample of 403 program attendees (90% students) and 16 handlers/observers, and 187 at follow-up, it was found that: *Love* is understood as having reciprocal love for the dogs and gaining positive feelings from visiting with them. *Support* is understood as de-stressing and relaxing by interacting with the dogs.

Taken from: Dell, C., Chalmers, D., Gillett, J., Rohr, B., Nickel, C., Campbell, L.,... Brydges, M. (2015). "PAWSing student stress: A pilot study of the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program on three Canadian campuses". *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 9(4), 332-359.

Programs by Province

British Columbia: The environmental scan data for British Columbia relayed nine universities feature therapy dogs on campus. The majority of the institutions shared that student mental health and wellbeing was the primary reason for offering the service, with increased attention to this during examination periods. The universities varied in how they offered the therapy dog service. For example, one university had a permanent therapy dog as a part of counseling services available to students. Another offered a visiting program geared toward first year student retention. The size of the programs varied with one university having numerous dogs in the program and many of whom accompany faculty, staff and students in the workplace whereas others only hold sessions during exam periods through animal therapy organizations. Half of the programs were initiated by counseling or student wellness services on campus and half were organized by the student union. The number of students visiting the therapy dogs depended on the event.

Alberta: Of the six universities that environmental scan data was collected for in Alberta, all provided therapy dogs on campus. At two of the universities, the events were organized by the Dean of Students; at the other four, events were organized by the student union or student association. At one university a therapy dog accompanied a professor and interacted with students on a regular basis. All were designed to address student stress during final exams, and some were also linked with larger mental health awareness campaigns on the campuses. One university reported that given the perceived success of the program, they are looking to offer it more frequently. Another was considering integrating the therapy dog program into their advising services for students though not across all faculties.

Saskatchewan: In Saskatchewan three universities in the environmental scan have therapy dog events on campus. All have therapy dogs to help deal with student stress during final exam periods. Like in other provinces, the extent to which therapy dogs were employed and the ways this occurred varied across institutions. Starting in Fall 2014, one of the institutions offered weekly group sessions with visiting therapy dogs, organized through a faculty member, student health services and a student binge drinking prevention initiative. Another campus is looking to bring the dogs in next year during mental health week in addition to exam periods.



Manitoba: Three of the Manitoba universities in the environmental scan have had therapy dog events on campus. The universities reported mainly having the therapy dogs on campus during final exams for students. One university also offered the service during its mental health awareness week. Student services, health and wellness, and counseling services were all involved in organizing the therapy dog visits. One of these services offered weekly scheduled appointments with a counselor who had a therapy dog, small weekly therapy dog sessions, and larger and more frequent visiting events during examination periods. One university reported hosting weekly sessions with both counselors and therapy dogs, with additional events during the student exam period.

Ontario: A remarkable twenty three universities in Ontario in the environmental scan had incorporated therapy dogs in the programs and services that they offered to students on campus. All were planning to continue to use therapy dogs as a form of stress relief in the future.

There was considerable variation in the organization and operation of the programs. Six programs were hosted by student counseling services and/or health and wellness services and seven were hosted by the student union. The remaining programs were organized through combinations of residence groups, student services and other university bodies. All of the therapy dog events were aimed at targeting student stress, and again with an emphasis on examination periods. Student residences were targeted at a number of the universities.

Two of Ontario universities offered the therapy dog service on a weekly basis in partnership with campus mental health services. One of these offered weekly scheduled appointments with a counselor who had a therapy dog. Another university reported hosting weekly sessions with counsellors and therapy dogs with additional events during the student exam period.



Programs by Province continued

Quebec: Environmental scan data collected for five universities in Quebec relayed they used therapy dogs in their programming for students. Most were connected to services offered by libraries to help students during the exam period. The remaining universities' student associations coordinated the program. All institutions offered the service during mid-terms and final exams as a means for students to de-stress.

Newfoundland: One university in Newfoundland operates a therapy dog program through the school's wellness program, according to the environmental scan data. Monthly sessions are held as part of a student de-stressing initiative, in which students can also access resources for their health and well-being. In addition, therapy dogs have been brought into the library during exam times.

Nova Scotia: The environmental scan data for Nova Scotia relayed seven universities feature therapy dogs during the school term. Unlike most other provinces, the majority of programs were operated by student unions, and they hosted the events primarily during exam periods as a method to reduce student stress. One university has a permanent therapy dog as part of its student counseling department, and is available to meet with students alongside a counselor.



Prince Edward Island: The main university in Prince Edward Island reported in the environmental scan to have a therapy dog program. It operates as part of the school's mental health awareness week. Due to the success of the program it was expanded to student residences.

New Brunswick: Environmental scan data collected for four New Brunswick universities relay they coordinate therapy dog programs. The universities host therapy dog events on campus during student de-stressing weeks, and at least one a counselor is available on request. This initiative is a partnership of the student counseling department and student union.

Conclusion

With concern and awareness increasing about student mental health in Canada, and in particular the extra mental health support students may need during stressful times such as examination periods, universities have been turning to dogs to help “paws” student stress. Since 2012, this approach has been undertaken by the majority of Canadian publically funded universities.

There has been limited empirical research on AAIs in general, including on university campuses, but it is growing. The literature that does exist identifies dogs' innate ability to offer and receive nurturance (Chandler, 2005; Levinson, 1984; Melson & Fine, 2010). Animals can trigger happy memories, improve mood, and bring a sense of happiness, joy and a general sense of wellbeing to individuals (Arkow, 2011). Perceived shifts in participants' feelings and mood may also be influenced by beneficial hormones and neurochemicals that are released when petting an animal, including oxytocin, prolactin, dopamine, beta endorphins and phenylethylamine (Odendaal & Lehmann, 2000).

At the same time, the handlers' offering of support alongside the therapy animals has recently been acknowledged in the AAI literature (Adams, et al., 2015; Dell et al., 2015).

As understanding in the AAI field increases, it should be guided by relevant theoretical and conceptual frameworks that orient the implementation of AAIs generally, and specifically within the context of the university campus. Authors such as Daltry and Mehr (2015) suggest a goal-based framework for implementing therapy dogs in student counselling—to provide comfort and stress reduction to students and to increase awareness and perception of university counselling services.

Hodgson and Darling (2011) also introduced the concept of zoeyia as ‘the positive inverse of zoonosis’ (p. 189), that is, accounting for the multiple benefits to human health from interacting and bonding with companion animals. According to them, zoeyia provides the “evidence base for the philosophical construct of the human-animal bond” (p. 190).

Recommendations

- * Continue to collect up-to-date information on therapy dog programs on Canadian campuses.
- * Identify an on-line mechanism for universities to share program specific information so they can learn from one another.
- * Expand this environmental scan to colleges, especially given that there is only one university in Canada's territories (and for which data was not collected for this environmental scan).
- * Gather additional information on AAA and AAT program specifics on Canadian campuses, including program similarities and differences.
- * Although not asked about in this scan, document university policies and procedures that enable therapy dog visits on campuses (e.g., concerns with allergies).
- * Encourage communication between the university host and the therapy dog programs about their goals, to ensure they align.
- * Conduct regular program evaluation of university campus AAIs to further understanding of positive approaches to addressing student mental health.
- * Implement alternative approaches to supporting the human-animal bond for university students (e.g., allowing companion animals in student housing).

This Fact Sheet is part of a larger series that evaluate the impacts of AAT and AAA therapy dog services on and off Canadian campuses.



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