President's Advisory Committee on Student Mental Health (PAC-SMH)

Academic Panel

FINAL REPORT

February 2, 2018

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1. Executive Summary

The Academic Panel had good representation from the University of Waterloo community, faculty, staff and students who volunteered their time and expertise to be part of this very important discussion. We began with the mandate questions provided:

- How do we understand the relationship between academic stress and mental health?
- What is a reasonable level of demand in terms of academic load, scheduling, and other planning required by students (i.e.,)?
- What is the utility of comparing students against students? How do we balance a culture of wellness and a culture of competition?
- How do we support instructors and their efforts to embed wellness into their pedagogy and the curriculum?
- Are there exemplars of programs, instructors that represent a good balance between academic rigour and mental wellness? Can we learn from these?
- How do we eliminate barriers to academic accommodations for students who need mental health supports and/or are experiencing symptoms of mental illness, but have not been diagnosed?

We met regularly beginning in August 2017 and early on we expanded our mandate questions to a broader question set, as shown on the following page. We used a number of different methodologies to investigate the questions and develop our recommendations.

We found that there are many great things happening on campus that address mental health issues directly and indirectly, but in many cases awareness and participation rates are low. We also found many areas in which we had recommendations for improvements or additional research.

Our recommendations address issues surrounding course design, competitiveness, coop scheduling, assessments, midterms and final examinations, verification of illness processes, mental health training, raising awareness of existing programs, student and instructor supports, and more.

We hope to see this initiative continue into the future and build on the momentum that has been created by the committee and panel members.

2. Overview of Panel Mandate

General Questions:

How do we understand the relationship between academic stress and mental health?

How can we better balance a culture of wellness and a culture of competition? Is there utility to comparing students against students?

How can we support wellness by supporting student success and preventing distress?

What are reasonable demands in terms of academic load, scheduling and other expectations?

How many co-op terms are required for a credible co-op experience? How can co-op students be better supported in the pre co-op term?

How does course design affect mental health?

Can we better coordinate midterm scheduling?

Can course outlines / syllabi from previous years be made available to students to aid in their course planning?

Can we improve scheduling of final exams?

How can we better support instructors in their efforts to embed wellness into their pedagogy?

What would constitute 'embedding wellness' into teaching?

How can we encourage more faculty to buy into the culture of good course design that promotes student wellness?

Are there exemplars of programs or instructors that represent a good balance between academic rigour and mental wellness?

How can we better support students through the high school to university transition?

Supporting students who are struggling

How can we reduce barriers to accommodations for students needing support?

Accommodations Relating to Missed Assignments, Tests and Final Exams

Obtaining Documentation

Submitting Documentation

What happens after students are approved for accommodation?

How can we better prepare faculty and staff for their interactions with students in distress?

What are the pathways for students who have either academic or non-academic concerns? Is there a way to bridge the gap between students and faculty/staff?

Students in Course-Based Programs

Graduate students in Research-Based Programs

How do we support a student when a faculty member is the cause of distress?

What are the communication pathways for instructors concerned about a student's welfare?

How can we increase awareness and participation rates in existing supports amongst all stakeholders to facilitate a cultural shift at the University of Waterloo?

3. Methodology

The Panel undertook a collaborative set of exercises to arrive at a set of observations, analysis and recommendations that are included here. The Panel divided itself into four subgroups that met between one to four times per month. The full panel met monthly to share findings and discuss direction.

Meetings

Members of the panel met with the following departments/individuals to gather relevant information:

- Mario Coniglio, Associate Vice-President, Academic
- Ron McCarville, Former Associate Dean Undergraduate, AHS
- Matt Erickson, Director, Conflict Management & Human Rights Office
- Crystal Tse, CTE, Instructional Developer, Research and Consulting
- Christine Zaza, CTE, Faculty Liaison: AHS, Psychology, Sociology & Legal Studies
- Trevor Holmes, CTE, Senior Instructional Developer, Faculty Programs and Research
- Dan Wolczuk, Math, Lecturer in Pure Math, award-winning instructor
- Andrea Prier, SSO, Senior Academic Development Specialist
- Erica McKellar, SSO, Academic Development Specialist
- WatPD
- Campus Wellness
- Cooperative Education and Career Action (CECA)
- Centre for Extended Learning (CEL)
- Registrar's Office – Scheduling and Exams (RO)
- Department of Architecture
- Faculty of Engineering
- Science Faculty Council
- Faculty Association (FAUW)

Literature Reviews

Two literature reviews were conducted:

Review #1 - Discussion of stress versus distress:

- Challenges and opportunities presented to post-secondary students in terms of balancing academics with positive mental health
- How does academic stress affect mental health?
- How does course design and programming affect mental health and wellbeing?
- What methodologies exist around assessing the mental health impacts of academic policy, and to what extent have they been implemented?
- What are the best instructional strategies to blend the delivery of class content with developing students' coping skills?
- How does orientation and academic transition programming affect students' mental wellness? Are they a response to a lack of preparedness coming into university? Are they beneficial? Are there alternatives?

Review #2 - Components of academic courses that facilitate mental wellness and learning

- What are the academic experiences of post-secondary students with diagnosed mental illnesses?
- What are the correlations between aspects of course design and mental distress and attrition?
- What models have been proposed that account for mental health issues when developing pedagogy?
- What are the specific recommendations that can be derived from research on mental health and pedagogy?
- What outcomes have been associated with implementing academic programs designed to facilitate mental wellness and learning?

Surveys

Two surveys were conducted:

1. undergraduate engineering students were surveyed about the current practice of ranking students (see Appendix).
2. faculty/staff were surveyed to determine their experiences with the current verification of illness procedures (see Appendix).

Focus Groups

Two focus groups were conducted:

1. 10 undergraduate students in Engineering, representing seven programs (see Appendix)

Discussion topics:

- students feelings with respect to 8 stream and 4 stream coop options
- interviews during study days/reading week
- class representatives

2. 6 graduate students in a research-based program (Biology)
- student-supervisor relationships
- their perceptions of transition from the undergrad to grad school lifestyle and the availability of mental health supports

Assessments

We undertook an assessment of peer institutions policies and procedures with respect to illness reporting, accommodations for assignments, exams and other assessments. (see Appendix for a list of institutions).

Other

We were given access to the results from the Student Experience Panel's survey, and reviewed responses that related to our mandate (see Appendix).

Our panel had a highly diverse group of faculty, staff and students who brought lived experiences and anecdotes to the group.

4. Observations/Analysis/Recommendations:

Q. How do we, the Academic Panel, understand the relationship between academic stress and mental health?

Is all stress bad? Stress vs distress
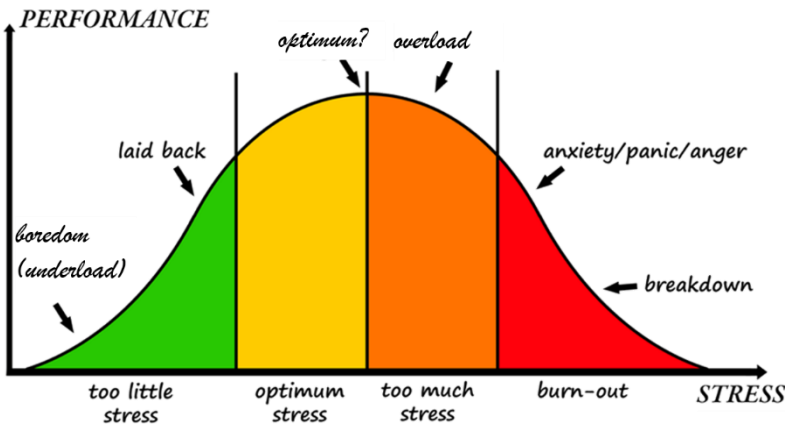
Stress, a term borrowed from physics and engineering, now refers to physical, psychological or emotional challenges that elicit physiological responses. Physiological stresses including going for a run or any other form of exercise, intense anticipation of an event, a joyous reunion and rushing to make a deadline. Stress is part of being alive. Not enough stress puts us in the green part of the curve above – unmotivated, unproductive, bored. We are happiest and most productive when we have some stress or stimulation, the light orange zone. Too much stress or strongly negative stress, or _dis_tress, can push us into the red zone, which productivity drops, anxiety panic may set in, and deterioration in health (physical and/or mental) occurs.

A well designed university program should ramp students into the optimal zone, without pushing them into the red zone. There may be a few bad stretches over a term where are they are pushed beyond optimal, but this is not sustainable. One of the challenges is that individuals are different in their abilities to take stresses in their stride, such that a load that is readily manageable for one person may push another into the red zone. Academic stresses may be compounded with personal stresses, which also differ between individuals.

In the academic context, we also need to accept that if an individual student is in the 'red zone' while the majority of their class is comfortable, we may be looking at issues beyond course and program design. This student may need to step away, and either reconsider their program choice or whether this is the right time in their life to be tackling university.

Is there a correlation between low academic performance and mental health?

We have all known students who have continued to excel academically even as they struggled with mental illness. However, without making attempts to disentangle cause and effect, mental health struggles are strongly associated with poor academic performance.

Compared to the general population of postsecondary students, individuals with mental illness are significantly less likely to graduate (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009; Megivern, Pellerito, & Mowbray, 2003; Salzer, 2010).

How can we better balance a culture of wellness and a culture of competition? Is there utility to comparing students against students?

The University of Waterloo strives for excellence. This is a very positive attribute, so long as it does not come at the cost of student wellbeing.

Observations

Engineering students are ranked. These rankings are used to determine eligibility for the Dean's Honour List (DHL) in Engineering. Engineering attempts to equalize between programs by using a student's class rank as part of the calculation. In the past year, the minimum average for getting onto the DHL has varied from 84% to 92.7%, depending on program.

Since 2015, undergraduate Engineering students have been able to view their rankings by logging into a website. Before 2015, students were emailed their rankings following the grades official date. Software Engineering students get their deciles instead of their rankings.

Honours List Criteria used by other UW faculties:

- AHS, Science: 80% term average
- Arts: 80% cumulative average
- Environment: 83% term average
- Math: 87% term average

Honours List criteria used at other universities:

- McGill: top 10% of graduating class;
- University of Toronto: 3.5 GPA for Arts and Science, 79.5% cumulative average for Engineering
- Western: awarded yearly for those with an 80% average

Analysis

The pursuit of excellence can be motivated intrinsically, extrinsically motivated, or both. This pursuit can push people beyond their comfort zones, which is required for growth, but can also be harmful to wellness. Competition is one extrinsic motivation source; understanding your standing relative to peers can help you calibrate level of effort, potentially inspiring greater performance.

Advantages to rankings:

- students know where they stand in the class, which can provide (extrinsic) motivation; in the best case it can let students know they're doing OK
- useful for letters of recommendation
- used for the current definition of the Engineering DHL

Disadvantages of rankings:

- rankings cause unnecessary inter-student competition (and are a zero-sum game)
- even if optional, almost all students seem to check their rankings

- good rankings aren't that helpful to students, and bad rankings can be harmful to mental health

We acknowledge that many current students have expressed a desire to be able to view their rankings (see Appendix). We believe that this is because it is the status quo, and suspect that students would not miss the rankings if they were not available (as is the case for every other faculty on campus).

One common argument in favour of the status quo is that students are not obliged to look at their ranking under the current system. However, most students do seem to check their ranking; it takes a lot of willpower to not look, especially when discussing grades with friends. Students who are in trouble may not have the willpower to not look.

Deciles work well for Software Engineering students and would be a reasonable compromise if extended to all of Engineering. Helping peers is unlikely to affect one's decile, so deciles feel less competitive. We think that being in the ninth decile feels less damaging than being 246th out of 247 students.

Recommendations

in decreasing order of preference
- rankings or deciles not be made available to students, to be replaced by class averages plus standard deviations;
- that the Faculty of Engineering only release deciles to students; or,
- that students get a ranking or decile compared with last year's class (e.g. to an SE 2021 student: "if you were in SE 2020, your term average would have put you in the 4th decile").

One possible compromise is to allow current students to continue to view their rankings through graduation, but not new students.

In our opinion, the disadvantages of making rankings available outweigh the advantages.

How can we support wellness by supporting student success and preventing distress?

What are reasonable demands in terms of academic load, scheduling and other expectations?

How many terms are required for a credible experience? How can students be better supported in the pre co-op term?

Observations

Cooperative education is the cornerstone of the Waterloo experience, but must not compromise the overall well-being of a student. In some Engineering streams, students are expected to interview in their first term at the University of Waterloo and go out to a placement in their second term. This pattern is known as 4-stream.

The Faculty of Mathematics eliminated 4-stream in September 2008; their motion cited interviews as a struggle for 1A students. Math students can choose their own sequence; the cohort starting in 2017 had 61% choosing to go on coop immediately after 1B, 30% proceeding directly to 2A (3 academic terms in a row to start), and 7% off.

Analysis

Students in our focus group believed that starting a degree with two academic terms was better for student mental health than a having coop term in their 2nd term. Students felt they were better

prepared and had an easier time getting a job after 1B rather than after 1A. The first month of university can be stressful enough, in a new city, with new companions, without also having to create a résumé, take a WatPD course, apply to jobs, and interview.

Students also enumerated several other advantages to 8-stream.

- more time to get job-ready, e.g. over Christmas (easier after starting at university since they know what they need)
- two full terms to engage with extracurricular activities
- better opportunity to socialize with other first-year students: on-stream with almost every non-engineering program for all of first and at least part of second year

Similar comments regarding the extra stress of 4 stream were made in the Student Experience Panel Survey (see Appendix)

Recommendations

- Review the student experience preceding a first cooperative education term for their potential impacts to mental health.

Engineering programs should review the sequences where students go out for their first position in the 2nd term for unnecessary stress and evaluate student performance/retention, preferences as well as long-term effects both positive and negative.

How does course design affect mental health?

Observation

Among post-secondary students with diagnosed with mental illness, various qualitative studies have been conducted to describe their educational needs, strengths, and preferences. Examples of problems that are commonly reported, and that may lead to feelings of anxiety and depression, include poor communication with professors (e.g. difficulty understanding sarcasm), social challenges related to group assignments and discussions, lack of choice in assessment methods, unstructured class routines, and sensitivity to sensory phenomena (e.g. noise during lecture).[1,2,3]

Analysis

Several academic accommodations are routinely recommended for persons with mental illness. A review of accommodations provided in post-secondary education settings for individuals with autism

[1] Cai, R. Y., & Richdale, A. L. (2016). Educational experiences and needs of higher education students with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders, 46*(1), 31-41.
[2] Hart, D., Grigal, M., Weir, C. (2010). Expanding the paradigm: Postsecondary education options for individuals with autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disabilities. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities 25*(3), 134–150.
[3] McKeon, B., Alpern, C. S., & Zager, D. (2013). Promoting Academic Engagement for College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, *26*(4), 353-366.

spectrum disorder and learning disabilities included assistive technology, academic support services, flexible deadlines and schedules, and choice in test formats.[4,5]

Universal instructional design (UID) is a framework that has been applied to course design to improve the learning outcomes of students, including those with mental health issues. (Incorporation of UID principles into UW courses is discussed on page 17.) Although the framework varies by study, there are three features of UID that are generally consistent: multiple methods of teaching styles and aids, various means of testing and assessment, and prioritizing student engagement.[6,7,8]

When asked for their opinions on universal design, post-secondary students generally provided positive feedback.[9,10,11] Instructors have also reported positive perceptions on the principles of universal design,[12,13,14,15] but the degree of actual implementation has varied. While some instructors successfully incorporated some elements of universal design into their courses, others struggled. Factors associated with better uptake of universal design were inclusive training and disability awareness. Finally, compared to a control group, those that featured elements of universal design showed significant improvement in levels of stress and academic performance for all students, regardless of mental health status.[16]

[4] Cai, R. Y., & Richdale, A. L. (2016). Educational experiences and needs of higher education students with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders, 46*(1), 31-41.

[5] Hart, D., Grigal, M., Weir, C. (2010). Expanding the paradigm: Postsecondary education options for individuals with autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disabilities. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities 25*(3), 134–150.

[6] Davies, P. L., Schelly, C. L., & Spooner, C. L. (2013). Measuring the effectiveness of Universal Design for Learning intervention in postsecondary education. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, *26*(3), 195-220.

[7] Higbee, J.L. & Goff, E. (eds.). (2008). *Pedagogy and Student Services for Institutional Transformation: Implementing Universal Design in Higher Education.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

[8] Orr, A.C. & Hammig, S.B. (2009). Inclusive postsecondary strategies for teaching students with learning disabilities: A review of the literature. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 32,* 181-196.

[9] Kumar, K. L., & Wideman, M. (2014). Accessible by design: Applying UDL principles in a first year undergraduate course. *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, *44*(1), 125.

[10] McGuire, J. M., & Scott, S. S. (2006). Universal design for instruction: Extending the universal design paradigm to college instruction. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, *19*(2), 124-134.

[11] Schelly, C. L., Davies, P. L., & Spooner, C. L. (2011). Student perceptions of faculty implementation of universal design for learning. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, *24*(1), 17-30.

[12] Davies, P. L., Schelly, C. L., & Spooner, C. L. (2013). Measuring the effectiveness of Universal Design for Learning intervention in postsecondary education. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, *26*(3), 195-220.

[13] Lombardi, A. R., Murray, C., & Gerdes, H. (2011). College faculty and inclusive instruction: Self-reported attitudes and actions pertaining to Universal Design. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *4*(4), 250.

[14] McGuire, J. M., & Scott, S. S. (2006). Universal design for instruction: Extending the universal design paradigm to college instruction. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, *19*(2), 124-134.

[15] O'Connor, B., Kubiak, J., Espiner, D., & O'Brien, P. (2012). Lecturer responses to the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities auditing undergraduate classes. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*, *9*(4), 247-256.

[16] Kumar, K. L., & Wideman, M. (2014). Accessible by design: Applying UDL principles in a first year undergraduate course. *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, *44*(1), 125.

Can we better coordinate midterm scheduling?

Observation

There is currently no campus-wide coordination of in-term assessments; students can, and do, have direct conflicts or multiple assessments within a 24-hour period. Guidelines on how to handle such events are provided in the Undergraduate Calendar under [Guidelines on Tests during the Formal Lecture Period](). According to these guidelines, within one week of being notified of test dates, students should request accommodations from instructors when they have "adjacent" tests or more than two tests in a day. Presumably, these guidelines also apply to direct conflicts (two tests overlapping in time).

Analysis

Rather than addressing these scheduling issues after the fact, it would be preferable, for both students and instructors, if assessments could be coordinated. Some areas are already doing this:

- **Science:** Instructors submit midterm dates to the departmental undergraduate coordinator who enters them into a common online calendar (Outlook Web App, via Connect), which is accessible by all instructors. Midterm dates are also collected from non-Science courses commonly taken by Science students. When tight scheduling is unavoidable, the undergraduate coordinator can check how many students are affected in various scenarios (see Appendix).
- **Psychology:** instructors in Psychology use a shared document (wiki) to coordinate assessments (see Appendix)
- **Engineering:** many Engineering programs arrange for midterms to be held in week 7 of term and suspend classes for that week; some programs also coordinate deadlines for deliverables. In a survey of students in one Engineering program that does not coordinate midterms, students were asked to choose from a list of 12 changes that would help them manage their stress. Having a midterm week with no other deliverables was the most preferred choice relating to assessments.
- **Optometry:** this is a cohort program like Engineering; midterm dates are available to instructors on a common calendar. Class reps also communicate tight deadlines to instructors.

Recommendation:

The panel recognized that it would be very difficult to coordinate all in-term assessments across faculties, but better coordination within departments/faculties is certainly achievable. Best practices should be shared between different units and used when appropriate.

The number of assessments per term should be carefully considered in course design, to find that balance between the stress of limited number but high stakes assessments (e.g. one midterm and a final exam) versus lower weighted, more frequent assessments that provide better feedback but a busier schedule.

Can course outlines / syllabi from previous years be made available to students to aid in their course planning?

Observation

Each course is required to have a syllabus which, in most faculties, must be provided to students on the first day of classes. Key elements of the course are to be detailed out on this document (senate guidelines), including the evaluation structure, weight of requirements and deadlines.

At other institutions, course outlines are publically available, either on department/faculty-maintained websites or centrally. This is tremendously useful for students wanting to get an idea of the structure of a particular course or program, or for students considering taking a course at another institution on a Letter of Permission. (It is also useful for faculty tasked with assessing courses at other institutions for transfer credits, etc.) For our own in-course students, this information would be helpful during course selection, allowing them to choose courses that strike a balance between tasks – weekly assignments, major term papers, midterms, etc.

At the University of Waterloo, course outlines are generally *not* readily available, to anyone. Even new faculty hires need to approach colleagues individually to ask for syllabi of courses that come before and after the course they are about to teach for the first time.

Analysis

This information would be helpful during course selection, students often feel anxiety when the expectations of the course are not clearly defined, or where the assessments change throughout the term.

For several years, there has been strong interest to make syllabi available, from several groups. In fall 2016, Feds (the VP Education and another member of the executive) requested a meeting with representatives from the FAUW board to address this issue. The Faculty Association board was supportive, with some caveats regarding creative content on some syllabi that warrant IP protection. There was talk of a centrally administered repository, with content provided by the faculty undergrad offices. There seems to have been no movement on this initiative.

This past year the Faculties of Science and Mathematics have worked to develop a Syllabus Repository that is aiming to produce a generic syllabus template for all courses. However, at the moment, the database is password-protected so that only students already in a particular course and the instructor that generated the syllabus have access (i.e. the groups that *already have* access).

In contrast, the Centre for Extended Learning has posted past syllabi for many years.

Recommendations

The university should review the potentials of such a repository for all faculties.

- Develop a centrally administered, *open* repository of course syllabi that is publically accessible. There would need to be the usual caveat acknowledging that past outlines may not reflect future offerings of a course. The Centre for Extended Learning has a statement that could serve as a model.

- To respect IP concerns, a template should be developed, which will be an abbreviated syllabus, which would cover the key elements, particularly the evaluation, including numbers of types of assessments, while protecting sensitive information.

Can we improve scheduling of final exams?

Observation

Scheduling final exams for on--campus courses is primarily a manual process, in which faculty scheduling reps choose exam slots in order of class size for large classes (defined as 300+ students). Small classes (less than 100 students) are scheduled using software.

The Centre for Extended Learning (CEL) schedules the majority of exams for online courses using Cyon scheduling software, with all CEL exams held on a Friday and Saturday early in exam period in order to have paper exams returned in a timely manner. The official exam schedule for on-campus courses is posted as a PDF on the Registrar's website, in week 5 or 6 of the term. Exam information for online courses is posted in Quest/Odyssey. All is available in the UW Portal

The goal is to provide a conflict-free schedule in line with current policy:

The University will strive to schedule final examinations conflict free and with:

- No student having two examinations in a row
- No student writing in the last period on one day and the first period the next day.

Students with conflicts, or schedules that violate these conditions are sent an email indicating that they are eligible for Exam Relief, with a link to the appropriate form. They have two weeks to submit the form. The accommodation for back-to-back exams is to write one of the exams an hour earlier or an hour later. These exams are written with AAS, with no access to the instructor or proctors familiar with the course. Schedules with three or four exams within 48 hours are not eligible for accommodation unless they meet the above criteria.

Since the 1970s, University of Guelph has made the day/time (but not locations) of final exams available during course selection.

Analysis

First, we wish to acknowledge that a final exam is not, and should not be, the default for every course. Various pedagogical, discipline- and course-specific factors factor into whether to have the exam, whether it will be cumulative, and what its weighting will be. Many courses that are more skills- than content-based do not have final exams.

Final exams are a very stressful time for students. Heath and Counselling services see a large spike in visits, particularly for completion of Verification of Illness forms. Knowing the exam schedule during course selection can help students feel more in control of their academic lives and allows them to decide on whether/when to take non-core courses, factoring in how this will affect their final exam schedule/chances of success. It would also enable to them book flights home/make decisions on job/holiday plans well ahead of time.

There is strong support from the Faculty Association for both earlier release of the exam schedule and changing the way exams are scheduled at Waterloo. Particularly for lecturers teaching three terms out of three, knowing their schedules for December, April and August has major work-life balance implications.

A fall break was introduced at Waterloo in Fall 2016, to address concerns about student stress. Currently, this break consists of Thanksgiving Monday plus the following two days, with classes resuming on Thursday. There is currently a Working Group addressing the logistics of making this a full week. Optimizing the exam schedule might make a full week possible.

Recommendations
- Post the exam schedule (date and time) by the second week of classes, ie before the drop/add deadline. Room assignments can be added later.
- Review what factors can and should be included in the optimization model – spacing of exams for required courses within programs? Room and time use? Scheduling like duration exams together? Avoiding X exams within Y hours for individual students? We have internationally recognized experts in optimization who could be involved in the project.
- Explore building/buying scheduling software that can accommodate the factors above.
- With the ability to modify their course selections to avoid tightly packed exam schedules, students should have greater exam relief. With this shift in emphasis to student control, a review of existing exam related policies should be conducted.
- Review the existing exam related policies and the literature with a view to minimizing unnecessary student stress. Is having two exams in one day reasonable?

How can we better support instructors in their efforts to embed wellness into their pedagogy?
What would constitute 'embedding wellness' into teaching?
Observations
There is an educational framework known variously as Universal Instructional Design (UID), Universal Design for Instruction, etc, in which universal design principles (originally from architecture, industrial design) are applied to learning environments. While originally considered in the context of students with disabilities, UID is a proactive way of identifying and removing unnecessary barriers to learning for *all* students while maintaining academic rigor.

Many universities have excellent online resources explaining UID principles and identifying tangible ways to incorporate them into teaching (eg. Guelph, Queen's, UVictoria). These sites provide detailed implementation checklists of course design elements such as:[17]
- post course materials such as syllabi, handouts, lecture outlines online
- use a microphone when necessary
- allow students to work in pairs in labs
- use online quizzes and self-tests to provide formative feedback for students
- provide ample time for assignments, adding a 'buffer' to address various contingencies

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[17] http://opened.uoguelph.ca/instructor-resources/resources/uidquickstart-implement.pdf

- for writing assignments, allow for drafts and revisions; consider using peer review
- allow students to submit assignments electronically
- provide grading schemes and sample assignments to students
- apply grading standards consistently among students and across assignments
- provide feedback on work before the next assignment or assessment
- use mid-semester feedback to discover any problems or areas of confusion

It could be argued that the elements above are not specific to accessibility or wellness, but are 'merely' good pedagogy, and should be standard practice in many, if not most, courses. However, 'most' does not equal 'all', and our panel has come to appreciate that good pedagogy should never be taken for granted. Some elements on UID checklists may not be universally applicable. For example, using a variety of strategies during lecture periods, providing a choice in assignments or flexible due dates, allowing students to choose their own assignment formats and weightings may not be practical in certain disciplines or with large class sizes. However, instructors should at least be aware of these possibilities.

The Centre for Teaching Excellence (CTE) is a valuable resource that already exists on campus, and many instructors already work proactively to embed wellness in their courses.

At present, CTE offers no workshops or internal websites explicitly labelled UID or wellness. However, most UID principles are in common with those underlying good course design, for which CTE offers a wide range of workshops and training opportunities. Statistics on CTE's offerings and participation rates are detailed in their latest report[18]. In the last academic year, CTE offered a total of 374 sessions (104 unique workshops), variously targeting faculty, staff, graduate students and postdocs. Some programs are specifically designed to prepare new faculty for what could be their first teaching experience. In 2016, 23% of faculty members participated in these workshops, with an average of three workshops attended that year. Participation rates among other groups can be seen in the CTE report, Table 1.

In addition to the existing workshops, there is considerable expertise and enthusiasm for developing resources in this area. Kristin Brown, an Educational Research Associate in CTE, is currently developing a workshop for faculty focused on course design elements and pedagogy that support student wellness. Two faculty members, Jay Dolmage in English and Shannon Dea in Philosophy, are very committed to teaching, accessibility and inclusivity. They collaborate regularly with CTE in the development and delivery of professional development workshops for faculty. No doubt there are other involved instructors we are not aware of.

How can we encourage more faculty to buy into the culture of good course design that promotes student wellness?

Over the past five years, participation rate in optional CTE workshops among faculty has been ~20%. While not all faculty members are taking advantage of this professional development, this participation rate should be viewed in the context that faculty members receive no credit or reward for fitting these optional events into their schedules.

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[18] https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/sites/ca.centre-for-teaching-excellence/files/uploads/files/2016-2017_cte_annual_report.pdf

Teaching, research and services are the three areas for which faculty are evaluated on an annual or biennial basis. Currently, the only assessments of teaching are the 'student perception surveys' (formerly known as course evaluations). By either name, these evaluations consist of surveys (now online in all/most units) in which undergraduate students in the last few weeks of a course express their opinions on the quality of instruction they received. The survey information is boiled down to a single number that is then included in faculty reviews for merit and promotion.

The shortcomings of the student surveys and the need for more meaningful teaching assessment have been recognized. As one group is working on improving the student survey, a task force is being formed to develop complementary teaching assessments.

Are there exemplars of programs or instructors that represent a good balance between academic rigour and mental wellness?

Observations

There are many instances across campus of instructors using good practices that assist with mental wellness. All of the features in the Table of Good Practices in the Appendix are currently in practice on this campus. Currently, the coordination of midterm scheduling is limited to a few units.

One initiative in development is tracking student participation in the LMS (for example, the Intelligent Agent feature in Learn). This would be of most value to instructors of very large courses. At this point, tracking of patterns is very much a manual process. A few instructors, in partnership with their CTE liaison, are developing an automated approach that would be more accessible to instructors. The goal would be to have an email sent to the instructor when certain criteria were met (eg. not logging in for 10 days, not submitting assignments or quizzes). The instructor could then take a careful look at that student's record, and decide whether to reach out to the student themselves or flag them to advisors. Staff support personnel would be able to view this information in the context of the student's academic record and notes in ASIS. In units with centralized tracking of VIF submissions, this information could also be considered.

Recommendations
- Explore ways to share existing best practices between instructors, on an on-going basis particularly in an online format
- Develop an online resource consisting of a repository of good practices for embedding UID/wellness into teaching
- Support ongoing efforts to develop alternative teaching assessments.
- Make the CTE program for new faculty hires mandatory (as it already is for Eng and AHS).
- Undertake program-based course assessment for UID/wellness features, initially targeting first year courses, eventually working through the curriculum. Consider making this a collaborative effort between CTE and departmental Teaching Fellows.
- Considering having each course assessed for UID/wellness regularly, based on a checklist developed from the online resource. New courses could be assessed after two offerings.
- Encourage faculty involvement in teaching-related professional development by recognizing these efforts in their merit reviews. Include information beyond the number generated by the

student survey; acknowledge (and value) up-to-date course assessments, participation in CTE workshops and pedagogical conferences.

How can we better support students through the high school to university transition?

Observations:

Competition for admission to many Waterloo programs is strong, and therefore high school averages are very high. According to Macleans University Rankings, Waterloo has the highest admission average in Canada[19].

Measures already in place include:

- Optional faculty-specific one-day summer programs that highlight the differences between university and high school allow incoming students to experience an abbreviated lecture followed by note-taking tips from upper year students in their programs; advice on navigating the transition is provided; students are informed of support services, academic and otherwise. (run by the SSO in collaboration with instructors and staff from each faculty)
- Optional sessions (STEM and Arts/Humanities versions) are offered during orientation week; 30-50 minute sessions run several times; topics include time management, study skills, resiliency, healthy balance; sessions are very well attended (room filled to capacity for most sessions).
- Course/program-specific content is delivered in the first few lectures of some classes (key points in a syllabus, time management, Bloom's taxonomy, high stakes vs formative feedback).
- Brief (5-10 minute) topics prepared by the SSO are provided to instructors of selected first year classes. This program was piloted in the Faculty of Environment in fall 2017 (brief report in Appendix) and is in development for Math and potentially AHS for fall 2018. The seven topics can be used/edited at the instructor's discretion if and when they fit into their course.
- Optional workshops on study skills, note-taking, exam preparation, time management, coping with stress, resilience are offered by various groups (Student Success Office, Counselling Services, program-specific peer-led groups, etc).

Analysis

Incoming students have typically been excelling in the education system their entire lives, and have never experienced failure or even 'average' performance. Commonly, they experience a downward 'grade adjustment' in their first year of university. Unquestionably, there are also social, emotional and cultural adjustments associated with starting university. The 'Liaison' or 'Transition Coach' positions described in this document are intended to assist with these issues. First year instructors should be, and in many cases, already are playing major roles in helping students make this transition.

We clearly have the capacity, the expertise and the will on this campus to create and deliver high quality 'transition programming'. While the content and intent of the above initiatives may be excellent, there are factors that may be limiting their efficacy:

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[19] Macleans, Nov 13, 2017, data for fall 2016 entry; http://www.macleans.ca/education/what-grades-do-i-need-to-get-into-canadian-universities/

- ***Most of the existing supports are optional***. The students who most need these supports are the least likely to attend extra, out-of-class sessions. We strongly support embedding these supports within courses, within the class contact times and/or within course LMS.
- ***Most of the supports are 'front-loaded' early into the 1A term***. During the first few weeks of classes, most students have not had enough feedback to realize that they may not achieve their tradition grades. For some programs (eg Science, via SciSpace), supports are strategically scheduled and promoted to coordinate with the known stresses of the term - approaching midterms (time management), release of midterm grades in large classes (resiliency). However, these sessions require the students to make the effort of attending something over and above their course load.
- ***Supports outside the context of the course/program may be perceived by students as lacking authenticity or relevance***. Generic advice can be made available online, workshops or via pamphlets. The most useful support should come from people intimately acquainted with the expectations of the course/program and the times in the term when supports are most needed. If they are comfortable doing so, course instructors – supported by groups such as CTE and SSO - are the ideal messengers.

At some institutions, courses are being specially designed to develop study skills and/or provide 'wellness' coaching. One concern with those models is that lack of direct relevance to the student's experience (see X above). A second concern is that we would be adding yet another time commitment to the student schedules. If there is no grade component associated with an activity, students will (justifiably) prioritize activities they perceive to have direct impact on their academic record. If grades are assigned to such a course (even pass/fail), we will be adding to their course load.

Recommendations:

Develop and deliver in-class, well-timed, authentic activities that introduce concepts in metacognition and learning strategies:

- Develop a repertoire of metacognition / learning-to-learn elements for instructors that address various learning strategies important in the high school to university transition. This is largely already in place, through efforts of both CTE and SSO.
- Form teams of instructors of first-year courses that will achieve maximum exposure of first year students to these concepts. Existing structures within programs would factor into these teams. For example, certain programs in Engineering are coordinated through a First Year Office. Another situation to consider is when large groups of instructors from outside a faculty provide service teaching to some programs (eg teaching Math to non-Math majors). One would expect that the instructors from within the host faculty would be most invested in this project.
- Hold workshops for these instructor groups, jointly developed and hosted by CTE and SSO, to help instructors within a given program determine which metacognitive elements are important to their discipline, when those concepts should be delivered and which course should be used to deliver particular elements. Although most of the learning principles are likely universal, some adaptation may be necessary.
- These 'metacog moments' should be delivered during the lecture slot by the main instructor (ideally) or within *mandatory* tutorials (with possible online phases).
- Through consultations with CTE and SSO, it is clear that considerable resources and expertise already exist on campus. We recommend that ongoing efforts be supported and expanded in

scope. While the priority should be first year students, this support should gradually move into higher years, for students who didn't 'catch it' the first time and/or for skills that only come up as class sizes decrease (eg. writing skills for STEM students). \

Supporting students who *are* struggling

How can we reduce barriers to accommodations for students needing support?

Accommodations Relating to Missed Assignments, Tests and Final Exams

Observations

Obtaining Documentation

In most units, the [Verification of Illness form](#) (VIF) is the only acceptable documentation for missing a test, assignment or lab. This form must be completed (or at least signed) by a physician. Some units specify that the medical examination must be performed within 24 hours of the missed course element. Many units specify that the level of incapacitation must be "moderate" or even "severe" for the missed event to be accommodated.

According to the wording on the VIF, "severe" means that the student is "completely incapacitated as regards to functioning at an academic level (unable to attend any classes)." Some units warn that attending classes/labs, submitting assignments or writing other tests during the period covered by the VIF stating they are "severely" ill puts the student at risk of being charged with misrepresentation, an academic offence that can lead to suspension. Some units only forms from Health Services if the illness occurs while it is open, the rationale being that Health Services is more discerning than local walk-in clinics in their 'awarding' of illness levels.

Submitting Documentation

Once the student has acquired the piece of paper, there is considerable variability in what they do with it. For example:

- [Science](#) – VIFs submitted to online system managed by Science Undergraduate Office; all instructors receive auto-notification by email when a student in their course submits VIF for any other Science course; VIF submission patterns reviewed regularly by Associate Dean Undergrad.
- [Engineering](#) – VIFs should be submitted to the Engineering undergraduate office. Only severe degree of incapacitation is accepted.
- [Economics](#) – paper VIF submitted for each individual course to the Department of Economics Support Services Assistant office.
- [Psychology](#) – VIF submitted to individual course instructor.
- [Centre for Extended Learning (CEL)](#) – students are instructed to send their VIFs for any online course to CEL. Electronic submissions are accepted

There are units with no stated procedures, and individual instructors who do not follow their department- or faculty-level guidelines. Clearly, there are inconsistencies across faculties, across departments and *within* departments with respect to how the documentation around missed course elements is handled.

What happens after students are approved for accommodation?

For students who miss midterms and successfully navigate the VIF phase, the options are typically to write a deferred midterm or transfer the weight to other tests/final exam. It is recognized that writing a more heavily weighted final exam may further burden students who are already distressed. However, the decision on whether to offer 'make-up' midterms also depends on factors such as the difficulty of creating another test, how soon the midterm is taken up with the class, and the time constraints/workload of the instructor.

In the case of missed final exams, students may write at a Department pre-arranged make-up session, write during the next offering of the course, which could be a year away), have an instructor arrange a make-up session. Current examples:

There are anecdotal reports from students that accommodations approved by AccessAbility Services are being denied them by individual instructors. This is unacceptable and would be shocking to the vast majority of instructors. Apparently, some instructors need to be reminded that the accommodations communicated (and largely managed and provided) by AccessAbility Services are complying with the terms laid out by the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

Analysis

After our review of existing practices, peer institutions and consultation with students, faculty and administrative support people about their experiences with the current VIF system, we feel that the current system lacks consistency and improvements could be made.

The ever-increasing stringency of the VIF regulations was no doubt driven by perceived abuse of the system by a subset of students. What we have now is an 'end-goal' document that often makes little sense for chronic issues of any sort, but particularly mental illness. The fact that Counselling Services does not seem to be part of the information/documentation loop is inexplicable. To have a student with a long track record at Counselling Services wait for hours in Health Services to obtain a VIF is a poor use of time for both the physician and the student.

A few institutions allow students to self-certify short-term illness based on particular scenarios – University of Manchester & Queen's. This indicates trust in the student and requires considerably less bureaucracy and red-tape. However, given the reality that the midterms of the more challenging courses are more likely to trigger acute illnesses, the impact on these courses and instructors would need to be considered. See Appendix for additional links.

Cases of students dealing with long-term issues such as extended/chronic illness, family deaths (eg parental) that takes a much greater toll than missing a test for a funeral, or ongoing mental health issues could be better handled. Under the current system, these students may be repeating the VIF process multiple times per course, multiple courses per term, over multiple terms. Rather than add to their burden, a more coordinated approach should be taken.

Recommendations

- Standardize and harmonize academic policy and procedures across faculties, departments, and services - prioritizing student mental health and wellbeing. Establish a university-wide academic

regulation that codifies accommodations for conflicts/issues on assignments, research papers, midterms, and final exams.

- Revise the documentation required for missed course elements to a single document that is acceptable to all faculties. Ensure that this documentation, with respect to duration and level of incapacitation, makes sense for mental health issues.
- For complex and/or chronic cases (including but not limited to mental health), designate people with training in mental health as case managers, to develop coordinated solutions, informed by communication with both health professionals and instructors.
- Develop a central online system for submitting VIFs notifies all of a student's instructors without disclosing unnecessary details. The system should be able to track a student's submission history, which would allow the appropriate people to intervene in a timely manner. Intervention reasons could include: potential mental distress, repeat offenders, suspicious behavior. Centralizing the system would ensure fair, unbiased treatment for students across faculties and departments. The centralized system for dealing with INC grades launched by the Registrar's Office in fall 2017 is a step in this direction.
- Establish unit- (faculty?)-managed deferred exam sessions such that students who miss final exams do not have to wait 4, 8 or 12 months to write make-up exams.
- Require all officially determined accommodations to be implemented. The rare time an accommodation is deemed unfeasible or in violation of course learning outcomes, instructors must raise their concerns with AAS as soon as they receive the e-notification to discuss a way forward. Institute clear, simple reporting and recourse procedure for students whose accommodations are denied by faculty.

Note that for students missing all or most of the tests in a given course or term, those failing or dropping courses term after term, or those with a track record of petitioning for WD or CR/NCR, granting further accommodation may not be truly in their best interests. Continued accommodation may in fact do further damage to their health, their academic record and their finances.

How can we better prepare faculty and staff for interactions with students in distress?

Observations

Instructors are often front-line in recognizing students who may be in distress. However, an instructor may be in a better position to make referral decisions, or more comfortable meeting with distressed students if they have had some training in mental health.

Relatively recently, a wide range of mental health training opportunities became available on campus, ranging from an online program that can be completed in about an hour, to two-day programs. Some of these programs were developed for the academic environment (eg More Feet on the Ground) and some are very generic (eg Mental Health First Aid). All of these programs are listed as being open to students, staff and faculty. The demand for these session is shown by the fact that they seem to be already full by the time they are advertised.

While the launch of all these training options is laudable, what seems to be missing is the context-relevant support that would most useful to faculty and staff. In response to a request from one department, the Faculty of Science has had these types of workshops for several years. For example, QPR (a suicide prevention program developed in the US), was offered in June 2014 and April 2017. It is

contextualized in that it is delivered by the Science counsellors to Science faculty and staff. This mix makes it very clear that student mental health is a team effort, and these are the members of the team.

There has been discussion of making mental health training such as More Feet on the Ground online mandatory for all faculty. There are several reasons that this may not be advisable. The list of mandatory training already required for faculty is daunting (eg six courses in Science, one of which must be renewed every three years). Forcing faculty to complete yet another mandatory module (to be clicked through as quickly as possible) is not likely to develop the culture of empathy that we are looking for. Furthermore, some faculty have little interaction with students, or are very uncomfortable with these types of interactions.

Recommendations

- Create situational mental health training, based on role and/or faculty, and make it available to all staff and faculty
- Make mental health training part of the on-boarding process for new faculty (as part of a culture change), and strongly encouraging workshop participation in current faculty.
- Consider mandatory mental health training for key individuals/roles who have the highest level of contact with students
- Ensure all staff/faculty are aware of the supports for students that already exist both on-campus and off-campus, and what to do in case of an emergency or when they suspect a student is in need of additional support
- Consider additional hours of operation during peak times of stress for students, such as exams and coop interviews.

What are the pathways for students who have either academic or non-academic concerns? Is there a way to bridge the gap between students and faculty/staff?

Students in Course-Based Programs

Observation

While improving access to care for distressed students is important, providing support before they develop full blown issues would be a more proactive approach. There are many excellent programs already in place, some of which are under-utilized. What is often lacking is a first contact for students, a liaison, ideally a peer who can listen to concerns and facilitate the next steps. This liaison should be familiar with the academic environment within that 'unit' and well versed in the pathways to be followed in various situations.

While not housed in individual programs or faculties, Feds offers a number of student-support programs, such as MATES, as well as an advisory service for helping students deal with policies 70, 71, 72 and occasionally 33 and 42. Feds is currently working to boost their service which provides policy support to students for their academic concerns.

Analysis

There are existing models for peer support in a program-specific context. For example, Engineering and Optometry (both cohort programs) have 'class reps' who communicate class-wide concerns to a designated faculty member. In most Engineering programs, class reps meet with faculty at two designated points in the terms. In Architecture, meetings are biweekly, and include a broad community

of student leaders. While class reps no doubt serve valuable roles in those programs, this model has limitations. For example, for issues pertaining to pedagogy, a first year student (receiving input from other first year students) is unlikely to have the judgement or experience regarding what constitutes an appropriate level of difficulty or reasonable demand at the university level. Class reps are tasked with gathering and communicating information from the class a whole rather than individual students. Furthermore, class reps are explicitly not to be involved in issues for which university policies exist (eg harassment, discrimination).

Science has the Science Student Help Team ([SSHT](#)), which is trained by the SSO, and offers "a student's perspective on problems, so we can relate to what you are going through". They offer Monday to Friday drop-in hours along with group sessions. Recently (fall 2017), Science piloted a 'first year transition coach'. This person, a graduate student hired for two terms in a special 'TA' position, started by visiting each of the five sections of the largest course in first year Science (2,000 students). This support, which was coordinated through the Science Undergrad Office, was originally meant for incoming international students. However, the mandate expanded to all first year students. This model could be built upon, to extend support beyond first year.

For many undergraduate students experiencing distress, there is the perception of a large gap between themselves and the appropriate faculty/staff support person. The student may not even be aware of which support person or organization is most appropriate to their situation. Beyond the class rep model, few, if any, of the current peer support initiatives involve the combination of local context and connections with staff/faculty with access to background information (academic track record, notes on ASIS (Advisor Student Information System).

Recommendations:

Develop Liaison positions to provide a peer, well-versed in local context to bridge the power imbalance of that first conversation, hopefully leading to earlier invention (possibly before accommodations become necessary) and local resolutions. Close coordination with local support provides continuity, more local context and the capacity to provide a more holistic view of complex situations.

- These positions (which could be structured like Teaching Assistantships) should be two consecutive terms to provide continuity and return on the training investment. The ratio of Liaison to students should be within agreed upon guidelines. Given the differences between units, each unit should prepare its own plan, to be approved by a standing committee overseeing Student Wellness. This committee must include student representatives. Efforts should be made to integrate the Liaison program with existing models run at the departmental, program, faculty levels and above (e.g. Counselling, Feds, Student Success Office).
- Liaisons should receive pre-service training and in-service support with respect to the appropriate referral paths to be taken in various situations. This training/support program should be developed centrally in conjunction with staff at the local (unit) level.
  - Central support could be provided by an expansion of the training mandate of the current Conflict Management & Human Rights Office (CMAHRO), possibly in conjunction with other groups (Counselling, Student Success Office).
  - Local support could be provided by a student success officer or a faculty member within each unit. This will be dependent on existing structures within the unit.

- The Liaison should prepared to facilitate next steps on a range of issues, including academic performance (academic advisors, SSO, MATES), transition to Canada (MATES, SSO, Waterloo International?), or interpersonal issues with an instructor or another student (department/program/faculty level, or direct to [Policy 33](#)/[Policy 42](#)-governed processes).
- The Liaisons should have a plan for making themselves and their availability known. These could include monthly social gatherings, drop-in hours in a relaxed setting and/or face-to-face outreach to key classes, depending on the 'culture' of that unit.
- Consultations with Liaisons should be logged and reviewed (by the local support person?) on a regular basis to determine whether situations require deeper investigation that goes beyond the purview of the Liaison (academic record, notes on ASIS, patterns of missed exams/assignments). At the end of each term, logs should be assessed to determine
   - level of use, whether appropriate number of liaisons are available in a given unit
   - if patterns exist that merit attention at a higher level.
- In cases where an instructor is found to be practicing poor pedagogy and/or treating students disrespectfully, clear procedures (and consequences) need to be defined, that are relevant to both pre- and post-tenure faculty. (possible cross reference to section on increasing the value placed on teaching)
- The plans must consider students taking courses across faculties and instructors from outside faculties brought in to teach service courses. Concerns about instructors may involve the home faculties of both the student and the instructor.
- Explore expanding to Science First Year Transition Coach role to all first year students.
- Explore strengthening the Feds supports which are already in place and available to students in every faculty. The benefit is that Feds is already very involved and communicates frequently with faculty deans, advisors, the SSO, AccessAbility Services, the RO, etc., and

Graduate students in Research-Based Programs

The concerns of graduate students in course-based programs are similar to those faced by undergraduates. However, for those in research-based degrees, the transition from the undergraduate experience to life as a graduate student can be abrupt. Graduate students are typically faced with much less structure, fewer but much larger tasks and the challenge of motivating themselves. For a successful research-based degree, they need to develop a close working relationship with a supervisor they may have never met before. In a discussion with Matt Erickson, director of the Conflict Management & Human Rights Office, graduate student - supervisor conflict was flagged as a major concern.

To further explore this topic, an informal focus group was held with students in a research-based graduate program (Biology). While acknowledging that one department is not likely to capture broader concerns across the campus, feedback from this session are included below:

- The main resource person for dealing with issues with their programs or their supervisors was the Associate Chair, Graduate for that department.
- Navigating the relationship with their supervisor was a major theme in the one-day orientation held every September. One of the Science counsellors speaks at this session. A representative from the Writing Centre also participates.

- For those who had experience with Counselling Services, there was an appreciation for the intake matching of counsellors to students, (i.e. seeing someone who was familiar the challenges of research-based programs).
- Somewhat surprisingly, the students saw the Writing Centre as an excellent resource for issues that went well beyond writing support.
- The Graduate Student Medical Leave Award (in effect January 2018), in which students can step away from their programs, be paid $5,000 and retain access to Counselling and Health Services, is a welcome development.

Concerns expressed by these graduate students:

- Orientation runs only once per year despite three intakes. Students starting at other times are invited to speak with the Associate Chair Grad, but few do. At that point, they would have no idea what they are missing.
- There was uncertainty about which campus services were available to students on medical leave. For students in mental distress, access to facilities such as the gym or the library may be very helpful.
- There were comments about the location of the office for the embedded counsellor and lack of privacy. In Science, the counselling office is in a main thoroughfare. There is a wooden bench just outside the Dean's office where students wait for appointments. Fortunately, students can choose whether their appointments are at this site or at the central Counselling site in NH. One could question the value of separate counselling offices for units close to NH, which has the advantages of privacy and not being on home turf.

Recommendations
- Parts of the orientation presentation could be staggered or reiterated through the year, with enticements for attendance (i.e. free food).
- Explore additional supports for students having difficulties with their supervisor and ensure students are aware of them.
- Encourage research supervisors to explore positive ways to interact with their students

How do we support a student when a faculty member is the cause of distress?

Observation
Although the vast majority of faculty interactions with students are positive, students, faculty and staff have reported instances of faculty behaving in a degrading and abusive manner toward students.

Analysis
Instructors should be role models, mentors, and evaluators, and abusive occurrences can have a vastly outsized impact on student mental health. Currently, students' only recourse in these situations is through Policy 33; however, students see this as a complicated and intimidating process and not a realistic option for most students. The perception is that instructors, in particular tenured faculty, will not be held accountable for their actions. Students feel that there is a large power differential in these situations.

Students believe that current university policies do not provide a clear and manageable path to obtain recourse.

Our interviews suggest that these scenarios may be even more prevalent with grad students. CTE runs a two day, six module Graduate Supervision Series for Faculty that is aimed primarily at new faculty seeking ADDS status (sole supervision of PhD students). Participation would be expected to be high since new hires are highly motivated to take on their own PhD students. Before a case is made that training is a problem, in terms of either uptake or efficacy, it would be useful to know the career stages and training levels of the faculty who do end up having issues with their graduate students.

Recommendations

- If it can be done while respecting confidentiality, look for patterns in the types of supervisors/instructors who seem to induce distress in their students. This will help determine whether improving or mandating training is likely to be a useful approach.
- Have a clear chain of recourse for students when student-supervisor issues do occur. Potentially someone whose role it is to advocate on behalf of student. Clear accountability for instructor.

[from inter-panel coffee chat]

What are the communication pathways for instructors concerned about a student's welfare?

Observation:

Regardless of whether or not they have had formal mental health training, there are instructors on this campus who have not only referred students to Counselling Services, but actually walked them over there. There are instructors who have called 911 or campus police to have students brought to Grand River Hospital. Thankfully, the most issues do not require such dramatic action, particularly if they are caught before they escalate.

Analysis

Instructors can detect signs of student distress even if a student does not come to their office. Missing midterms without communication can be a sign of concern. online LMS access patterns can provide hints that students may be in trouble – lack of timely access of course content, missing online quizzes, failure to access Learn whatsoever.

Concerned instructors can reach out to students directly by email. However, students experiencing distress are often disengaged, and reluctant to communicate with instructors. Instructors may be uncertain as to whether there is any real reason for concern. More context would be available to people in the departmental or faculty Undergraduate Office, via access to that student's full record and notes on the Advisor Student Information System (ASIS). Based on a more complete picture, there could be a reach-out to that student.

Awareness among instructors of appropriate communication pathways is highly variable. There are some very functional models, involving strong ties between instructors and the Associate Dean Undergraduate and Student Success Officer in the faculty support unit. In contrast, there are instructors who teach 1,000 students per year who have no idea could provide support in situations like this.

Recommendation:

- Each unit should provide clear guidelines to instructors regarding who they can contact when they have concerns about a student's welfare that may not (yet) require interventions such as emergency services or counselling.
- Guidelines must consider pathways for students taking courses outside their home faculties and instructors from outside faculties brought in to teach service courses. For student-focused issues, it maybe be most appropriate to contact someone in the home faculty of the student rather than the faculty offering the course. There needs to be sharing of communication plans when instructors are teaching students from outside their own unit.

How can we increase awareness and participation rates in existing supports amongst all stakeholders to facilitate a cultural shift at the University of Waterloo?

Observation

While upon review and discussion there are many supports available to students on-campus that help them in many and diverse ways to alleviate and mitigate adverse mental health, awareness of many of them is low.

Analysis

Information about available services is not centralized and can be difficult to find. The wealth of individual support, each with its own independent website can be confusing and difficult to navigate, often using difficult to understand terminology and industry jargon.

Some examples include:

- Academic Advisors
- Equity Office
- Writing Centre
- Student Health 101 magazine
- Campus Wellness, AccessAbility
- Student Portal
- Student Success Office
- RO's Information for Current Students
- The future Student Service Transformation

Recommendations

- A centrally maintained database should be created of all available supports (including events and workshops) for students, with the ability for on-campus departments to contribute their own initiatives. It should be online, accessible and mobile friendly and searchable by various categories and keywords. It should be added to the architecture of the WCMS so that it is available on all WCMS websites. This would eliminate the need for individual departments/faculties/persons to attempt to maintain their own lists of student resources and better ensure that the links/data was kept up to date. It would be the go-to spot for students, as well as parents. Faculty and staff helping students with whatever situation was presenting itself.

- An integrated marketing and communications plan should be developed to inform students about all of the support options available to them. This should include email, imprint, daily bulletin, portal, posters, digital signage, all relevant social media sites etc.
- A first-year seminar course requirement should be developed, composed of common university curriculum that is not strictly academic (with a component on student mental health and support resources available on campus), and faculty/department contextualized curriculum that achieves desired learning and skill development objectives.
- Distribute the existing poster detailing what people should do in particular situations to all Waterloo campuses/faculties/schools/departments etc. so they know where to find help in the event of a crisis.

5. Future Considerations

Communicate any additional considerations that the panel believes are relevant/important/worth further exploration but were not fully addressed due to limitations (e.g. time) of the process.

- This endeavor brought together a large cross-functional group to collect a broad set of information on student mental health considering both the UW student body and the larger societal context. We believe that we have been very successful and that it would be in the best interests of the University to have some/all members of the five panels continue to contribute to the Student Mental Health Initiative in some manner, so as not to lose the collective intelligence gained during this process.
- To carry out final recommendations decided upon by the PAC-SMH and make sure this momentum carries forward, standing committee should be formed to oversee Student Wellness. This committee must include student representatives.
- Drysdale and Wray have committed to the development of a research synthesis using the Campbell and Cochrane standards for evidence production – with an estimated delivery of January 2018.
- Although focus of the PAC-SMH has been on student mental health, there should be a campus-wide culture of wellness, such that mental health of faculty and staff should also be addressed in future initiatives.
- Through the local chapter of Jack.org, connections have been made with the Mental Health Lead for the Waterloo Region District School Board (Barb Ward). She has information shared the (excellent) programming being used in the school system, beginning in kindergarten. She would love to hear from us about challenges of the transition to university. Several faculty members are interested in hosting an outreach session with high school teachers.

- The University adopt a framework to support a healthy campus and guide future decision making, such as the Okanagan Charter and/or Healthy Campus Initiatives. (from the inter-panel coffee chat)

6. Appendix

Engineering Survey results

Survey results. Patrick Lam and Andrew McBurney (EngSoc VP Academic) ran a survey of undergraduate Engineering students and received 935 responses (out of about 7,500 students). The key question ("should rankings be available") was somewhat ambiguously phrased, but *70% agreed or strongly agreed that students should be able to see their rankings upon request*. It seemed that many freeform text responses were inconsistent with the key question, so Patrick, Andrew and Bilal Akhtar manually coded the freeform text responses. They found that 20% of the responses indicated an opinion contrary to their answer to the question about availability, and that 60% of freeform responses supported availability of rankings upon request, despite many acknowledging harmful effects on student mental health.

There was also a question about whether students wanted rankings or deciles.

Program	Deciles	Rankings
Software Engineering	53%	31%
not Software Engineering	31%	48%

Humans like what they are used to.

Further reading: History of Student Rankings

Engineering Focus Group Results

A focus Group was held with 10 Engineering students, representing seven programs.

Discussion topics:

- students feelings with respect to 8 stream and 4 stream coop options
- interviews during study days/reading week
- class representatives

Programs represented: 1A Geological, 4A SYDE, 2B Chem x2, 2B Mech, 2A Nano (8-stream), 2A Tron (8-stream), 3B SE x2 (8-stream)

Consensus. All else being equal, the 4-stream students would have preferred to be 8-stream.

The students generally agreed that having two back-to-back academic terms at the beginning of the degree was better for student mental health, and that students had an easier time getting a job after 1B rather than after 1A. All very stressful: the first month of university, applying to jobs, and interviewing for said jobs.

Some potential challenges: families would need to afford two terms of school before getting any earnings. (That only works if students get a coop job, though.) Also, geological engineering students were concerned that civil engineering students would outcompete them for all of the jobs.

Students also enumerated several other advantages to 8-stream.

- more time to get job-ready, e.g. over Christmas (easier after starting at university since they know what they need)
- more time to engage with extracurricular activities, e.g. returning to same activity after Christmas break
- better opportunity to socialize with other first-year students: on-stream with almost every non-engineering program for all of first and at least part of second year

Interviews during study days/reading week. Students were generally negative on this: for those who do not come from Ontario, the study days were their only chance to go back home. There is a real possibility of having to stay in Waterloo because interviews are possible and yet getting zero interviews. The majority of jobs posted on WaterlooWorks will require a physical interview on campus and possibly a subsequent round online.

Class reps. Students agreed that the effectiveness of the class rep system depends primarily on what programs do with the solicited student input. Engaged Program Directors / Associate Chairs are key here, especially when student feedback involves a tenured faculty member. It is also important to have good class reps, but that does not matter as much if no one is listening.

Raw data

Thinking back on 1A: (GEOE 1A)

- very stressful: applying in first month, being away from home, stress with workload
- prior experience = 4 interviews
- no prior experience = 0 interviews

- Advantage to not competing: yes, because civils are 8-stream and would take all the jobs because they have higher averages
- Comparing 4- and 8-: would choose 8-stream; they don't know what they need to get jobs before getting to university
- wish they would have been in 8-stream because they would have had time to learn the software over Christmas break (AutoCAD, RGIS, C++, Matlab); would love to have more time to gain skills and knowledge ahead of coop
- helps with having money to pay for school sooner: for them, not really, because they're not optimistic about getting a job / not a minimum-wage job
- all-first-year-jobs-during-reading-week: no, can't go home to visit family, and don't know whether they have interviews or not.
- reading week should be a break from school, shouldn't have to do interviews during that time
- random other questions: didn't know class reps, liked all their profs and interacted directly with them. (GEOE 1A profs are really good)
- really helped: living learning community, as a 4stream coop
- CECA was not helpful for them
- same perspective about reading week
- 4-stream doesn't make you more employable
- university transition is pretty person dependent, but being 4-stream doesn't help
- abusive instructors are pretty protected by the school

2nd subgroup (Bilal + Matt (4-stream mech), one 4-stream ChemEng, Robin (8-stream tron))

- 8 stream viewed as less stressful and "objectively better"
- 8-stream could cause burnout in first year with 8 straight months of school (people care less in 4th year, plus better at managing time)
- 8 stream encourages more extracurricular involvement - you have 4 months to get your groove in
- 8 stream gives you a better opportunity to socialize with other people of your year - on-stream with almost every non-engineering program for all of first and at least part of second year
- 8 stream people in dual-stream programs have the option to do an 8-month coop, "switch to" 4 stream, and then do 8 months of school to get back in original cohort.
- Some talk about 4-stream classes being more tight knit due to people's egos being knocked down earlier and toxicity getting eliminated, but hard to make any general deductions about this
- Some talk about 8-stream classes of dual stream programs having a higher average due to a lighter 1A building a better base understanding
- Financially: 4 stream results in lower debt, even though you pay lower real tuition (i.e. assuming zero inflation but assuming tuition increases) in 8-stream.
- On reading week interviews: wouldn't impact first years much (according to chem/mech eng people), "most of them have very few interviews anyway".
- Some opposition to university expecting people to go home; tends to result in worse social atmosphere for the people who do stay back
- Class reps: depends on how much power departments give them

Resources re VIF recommendations:

A PhD thesis:

https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/files/54561933/FULL_TEXT.PDF

University of Manchester Self-Certification of Student Ill Health: (same for undergraduates and post graduates)

https://studentnet.cs.manchester.ac.uk/student-services/certification_ill_health.pdf

http://www.maths.manchester.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/information-for-current-students/informationforcurrenttaughtmscstudents/programme-handbooks/postgraduatetaughthandbook2016-17/10sicknessandabsence/

Sickness and absence | The University of Manchester | School of Mathematics

www.maths.manchester.ac.uk

Queen's University, Department of Chemistry, missed exam policy:

http://www.chem.queensu.ca/undergraduate/undergraduate-resources/missed-exam-policy

Queen's University, self declaration of short-term illness:

http://www.chem.queensu.ca/sites/webpublish.queensu.ca.chemwww/files/files/Undergraduate/Self_Declaration_of_Illness_Form.pdf

Sample of Science Calendar for Midterm Scheduling

< > October 2017 ⌄

SCI exams ✕

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
25	26	27	28	29 4:30p CHEM 400 002 Midterm 1	30 8:a Reunion weekend. Campus v
2 12:30p BIOL 225 midterm 1	3 5:30p EDGE workshop	4 8:30a CHEM 120 Midterm 1 9:30a CHEM 120 Midterm 1 10:30a CHEM 120 Midterm 1	5 4:30p STAT 230, 231, both test # +5	6 8:30a Can be unwise to schedule 9:30a BIOL 370 midterm 1 12:30p BIOL 150 midterm +1	7 8:30a Thanksgiving long weeke
9	10	11	12	13 Earth 231 - Field trip #1 8:30a BIOL 309 midterm maybe 10a BIOL 483 Midterm 1 +1	14 10a BIOL 130 test 1 2p CS 135 and CS 145 test 1
16 3:30p CHEM 237 Midterm 1 5:30p MATH 127 and MATH 128 7p Phys 342 Midterm +4	17 8:30a MNS 331 Midterm 11:30a BIOL 323 midterm 1p EARTH 121 midterm 1 +3	18 8:30a BIOL 309 midterm 10:30a BIOL 354 midterm 10:30a CHEM 220 Midterm +3	19 10a Earth 231 - Midterm 11:30a BIOL 472 midterm 1 1p CHEM 430 Midterm +3	20 10:30a CHEM 333 Midterm 12:30p CHEM 264 Midterm 1 2:30p EARTH 123 midterm +3	21 10a PHYS 111 midterm 2p MATH 135, and MATH 145
23 8:30a MNS 211 Midterm 11:30a EARTH 121L midterm 12:30p CHEM 356 midterm 1	24 8:30a EARTH 121L midterm 10:30a BIOL 325 midterm 1p CHEM 310 midterm	25 8:30a EARTH 121L midterm 8:30a BIOL 439 midterm 2:30p BIOL 479 +2	26 4p CHEM 240 Midterm 4:30p CS 246, 246E 4:30p CHEM 400 002 Midterm 2 +4	27 3p Science Open house set up... 6:30p BIOL 345 midterm +2	28 2p MATH 137, MATH 138, and M
30 11:30a BIOL 443 midterm 1 2:30p BIOL 335L midterm 7p CS 115	31 4:30p MATH 235, 245	1 Nov 12:30p BIOL 225 midterm 2 1:30p BIOL 342 midterm	2 4:30p CS 234, 245, 245E	3 4:30p CHEM 400 004 Midterm 6:30p CS 135 test 2, CS 136	4 8:a Fall Open House. Don't recor 2p CS 116, CS 145 test #2

Guidelines/policies for tests in Psychology

Excerpt from the UW examination and related matters (effective march 2016)
http://ugradcalendar.uwaterloo.ca/page/RegulationsOverview

See heading Guidelines on Tests during the Formal Lecture Period:
"In instances where a student has adjacent tests or examinations or when a student has more than two tests or examinations in a given day, the student must request relief from instructors within one week of the notification that caused the conflict.

See the Accommodations portion for further information.
Any unresolved disputes between instructors and students regarding the legitimacy of extenuating circumstances or the suitability of accommodations will be decided by the appropriate Associate Dean(s). When in doubt, students should approach the Associate Dean from their home Faculty. In such cases, any regularly scheduled University academic activity will be given precedence in the resolution of a conflict with a test or examination in another course. For students in courses taught at the University Colleges where there is no Associate Dean, the Dean exercises these responsibilities.

*Excerpt from the Faculty of Arts Beginning of Term Memo:
The period (typically 23 days) between the end of classes and the start of exams is sacrosanct: lectures, tests, and other course activities may not be scheduled during this period.
A final exam is any test worth more than 25%, and that covers all or most of a term's course content. As such, it may not be scheduled in the last five lecture days of the formal lecture period for the term.

Department of Psychology policies for scheduling tests in Psych UG and HRM courses applies to on campus courses only (revised January 29, 2014)
Definitions:
- reserve the use of the word 'exam' for testing done during the 'final examination period'.
- all other testing (e.g., midterms, midterm tests, tests, quizzes) will be referred to as 'tests'.
- 'test relief' refers to the requirement to provide students an alternate date/time for the test.
- In the absence of a definition of 'adjacent tests' in the University of Waterloo test relief policy, the Psychology Undergraduate team decided that adjacent tests will be classified as two courses holding tests with less than 50 minutes between those tests. The Associate Dean of Arts was consulted about this matter (January 29, 2014).

Please note that the Faculty of Arts practice is that an evening test followed by an 8:30 am test is not an undue hardship.
Department of Psychology goals when building the test schedule:
- avoid scheduling students for 'adjacent' PSYCH/HRM tests. Where this is not possible, must choose a date/time for the test that will minimize the number of students who will require 'test relief'.
- students will not be required to write more than 2 PSYCH/HRM tests in one day so please schedule tests appropriately to eliminate (or at least minimize) the need for 'test relief'.
- must abide by the Faculty of Arts '25 percent rule' above.

https://strobe.uwaterloo.ca/~twiki/bin/viewauth/PsychMidterm/WebHome

Prior to finalizing course outlines for the term, PSYCH/HRM course instructors will use this WIKI to tease apart the test schedule as best as possible keeping in mind the above goals. See next section for instructions. Note that all sessional instructors as well as

Relevant Student Experience Panel Results

The Academic was given access to responses from the extensive survey conducted by the Student Experience Panel. Select responses from three questions (15, 22, and 23) were found to be relevant to the Academic panel mandate, and were analyzed to determine emerging themes. Five broad themes emerged: Faculty Interaction & Classroom Content, Workload, , Culture of Competition, and Intersections of Systems/Services & Academics. The following is a high-level summary of each theme; for a more detailed summary, please refer to Appendix X.

Faculty Interaction and Classroom Content:

Of the five themes, this one had the most responses. Subtopics within this theme include:

- Instances of disrespectful, callous, or abusive behaviour on the part of instructors. This was a major concern. While most respondents acknowledged that these incidents are rare, they are disproportionately harmful. Respondents would like to see:
  - Mental health training for instructors
  - Passionate instructors who are well-equipped to teach
  - Accountability for instructors with a history of negative student interactions
  - Guaranteed implementation of officially approved accommodations
- Quality of course design, including multiple opportunities for lower-stakes feedback
- The inclusion of mental health content in classes

Workload:

- Workloads broadly seen as unrealistic, particularly in Engineering
- Respondents had four main suggestions:
  - Reduce workloads for all students
  - Have greater flexibility and reduced workload options students can access on multiple scales
  - Culturally prioritize wellbeing
  - Coordinate between courses and programs to reduce term crunch points
- The process is perceived as a major source of stress, particularly 4-stream
- CCA is perceived to treat students very disrespectfully
- There is a perceived lack of resources available to students while on

Culture of Competition:

- Respondents generally agree that there is a strong culture of competition at Waterloo
- is seen to be a significant driver of competition
- Separation of faculties into silos is seen as another significant driver
- Ranking in Engineering is also a significant driver

Intersections of Systems/Services & Academics:

Respondents would like to see

- Guaranteed implementation of officially approved accommodations

- Simplified VIF/accommodation process
- A clear method of recourse for students experiencing disrespectful, callous, or abusive behaviour on the part of instructors
- Effective coordination of exam schedules
- Flexibility within terms through assignment and deadline options
- Flexibility within programs, e.g. reduced course load options

Across all five themes, one point that stood out was that STEM faculties, and Engineering in particular, were consistently pointed to as most stressful, most competitive, and as having the highest workload, while AHS and Arts were consistently referred to as balanced and supportive.

Literature Review #1

To be provided February 2018

Literature Review #2

See Attachment

Table of Good Practices

See Attachment.

Institutions Reviewed

- UBC
- DAL
- Queens
- UofT
- Manchester
- Guelph

Survey #2

Faculty/staff were surveyed to determine their experiences with the current verification of illness procedures (see Appendix).

Note that several barriers arose which meant that the survey only circulated to faculty involved in the academic panel and only 4 responded. In the main, it is clear from these narratives that faculty who are extremely open to and respond well when they understand that students are experiencing distress. Several faculty reported changing their course syllabi after recognising that their course design was creating unnecessary stress for their students. such a survey should be sent to the entire campus -- in its very form, it is pedagogical for it prompts faculty and staff to consider/reflect on their own activities.

Question for Faculty/staff:

If you have been involved with incident(s) with a student who was experiencing distress which they described as directly due to academic stressors, we would ask that you take the time to share your experiences with the committee. You may share positive experiences of support and care; or ones that resulted in distressing sequences of events. Some things to consider: What were the stressors the student was experiencing as you came to understand the situation? Were these obvious to you prior to the incident? What was your response? Do you believe you were prepared for this situation? If not, why not? Was this an example of best practices? If not, do you know if the fact there was too little support lead to further distress?
We know that many of you have been invited to complete survey after survey — with measures and evaluations based on indicators and likert scales. While valuable, we are now seeking to understand students' experiences through a narrative approach. We believe that this will allow the committee to a) examine what sorts of academic stressors may trigger incidents that may not have been explored or fully understood to date; (2) examine when best practices may have been in place in the contexts in which they were applied as well as where gaps in services and access to these may not be so obvious.

From Registrars Office - Incoming Student (ISS) & Non-Confirm Survey (NCS) Highlights 2017

Growing Stress and Workload Concerns

- Over half of incoming respondents are concerned about:
    - Adjusting to workload - 63% (57% 2015 ISS)
    - Feeling stressed - 59% (52% 2015 ISS)
    - Having free time - 51% (46% 2015 ISS)
- "Waterloo's academic environment is stressful" #1 reason for declining offers up from #4 (NCS 2015)
- Among non-confirmed students who selected this reason, the factors most influencing this are:
    - Competitive atmosphere (57%)
    - Word of mouth among students/graduates (53%)
    - Perceived lack of social life (51%)
    - Believed UW programs more rigorous than other schools (34%)