Waterloo Student Experience & Engagement (WatSEE) Framework

The WatSEE Framework articulates the elements of the Waterloo student experience and engagement that we believe are fundamental to our students thriving. This report provides a brief justification for and description of WatSEE.

Creating a Common Vision of Student Experience Priorities: WatSEE

Background

Students are at the centre of the University's mission and their experiences with us matter. Student experience happens inside and outside the 'classroom'[1]. The 'Waterloo Student Experience' encompasses our students' perceptions of their interactions with us regarding their academic and intellectual development, experiential education opportunities, campus life, and well-being. The student experience is the shared responsibility of Faculties, Academic Support Units (ASUs), the Affiliated, Federated Institutions of Waterloo (AFIWs), and students. This responsibility occurs at the individual (e.g., instructors, advisors, service providers), activity (e.g., curricula, events, clubs, athletics, residence, work terms), and structural levels (e.g., institutional practices and policies).

A 2019 External Reviewers' Report on the Waterloo Student Experience articulated strengths (Figure 1) and recommended areas for improvement (Figure 2). Repeated external student perception survey data align with the 2019 Review's identified areas for improvement: we have relational work to do with our students to improve their experiences of interactions and support. The 2019 recommendations were made before high profile, external events underscored and exacerbated social inequalities affecting our students that include racism, settler colonialism, sexism, heterosexism, cisgenderism, and ableism. The student 'playing field' is not level. Going forward, student experiences need to be informed by equity, compassion, and impact. Student experiences need to be viewed through an intersectional lens that purposefully decentres Waterloo's historically Eurocentric roots. We have enough evidence to know that our approach to student experience needs to change; we need to disrupt the status quo.

Creating a Framework for the Waterloo Student Experience & Engagement (WatSEE)

The University of Waterloo's mission is to "*advance learning and knowledge through teaching, research, and scholarship, nationally and internationally, in an environment of free expression and inquiry*".

Waterloo needs a student experience framework that articulates objectives and guides practices and metrics. The Framework helps us confirm our actions, identify gaps, and plan changes. Waterloo Student Experience & Engagement (WatSEE) considers '*learning*' to be a transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development; thus, learning is not restricted to academic programming and student development is not separate from academic programming. We are all in this together.

WatSEE—informed, in part, by the Future Ready Talent Framework—acknowledges the holistic, interconnectedness of student learning, which occurs through all interactions with members of the university. Our students are listening and watching. Holistic, interconnected student learning means that while institutional contributors (e.g., instructor, residence life coordinator, student service specialist, academic advisor) may prioritize on specific elements of WatSEE, they remain mindful of and willing to incorporate other elements, where feasible. Operational excellence must reach beyond intent because impact is what matters.

WatSEE provides a lens for guiding student experience activity and assessment at the University of Waterloo. The framework supports necessary student connections—both cognitive and relational—that are the precursors to belonging. Student belonging is known to be positively associated with well-being, academic engagement, and performance. Students who feel like they belong, thrive. We want our students to do more than survive; we want them to thrive.

[1] The term 'classroom' is not meant literally. It is intended to convey academic learning environments including those that are physical (e.g., classroom, lab, clinic, field, work term), digital (e.g., online courses), and relational (e.g., instructor-student, supervisor-student, and work term employer-student dyads).

Figure 1: Perceived Student Experience Strengths

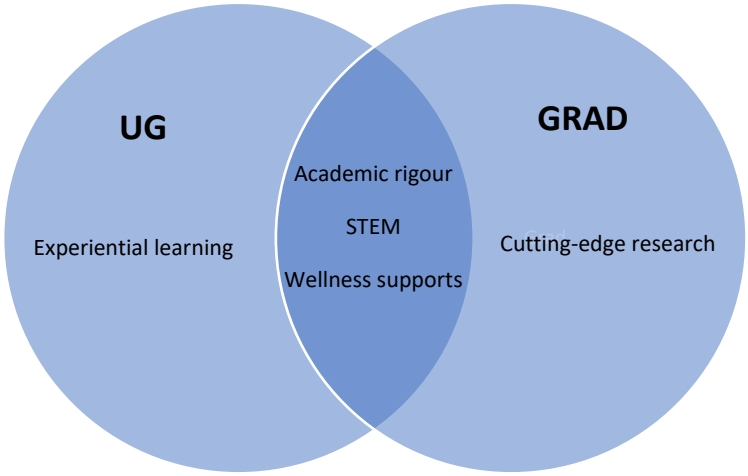


Figure 1: ***UG & GRAD****: Academic rigour (and excellence); STEM (UW focussed on STEM disciplines); Wellness supports (multiple units focussed on student wellness and success);* ***UG:*** *Experiential learning (led by Co-op);* ***GRAD****: Cutting-edge research (this would also draw and benefit UGs).*

Figure 2: Potential Areas for Student Experience Improvement

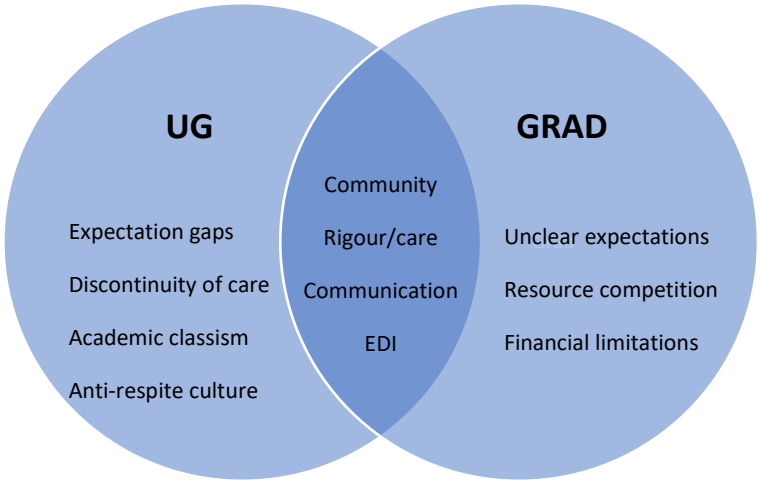


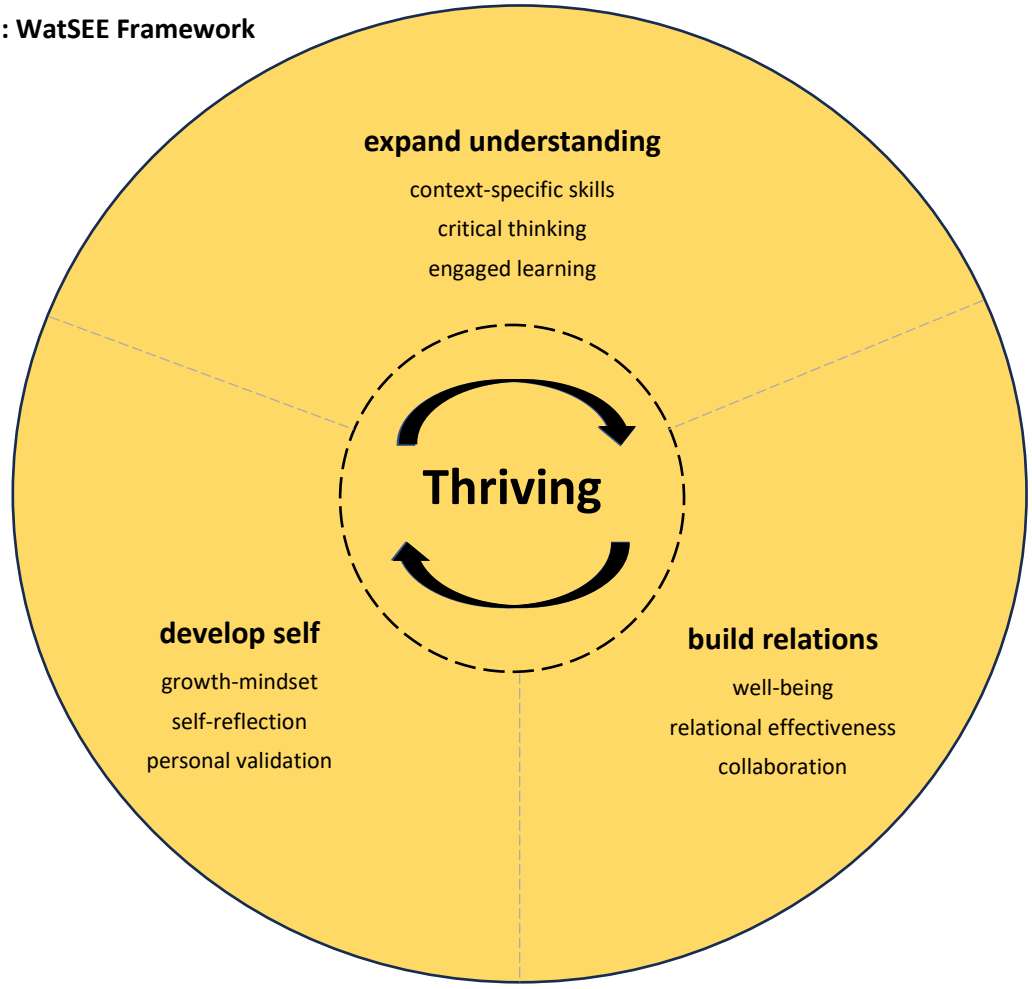
Figure 2: ***UG & GRAD****: Community/connection (insufficient); Rigour/care (disconnect); Communication deficiencies (content, format and timing); EDI (marginalized students are most impacted by processes and practices yet unaddressed in self-report);* ***UG:*** *Expectation gaps (relative to experience); Discontinuity of care (particularly after 1st year); Academic classism (STEM and Co-op valued most); Anti-respite culture (no opportunity to recover/reflect, particularly with co-op stream);* ***GRAD****: Unclear expectations (of students and supervisors); Resource competition (with UGs); Financial limitations (regarding tuition costs and funding options, especially among visa students).*

WatSEE is rooted in the understanding that students arrive with their own unique set of passions, interests, prior knowledges and lived experiences and that learning includes helping them make useful connections with their Waterloo-gained knowledge and skills. It presumes students are partners in their learning and development. WatSEE is not the product of one theory: it emergences from a consideration of multiple sources including:

- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action
- The Indigenous Relations Office Strategic Plan, including Objective 5.2 Education:
    - *Integrate Indigenous knowledge systems and pedagogies into the classroom, curriculum, and other teaching and learning opportunities for the campus community*
- Waterloo's strategic plan commitment to *developing talent for a complex future* and *strengthening sustainable and diverse communities*
- The Okanagan Charter (Waterloo as a signatory)
- The Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canada (Waterloo as a signatory)
- Waterloo's Wellness Collaborative Priority Areas
- Waterloo's Future Ready Talent Framework
- Student development theories focused on student success (e.g., Cuseo, 2013), student thriving (e.g., Schreiner et al, 2020) and critical theoretical perspectives to redress cultural, historical, racial, gendered, sexuality, and class roots of trauma and consider Indigenous decolonial pedagogies (e.g., O'Hara, 2020)

Thriving is foundational to student success. It occurs through practices that support students being able to expand understanding, develop self, and build relations. These three thriving student experience drivers, and their determinants are shown in Figure 1 (descriptions follow). Employing a thriving student experience lens, activities and processes can be initiated, continued, or revised, and mapped to elements of the model (see Appendix).

Figure 3: WatSEE Framework



Thriving Student Experience Framework Elements

expand understanding:

Context-specific skills: Students expand their understanding and critically engage with false or outdated understandings through academic, work-integrated learning, and campus life programming. Discipline-based training includes identifying and synthesizing relevant information and adopting and promoting technology. Student learning is respectful of different ways of knowing and evaluated based on meeting learning objectives that are aligned with learning activities.

Critical thinking: Students ask questions, define a problem, examine evidence, and analyze assumptions and biases. They avoid irrational reasoning and oversimplification, consider other interpretations and perspectives, and appreciate the complex and multifaceted nature of ambiguity.

Engaged learning: Students feel responsible for their learning, their connections within the university community, and their opportunities to learn about themes related to historical context, social landscape, and physical territories. They make meaningful connections between their learning, their life, and their goals. Students have the space and time to invest energy outside the 'classroom'.

develop self:

Growth mindset: Students develop a growth mindset by believing they have agency regarding their education, their intelligence can evolve, and their effort, perseverance, and resilience can lead to positive outcomes. These beliefs support their interest in lifelong learning.

Self-reflection: Students reflect on their learning experiences and build connections to previously gained experiences and knowledges. Self-reflection includes attention to and interest in self-assessment of knowledge, skills, and abilities. This work empowers students to understand how they relate to the world around them.

Personal validation: Students from diverse identities, experiences, and lived realities feel authentically seen, heard, and validated. Their concerns, questions, and success matter. Students have a right to harm averse, accessible, and respectful engagement but also hold the responsibility to reciprocate that approach.

build relations:

Well-being: Students are encouraged to consider their well-being while navigating their postsecondary journey. Well-being is centred in a holistic perspective. Equity, compassion, and social justice inform the supports offered across all areas of the university community.

Collaboration: Students seek interpersonal connections, collaborations, and relationships with peers, faculty, staff, and administrators. They work effectively together by seeking and including diverse viewpoints and commit to improving relationships with one another and with the natural world.

Relational effectiveness: Students effectively interact and collaborate with people from varying backgrounds. They explore ways to make meaning of their social worlds, identify how their sense of self is constructed, and recognize how diverse relationships can enrich and inform their perspectives.

WatSEE Adoption

WatSEE provides a lens for guiding student experience activities and assessments that occur at the levels of strategic plans, units, and individuals.

Student Perception Data

As part of activity assessment, we have and will continue to use external perception surveys (e.g., NSSE, CGPSS, CUSC, OUGS, CCSW). External surveys provide relevant feedback on an array of metrics and allow us to compare ourselves to other post-secondary institutions; however, their use can be limited by their inability to connect with individual institutional terminologies, practices, and priorities.

An internal, 'Student Experience Survey' (SES) has been developed to assess perceptions of undergraduate students (as of 2022) and graduate students (as of 2024). WatSEE informed the development of some of the survey items. The SES includes:

- A set of institution-wide questions asked of all sampled students
- Optional additional questions:
    - Faculty-specific asked of students enrolled in that Faculty
    - Short-term theme questions asked of all relevant students (e.g., advising, technology)

Disaggregated data where possible are needed to accurately characterize student perceptions of our impact on them over time.

WatSEE Toolbox

An online WatSEE toolbox has been developed. It offers examples of actions, indicates their alignment with WatSEE drivers, and provides 'how to' resources.

Towards positively impacting UWaterloo culture and practice, individuals and units are encouraged to adopt one new WatSEE-aligned action/year.

Exemplar Sources/Resources Considered[2]

People

• Vice President, Academic & Provost
• VP, Research & International
• Associate VP, Indigenous Relations
• Associate VP, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Anti-Racism
• Associate VP, Academics
• Associate VP, Graduate Student & Postdoctoral Affairs
• Associate VP, International
• Associate Provost, Students
• Associate Provost, Co-operative & Experiential Education
• Faculty
  ○ Deans
  ○ Associate Deans (student & co-op)
	• Accessibility Services
	• Athletics & Recreation
	• Campus Housing
	• Centre for Career Development
	• Centre for Extended Learning
	• Centre for Teaching Excellence
	• Co-operative Education
	• Counselling Services
	• Equity Office
	• Graduate Student & Postdoctoral Affairs
	• Human Rights, Equity & Inclusion
	• Indigenous Relations
	• Institutional Analysis &Planning
	• Legal & Immigration Services
	• Library
	• Organizational & Human Development
	• Registrar's Office
	• Secretariat
	• Sexual Violence Prevention and Response
	• Student Success Office
	• University Communications
	• Wellness Collaborative
	• Work-Learn Institute
	• Writing & Communication Centre

• Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association • Graduate Student Association	• President's Anti-Racism Task Force

Readings

Cuseo, J. (2013). Seven timeless and universal principles of student success: Research-based, learner-centered educational processes strongly associated with academic achievement and degree completion. https://www.wvaspa.org/uploads/1/6/0/6/16063526/seven_principles_of_success_research__practice_manuscript.pdf Accessed January 31, 2023.

Hernández, E. (2016). Utilizing Critical Race Theory to examine race/ethnicity, racism, and power in Student Development Theory and research. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57, 168-180.

Keeling, R.P. (2009). Learning reconsidered 2: A campus-wide focus on the student experience. *ACPA/NASPA*. Washington, DC.

Kurt, S. (2020). How Can We Align Learning Objectives, Instructional Strategies, and Assessments? *Educational Technology*, November 11, 2020 https://educationaltechnology.net/how-can-we-align-learning-objectives-instructional-strategies-and-assessments/ Accessed August 16, 2021.

O'Hara, R.M. (2020). STEM(ing) the tide: a Critical Race Theory analysis in STEM education. Journal of Constructivist Psychology. DOI: 10.1080/10720537.2020.1842825.

Schreiner, L.A., Louis, M.C., & Nelson, D.D. (Eds.) (2020). Thriving in transitions: A research-based approach to college student success (2nd ed). University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition.

Wade, C. (1995). Using writing to develop and assess critical thinking. Teaching of Psychology, 22(1), 24-28.

[2] In addition to sources identified on page 4.