

UW Response to the Student Experience Review

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Background

It is important that the student experience at the University of Waterloo support the success of our students - in their academic programs and in their experiential learning. While we have learned much about their experience from innumerable conversations and surveys of students, past and present, we are eager to know more. To this end, we conducted an external review of the student experience because we believed strongly that this approach would help us better understand our challenges as seen through an expert external lens.

In March 2019, four external reviewers were invited to the University to engage with the campus community for the Student Experience Review. The external reviewers were:

- Serge Desmarais, Professor and former Associate Vice-President Academic, University of Guelph
- Nathan Hill, Director, Learning Sciences and Health Professions Education Graduate Programs, McGill University
- Ann Tierney, Vice-Provost and Dean of Student Affairs, Queen's University
- Nancy Johnston, former Vice-Provost, Students and International Pro Tem, Simon Fraser University; President, World Association for Cooperative Education (WACE)

As stated in the [Terms of Reference](#) for the review, the external review team was tasked with commenting on the student experience broadly through three specific foci of interest – (1) quality practices in teaching and learning, (2) student support and (3) student wellness. Hill and Desmarais primarily focused on the graduate experience, while Tierney and Johnston on the undergraduate. To support their work, the reviewers were provided with a [UW Self-Assessment](#) – a comprehensive document describing the contextual framework through an overview of University services and offices, key data sources and other observations. The Self-Assessment also provided a summary of our perceived strengths and possibilities for improvements in each of the three focus areas. The reviewers were made aware of the University of Waterloo [Strategic Plan](#) and the relevant [Issue Papers](#) and [data sources](#) such as the NSSE, NCHA, etc.

During the site visit, the external reviewers met with the internal steering committee and a broad cross-section of campus stakeholders including:

- The President and Provost
- Faculty Deans / Associate Deans (Undergraduate and Graduate)
- Faculty Advisors and Coordinators (Undergraduate and Graduate)
- Four student focus groups (Undergraduate and Graduate)

- Student governments (Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association, Graduate Students Association)
- Student service supports (including Co-operative Education, Student Success Office, Writing and Communication Centre, Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs, Library, Housing and Residences, Athletics, Campus Wellness)

The University of Waterloo community is deeply appreciative of the generous time, expertise and care that were given by the external review team. We know that our request that the external reviewers consider such a breadth of areas in such a limited amount of time was bold – but their observations, insights and ideas demonstrated their quick grasp of our unique campus culture. Their final report was received by the Provost in May of 2019.

Overall Impression of the Report and Key Takeaways

With the limited time that the reviewers had on campus, the internal steering committee agrees that they did an exceptional job at capturing who we are as an institution, including an appreciation of the types of students that we attract. Through thoughtful dialogue with students, the reviewers got a clear picture of the needs of the students, especially related to Waterloo's unique challenges and opportunities.

An overriding theme emerged through the many conversations with the various stakeholders during the site visit, including with the internal steering committee. The external reviewers shared their perspective of our need as an institution to celebrate and respect the rigor of our academic offerings but to match that rigor with a deep sense of caring that we have for our students and their pursuit of success. The external reviewers highlighted in their final report that “rigor and care can co-exist”; a statement that the internal steering committee strongly agrees with. For Waterloo to be the institution it aspires to be, rigor and care must go together.

We clearly articulated in the self-assessment that Waterloo attracts students who “have demonstrated academic excellence and are eager to extend their education through conventional and experiential learning, as well as cutting-edge research.” The external reviewers’ findings supported this claim and commented that “Waterloo engages its students in impressive high-impact teaching practices, with a strong focus on experiential learning.”

Another component of many of our undergraduate students’ experience that needs this balance of rigor and care is in our co-op system. The competitive nature and sequencing of co-op is viewed by many students as making it harder to create a sense of community in the traditional sense even though it is co-op that attracts students to the University of Waterloo in the first place. The challenge for the University of Waterloo is to create a sense of community for our co-op students such that no matter where they are located they feel connected and supported by the institution.

Important sub-themes emerging from the review as they relate to many undergraduate students include:

- a perceived expectation gap from the recruitment promise related to co-op job opportunities

- an observed, but unstated 'class system' between co-op and 'regular' students that impacts some students' perception of their sense of worth or value
- challenges in managing schedules and workload

For graduate students, the sub-themes include:

- misalignment between the expected and realized relationships with graduate student supervisors
- lack of clarity relating to specific types of communications
- lack of awareness regarding support resources, and in some cases, challenges related to their access
- a perceived lack of financial resources

Contextualizing the Recommendations

The external reviewers' report outlined many recommendations for the University to consider. These recommendations will be helpful in the next phase of reviewing the student experience. Much work still needs to be done and their comments will help us focus on the important conversations ahead. It is important to note that there are many initiatives to improve the student experience already underway, including a number that address some of the concerns in the reviewers' recommendations. The following are a few examples:

General Observations

- The report stated that "students, faculty and staff expressed concern about the lack of a sense of community at the University, especially after 1st year for both undergraduate and graduate students." This issue had been recognized earlier, leading to numerous initiatives already in place to improve students' sense of community, including additional space being built for social, study and recreational activities. The co-op program is in the process of completing a co-op student experience review and working towards improvements to the overall co-op student experience, including their sense of belonging.
- The report further stated that "appropriate and timely communication to students is important throughout the student lifecycle". The Portal, a personalized website and app that keeps students informed of campus services, events and news and that provides tailored academic information in one convenient platform, is widely adopted by students and is expanding. Also, a cross-campus communications project (C4S) is in its preliminary stages of development.
- The report stated that "the main theme that emerged focused on graduate students' relationships with their supervisors including the frequent mismatch between expectations and reality." A [Task Force on Graduate Student Supervision](#) has been gathering information on University activities and best practices in establishing common expectations between graduate students and their supervisors, as well as supporting and recognizing excellence among supervisors. Also, the [Graduate Student Support Advisory Committee](#) (GSSAC) has plans underway to update offer letters such that greater financial clarity can be provided to incoming students.

- Lastly, the report stated that “rigor and care can (and needs to) co-exist”. The signing and adoption of the [Okanagan Charter](#) commits our university to a broad study and work framework that promotes the health and wellness of our students and the broader campus community, especially mental health. The charter signing is just one of the many recommendations from the [Committee on Student Mental Health](#) that are connected to this observation from the external reviewers.

The internal steering acknowledges that there is still much to be done – building on initiatives currently underway, and new ones emerging from the external review. Two areas that were notably absent from the report include commentary on how we can better use our student data to make decisions, and how we can better support international students. We know these two components need to be explored further and will also be included in the future planning.

Continuing to improve the experience that students have while at the University of Waterloo is an ongoing, high priority. In the short term, it will be important to continue to communicate effectively the projects, services and initiatives that are on campus for students so they are aware of currently available resources.