

Strengthening Connections – A Systemic Approach to Student Well-being

SSW Coalition: <https://uwaterloo.ca/school-of-social-work/coalition>

About the School of Social Work Coalition

The School of Social Work Coalition is an informal grassroots network of Social Work students, alumni, staff, and faculty committed to facilitating actions for change. Grounded in the School of Social Work's mission towards positive social change through justice, equity, and respect for diversity, the Coalition aims to address systemic issues such as racism, colonization, classism, ableism, and other forms of marginalization through dialogue, learning, and collaborative work.

Challenge Statement

University students face increasing mental health and academic challenges. At the University of Waterloo, many students report feeling supported during their transition from high school to university through orientation programs. However, they often end up feeling overwhelmed and isolated soon after due to academic demands, life and their limited experience, insufficient time and difficulty navigating student services and resources. At times, students face added confusion due to varying access and support requirements across departments, faculties, affiliated or federated colleges, and student associations within UWaterloo. Consultations with campus partners found services to be fragmented and reactive, with the complaints process often described as bureaucratic and inaccessible. Some of these findings are drawn from the research and lived experience of an alum who struggled with the university's silos and service gaps ([Working in Silos Policy Brief, 2024](#)). Service clusters, like Health and Wellbeing (formerly Campus Wellness) can provide coordinated support. And recently, in response to sustained student advocacy, UWaterloo has created a Student Decision and Policy Support director-level role and established an Ombuds Office. These steps seem to point to the need for a truly integrated work to support student wellbeing. Whether these promising steps will translate into coordinated, student-centered support remains uncertain.

The SSW Coalition seeks to better understand the structures, systems, resources and support available to students experiencing challenges, marginalization and harm within the university.

- ***In what ways university systems, policies and practices provide holistic, student-centered, trauma-informed, equity-driven support and resources particularly to students who must navigate intersecting barriers tied to identity, power, illness, housing, mental health?***
- ***What are the tools and practices available to engage students in accessing academic resources, non-academic support, and in overcoming barriers to their academic flourishing and wellbeing?***

This challenge invites students to map the ecosystem of student services, policies, and complaints processes, while identifying the structural gaps, informal supports, and relational power dynamics that either reinforce or resist change.

Impact on the Organization

This will support future initiatives and advocacy grounded in systems mapping and expand collaboration with campus-wide and community and external partners to promote student-centered support and services.

Potential Connections

Students may connect with members of the SSW Coalition; student advocacy leaders and affinity groups, staff from AccessAbility Services, Health and well-being, and Housing; administrative contacts (e.g., Student Success Office, Associate Provost, Students); related faculty. Students may also contact Evelyn Morales, MSW, RSW who compiled related documentation including research, interviews, and a policy brief on coordinated support.

Contact: Evelyn Morales - evelyn.morales@uwaterloo.ca

SSW Coalition co-chaired by SSW faculty Dr. Edwin Ng and Dr. Trish Van Katwyk

In partnership with the Centre for Peace Advancement and the UWaterloo Map the System initiative, and GreenHouse, in collaboration with the Graduate Students' Association (GSA).