Dear University of Waterloo Administration,

We are writing on behalf of the undergraduate student body regarding questions and concerns that have been brought to us about the winter 2022 reopening. We respect that you may not currently have all the answers, but we want to work together to ensure that the concerns and considerations expressed by the undergraduate student body are heard and addressed.

Overall, students have shared that they are excited for re-opening and having access to campus; this letter is not intended to overshadow that. It aims to give a platform and voice to students with concerns and questions.

We have three recommendations we would like to address collaboratively to ensure a safe and successful re-opening:

1. Acknowledge the barriers students will face changing their plans and living situation mid-way through the academic year.
2. Revisit teaching/assessment practices and pre-emptively identify practices that are not conducive to education during a pandemic and propose alternatives.
3. Consider the ways COVID-19 restrictions have changed the way campus can be used and how that impacts students daily.

While WUSA supports the University in plans to increase the number of in-person course offerings, we are concerned about the ability of all students to return to campus. Although public health conditions are improving, our student body includes vulnerable populations and students abroad for whom coming to campus may not be possible, risky, or involve significant bureaucratic or financial barriers. WUSA would like to work with the University to ensure that, in any plans for re-opening, we do not leave these students behind.

Furthermore, WUSA is concerned about limits to spaces for studying, eating, group gatherings (project teams, committees, clubs, etc.), hosting events and recreational activities. Students are receiving conflicting messages on how eating, common, event and study spaces are intended to be used. While students are grateful for the opportunity to return to in-person instruction, the lack of indoor eating and study spaces have left many frustrated and unsure of how to spend their time on campus. Students have been invited to use the campus as a social, academic, and extra-curricular space, but the continued closure of many student spaces (and resulting crowding in
the remainder) convey a message that students aren’t welcome if they are not going directly to or from class. The lack of formalized spaces for socializing have also resulted in unapproved gatherings, while we understand the desire of the University to limit its liability, we strongly believe in a harm reduction approach.

Student travel and housing situations make leaving and returning to campus between courses (especially those separated by 1-2 hours) unrealistic. Others may have synchronous online classes scheduled in between in-person classes. As campus continues to re-open, we need to recognize the importance public space access plays in facilitating academic activity.

It is also important to consider that many students don’t currently have housing secured for January. Having only two months to do so in a very competitive market will create challenges for students who need to find housing in Waterloo Region for the start of the winter term, and in many cases, finding housing in such a short period of time may not be possible.

We would like to see the campus reopen. Here are nine issues that we are asking to be addressed to ensure reopening is a safe and successful experience for both students and the University:

1. Consider the availability of study spaces. Will students be able to comfortably use campus facilities to get schoolwork done between classes?

2. What spaces will be available for students to eat on-campus? Will this also consider the outdoor climate for the winter term and students needing food into the evening?

3. Will students who are unable to return to campus be able to progress in their degrees? (Some options include reshuffling the order of courses, offering some online sections, allowing students to get credit for an in-person course in cases where lecture recordings are made and assignments are done online)?

4. What considerations will be taken in course design to ensure students do not feel pressure to come to campus if they suspect they may be sick or exposed to COVID-19?

5. How will you communicate expectations around use of campus for non-course activities, such as independent studying, collaborative work, and physical activity? Currently, all group study spaces are closed on campus. How will instructors be directed to assign group projects?
6. How will the vaccine mandate be enforced? If personnel will be on-campus, how will they be trained? (Especially considering continuing concerns around policing and its impacts especially on racialized students, how will we ensure that staff tasked with enforcement do not over police already marginalized students?)

7. Are classrooms equipped with the technology required to record and/or stream class content? What staff are being hired to support instructors with the technological components of instruction?

8. What steps will be taken to ensure that on-campus internet (Eduroam) will be reliable when the load of connected devices greatly increases? How are current concerns around the delayed receipt of the Campus Check-In being addressed?

9. Considering the ever-shifting regulatory landscape, what alternate plans exist to facilitate any necessary "pivots" to more limited capacities and/or greater remote options?

Despite these concerns, we do want to extend a sincere thank you to all the individuals - staff, faculty, and administrators involved in reopening the campus. We recognize that it isn’t easy adapting to an ever-evolving regulatory framework, and that you too have been left waiting for answers and planning in uncertainty.

We ask that in your strategic planning please include us in the conversations. Use us as a resource and consult with us as plans progress. We are the ones who can tell you how well reopening is going in students’ eyes and when policies create strange contradictions and confusion. We’re here to help you troubleshoot. We’re here to tell you how students are feeling and what barriers exist in the broader environment beyond school that impact us. Knowing that the particulars of reopening have been delegated to individual Faculties, campuses and departments, we ask that they also connect with their respective student associations and groups, if they haven’t already.

We look forward to working together to address these and other concerns raised by students regarding a return to primarily on-campus instruction this winter term. Please feel free to reach out if you have any further questions or would like to coordinate messaging around these issues.

Sincerely,

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