

2021

HABITATS

*STUDENTS IN THEIR
MUNICIPALITIES*

ONTARIO UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT
ALLIANCE



ABOUT OUSA

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) represents the interests of 150,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario. Our vision is for an accessible, affordable, accountable, and high quality post-secondary education in Ontario. To achieve this vision we've come together to develop solutions to challenges facing higher education, build broad consensus for our policy options, and lobby the government to implement them.

Recommended Citation:

Bourrie, Owen, Amelia Cammy, Maanvi Dhillon, Catherine Dong, Luke Horton, Hae Eun (Hayley) Lee, Callista Ryan, Matthew Nicholas Schwarze, Ryan Tse, and Hope Tuff-Berg, *Habitats: Students in their Municipalities 2021*. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Students Alliance, 2021.

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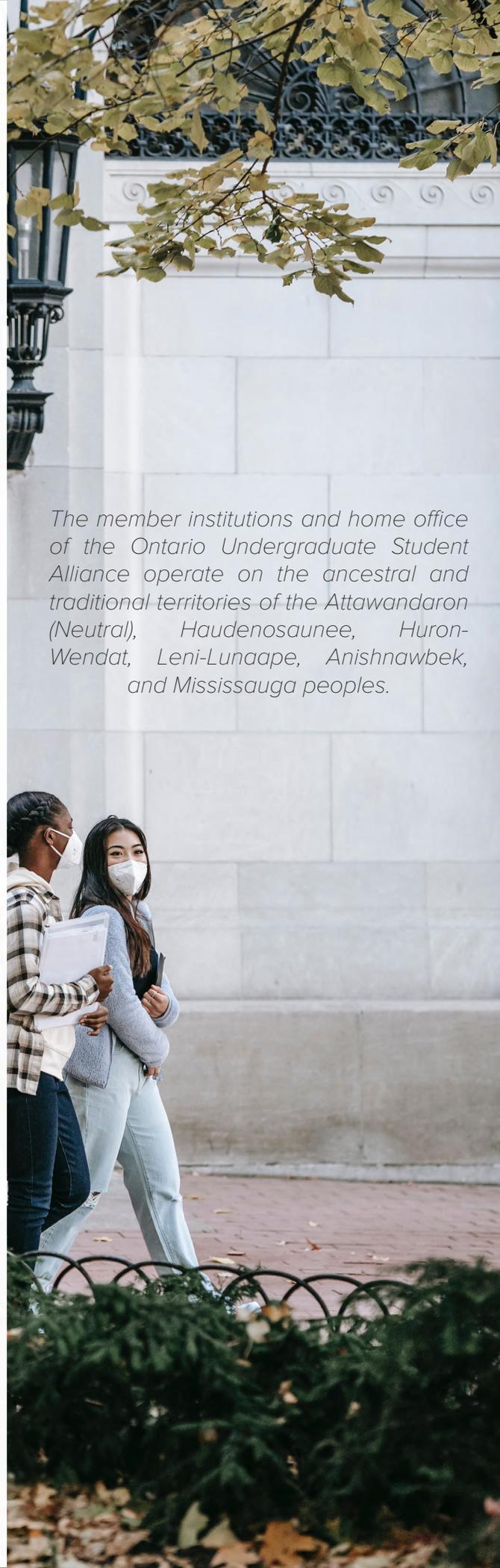


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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Britney De Costa

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

Since 2015, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance has published *Habitats: Students in their Municipalities* as a platform for undergraduate students at our eight member institutions to highlight the successes and challenges they face in their communities through a series of case studies and articles on municipal-level topics. In the past, *Habitats* has been largely focused on the persistent and ubiquitous concerns around housing, transit, student-community relations, and engagement in local politics that illustrate the ways in which students and their neighbours experience their communities in similar, yet distinct ways.

At the time of writing last year's edition, students, like the rest of the world, were experiencing the first weeks and months of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, student concerns largely remained the same and many of the articles reflected themes that have shaped these discussions year after year. However, they also provided us with insights into how a global pandemic might exacerbate pre-existing issues, reminding us of the importance of students as we move forward during and after COVID-19. This year, students have once again provided a roadmap of municipal-level concerns and proposed solutions to support all of us in our communities, but the impact of COVID-19 has revealed that student and community concerns are broad, complex, and extensive.

The first three articles embody the complexity of these municipal-level issues by highlighting different and overlapping concerns with student housing. In the first article, Amelia Cammy looks at the rising cost of student housing in the Waterloo Region, a phenomenon that has been exacerbated by COVID-19. Maanvi Dhillon and Ryan Tse take us to Hamilton where concerns around affordability are accompanied by limited housing supply, to which they propose the development of affordable purpose-built housing. In the third article, Owen Bourrie uses his experience with the Student Rights Advisory Committee to illustrate gaps in protections for student tenants that require a multi-pronged approach that must include tenant education.

The next articles explore the intersection of health and wellness and access to community resources. Writing from the Niagara Region, Hope Tuff-Berg writes about food insecurity and period poverty, showing us how these are issues

that affect students and non-students alike. This is followed by Callista Ryan’s article on the importance of ensuring that information about available health and wellness resources is accessible and the shared responsibility of universities and municipalities in this work. Hae Eun (Hayley) Lee makes the case for allyship in municipal governments and discusses how accessible municipal systems and citizen engagement can have a ripple effect to promote safer, more inclusive governments at all levels.

The final set of articles look specifically at the current COVID-19 pandemic and the opportunities to strengthen student and community relationships. Matthew Nicholas Schwarze and Catherine Dong discuss the impact of physical distancing and provincial health and safety measures on third spaces and what this means for students and how they engage with their communities. Finally, Luke Horton shows us how students can be integral to COVID-19 response and recovery efforts as part of what he calls an “undergraduate epidemiology”.

As we continue to navigate the pandemic and its impacts, it is abundantly clear that students will continue to be active and important members of their communities and addressing their concerns will only strengthen our communities for everyone. While these articles should be read and understood in the content in which they were written and post-COVID the specifics may differ, the general principle that ties this year’s Habitats to both past and future editions is the recognition of students as valuable members of their communities and the importance of including them in addressing municipal-level issues.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Home Office of the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is situated on the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnawbe, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples, and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. This land is covered by Treaty 13 of the Upper Canada Treaties.



THE RISING COST OF STUDENT HOUSING IN THE WATERLOO REGION

Amelia Cammy

Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association

Rent: \$1,603.34

Insurance: \$48.12

Internet: \$39.54

Hydro: \$40

Even splitting these costs with my roommate meant I paid about \$865.50 in housing expenses, every month for 2 years, while living in Waterloo. We were lucky too; we received great deals on insurance and internet because my roommate knew more about insurance cycles and the Wi-Fi market than I did, and neither of us had a car so we didn't have to pay for parking. Sure, our apartment had some cracks in the walls, missing screens in the windows, and no doors on one of the closets, but we didn't have other roommates and were a five minute walk from our campus at the University of Waterloo. My roommate moved out in the spring of 2020, yet they continued to pay rent for the apartment they weren't living in while I was forced to stay in Waterloo due to international travel restrictions. We were finally able to end our lease in August 2020, nearly 6 months after we stopped living together because of the COVID-19 pandemic. If you look at my landlord's website now though, our 2-bedroom unit – which we paid about \$1,600/month for – is advertised at \$1,645 - \$1,945/month¹

My story is just one example of the rising cost of living in Waterloo, in particular the growing price tag of student housing. This is a trend that started years before COVID-19 and one that, unfortunately, is not expected to end when the pandemic does. For context, the City of Waterloo is home to 42 percent of all purpose-built student specific housing in the country, and the market is only expected to continue growing.² So, while other post-secondary students certainly experience issues with higher rents and lack of affordable housing, Waterloo's situation is unique because there is no other market with this level of student housing anywhere in Canada.³ These revelations and many others were recently documented in the Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association's (WUSA) Housing Report, published in May 2021. The report explores various aspects of the student housing experience based on responses to a survey sent to University of Waterloo undergraduates. It should come as no surprise that the cost of housing was at the top of the survey respondents' list of concerns regarding off-campus housing. WUSA's report finds that, pre-pandemic, approximately 70 percent of respondents spent between 30 and 81 percent of their monthly budget on housing

expenses.⁴ During COVID-19, 17.5 percent of survey respondents continued paying rent despite having moved out of their near-campus housing, while the 13 percent of respondents who stayed in Waterloo reported having less money to afford non-shelter expenses.⁵

To be fair, increases in student housing prices isn't happening in a real estate vacuum of exclusively wealthy investors constructing multi-story apartment buildings. On average, the price of a detached home in the Waterloo Region jumped 30 percent from 2019 to 2020, and sales in the first quarter of 2021 have been closing at 15 percent over asking price.⁶ This boom in the local market is on par with what investors and economists have seen throughout Canada over the past year. According to one Wall Street Journal article, Canadian housing was 9.3 percent of the country's GDP in the last quarter of 2020, a sizable increase from its 7.5 percent share in 2019.⁷ Even in 2019, the market was at an all-time high considering that housing was only 6.6 percent of Canadian GDP 10 years before.⁸ So, the market continues to go up, taking student housing along for the ride as developers vie for valuable land and fast return on investments. This is especially true in hotspots like Waterloo where the market is saturated with students, particularly international students, who pay whatever the market (really, the investors) demands because they have no other choice.

Of course, landlords and property management companies are worried about having enough income to keep up building maintenance and to provide safe housing

to their tenants, and because the COVID-19 pandemic saw many post-secondary students leaving university towns to study at home there were concerns about a potential financial strain on property managers. But this strain is not as prevalent as one might think. In an article from October 2020, the executive director of my building's property management company – the one I moved out of in August 2020 – gave an interview detailing how student rentals “have come through the worst of the pandemic with flying colours” and the “demand for student rental units...many of which were leased out in the early days of the pandemic, has remained robust.”⁹ From a bottom-line standpoint this may be true, however the student perspective in WUSA's Housing Survey data paints a different picture. Students responding to the survey detailed experiences where landlords did not allow lease termination due to the pandemic, how many students have continued to pay for empty units, and that in many cases students really would benefit from legal assistance on this issue. As one student explained: “I attempted to legally end my lease and am now in a legal battle with a housing company over rent.” Similarly, another expressed that: “I have moved home but had to continue my lease while subletting for less than I have to pay per month because I could not terminate my lease.”¹⁰ Investors continue to collect monthly rental payments, contributing to the “stable market” cited above, from students who may not even live in the building anymore but cannot terminate their leases due to landlord push back.



It's not just this one property management company that thinks this way about the Waterloo market either. In a blog post from January 2021, an established realty broker posted on LinkedIn about how she and the clients she advised saw very little downturn in their student housing investments because 80 percent of student renters (her claim) held onto leases throughout the pandemic.¹¹ Again, while this may be true, it does not mean that students could afford to hold onto leases or wanted to have them in the first place. The broker continues on, explaining how “choice rentals move quickly” and “[t]he money foreign students in particular bring with them [to universities] is incredibly lucrative... There clearly remains a strong market for student housing here, and it's one that I am confident will continue to be a profitable one for investors for decades to come.”¹² All this to say, investors can make a nice profit off of students by taking advantage of their need to be close to the university and their general lack of power when it comes to student-landlord relationships. This mentality is not limited to housing during the pandemic either – one American-based property management company that works with small-time investors (i.e., landlords that maybe own one or two places to make a little extra cash) posted in July 2019 about the pros and cons of renting to university students.¹³ In this post, the company very bluntly explains that landlords can charge university students higher rent than they

would otherwise because students are most likely splitting with roommates and “a constant need for housing near campus means you [the landlord] can up your price. When the demand for anything is high, you can get away with charging more.”¹⁴ If this is the culture landlords and property managers ascribed to pre-pandemic – and continue to exhibit during the pandemic – there is nothing to indicate this profit-driven mindset will abate when the pandemic ends and students return to Waterloo in droves.

Students are aware of these industry practices used by property managers too. Hundreds of responses to WUSA's Housing Survey discussed how “[h]ousing at Waterloo is insanely expensive and I find it unreasonable for the price that we pay for the type of living we are provided. I understand that housing is not cheap but some companies are charging students up to \$1000 for one bedroom.” And, “I lived in Waterloo as a student in off-campus housing (rentals typically found on Kijiji or through word-of-mouth from friends) from 2012-2016 and again from 2018-present. Housing availability and prices have significantly increased in the time between 2016 and 2018.”¹⁵ Students know they are being taken advantage of – they see the effects real estate culture has on vulnerable tenants like themselves who have very little social or political power to challenge these practices individually.

Many students responding to WUSA's survey attributed some of this price inflation not to the overall market increase but to the expansion of local property companies that have bought up multiple buildings near the University of Waterloo campus. One student put it this way: "I feel like currently just a few companies have a monopoly over the student housing close to Waterloo campus. So, rent has become so expensive for a really poorly built apartment. I think my rent at Waterloo ends up being more than if I'm renting a place in Toronto for co-op."¹⁶ The idea that there is little choice in the market because many buildings are owned by one group who set all the prices is not a work of fiction or exaggerated by a handful of disgruntled students. In fact, in early March 2021 a Student Housing Real Estate Investment Fund (the Trust) bought two 'assets' (apartment buildings) only a few streets away from the University of Waterloo campus.¹⁷ This purchase is in addition to their two existing assets in Waterloo and expands the Trust's bed count from 3,394 to 4,189.¹⁸ This trust, formed purposely to make a profit from students, now owns over 4,000 bedrooms in Waterloo and limits student ability to search for housing at different price points.

The prices at the Trust's newly acquired assets are some of the highest in Waterloo: pricing for September 2021 leases start at

\$960/month for one room in a 3-bedroom unit, and \$880/month for one room in a 5-bedroom unit.¹⁹ For comparison, one property manager in Waterloo owns 13 multi-story apartment buildings and quotes \$800/month for one room in a 3-bedroom unit and \$735/month for one room in a 5-bedroom unit with move-in September 2021.²⁰ Students are finding it difficult to afford and justify the price of these units, especially when they are poorly maintained or there are other landlord issues (to which students report plenty). Even detached homes in Waterloo are usually owned by a larger property company with multiple locations, making it extremely difficult for students to escape high standardized pricing.

Despite the almost decade-long trend of increasing prices and competition in the real estate market, student housing is not often mentioned in the media besides how good the market is doing for investors. The COVID-19 pandemic may have revealed many issues students have faced for years in the housing market, but unless the system develops better protections for students (ideally more student rental assistance, better regulation of rent increases, and other policies), young people will continue to have no choice but to engage in a predatory market designed to maximize investor profit no matter the cost to students.

Municipal and Provincial Leaders should:

Strengthen the landlord dispute process. Allow prospective tenants to report *Residential Tenancies Act* violations BEFORE they move in and are locked in a lease.

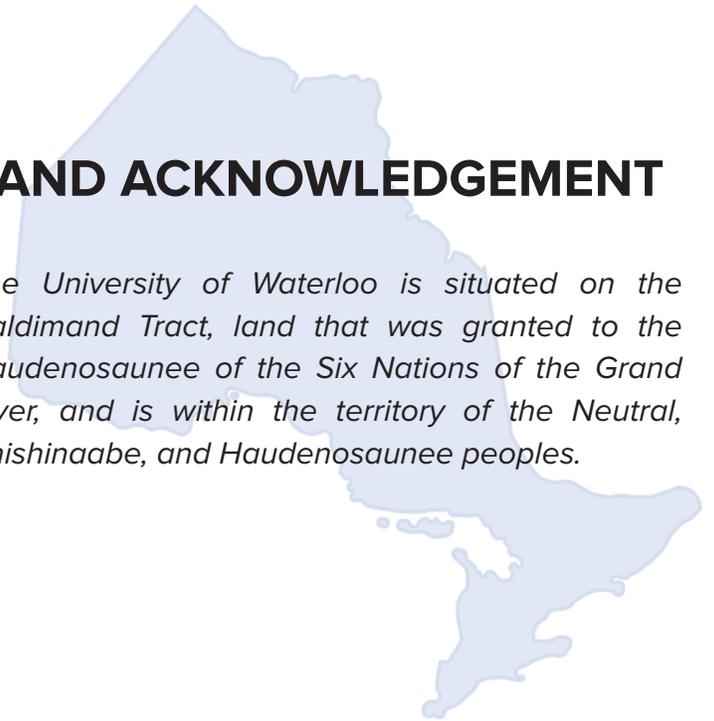
Promote the Ontario Trillium Benefit to students. Students renting on or off-campus housing are eligible for this benefit and are meant to help with rental costs, however not many students seem to know about this.

Increase awareness of lease termination rights. Students are unaware of ways they can legally end their leases instead of being forced to pay for empty units, especially during COVID-19.



LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The University of Waterloo is situated on the Haldimand Tract, land that was granted to the Haudenosaunee of the Six Nations of the Grand River, and is within the territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples.



PURPOSE-BUILT STUDENT HOUSING WITH A PURPOSE

Maanvi Dhillon & Ryan Tse
McMaster Students Union

INTRODUCTION

Student housing looks similar in many Canadian cities: old, renovated, single-family houses managed by small landlords; too many tenants crowded into a home with few bathrooms and common spaces; and generally, less than luxurious accommodations. However, this image is less accurate in places where developers have built new housing that specifically caters to students, known as ‘purpose-built student housing’. Purpose-built student housing describes private, off-campus residential units that are usually apartment-style and that offer student-friendly services and features related to entertainment, academics, security, socialization, and more. These new off-campus developments might be considered a fitting solution to the deficiencies of student off-campus housing developed from a city’s pre-existing housing stock.

10 to 12 percent of university students in the United States and Britain live in purpose-built housing, compared to just 3 percent of Canadian students.²¹ A select few regions in Canada – including the City of Waterloo²² – have a well-developed market of purpose-

built student housing, but for most other Canadian town and gown communities, students must deal with a stock of off-campus housing that fails to provide flexible or ideal choices.²³

This is the case for McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Housing has long been a point of concern for the McMaster Students Union (MSU). Our representatives have consistently advocated for policy changes to address poor off-campus housing conditions, including a municipal rental licensing program,²⁴ but it has been difficult to make significant, systemic changes, and there still remains an issue of limited housing supply that often results in students living in less-than-ideal accommodations.

Thus, the construction of new purpose-built student housing seemingly represents one solution—or at least part of a solution—in addressing insufficient student housing and poor housing conditions. However, there are unique obstacles to building private student residences in Canada, like a sparser population, smaller universities, and, in Ontario, high costs for development and construction.²⁵ Waterloo’s advanced purpose-built student housing development

is somewhat of an anomaly because the city contains two large public university campuses and consequently has a higher concentration of students.²⁶ But despite the contextual challenges, purpose-built student housing development seems to be gradually increasing in other Canadian university towns as well.

The trend is illustrated in Hamilton by the numerous proposed purpose-built student housing developments in Ward 1, where McMaster is located.²⁷ Based on our conversations with municipal representatives, it appears likely that the local housing supply will expand in coming years, especially given the consistent increase in McMaster's student admissions. It is worth noting that multiple approaches may be helpful in ensuring that students live in optimal housing conditions—for example, public policy changes, as mentioned. However, this article will specifically examine the potential increase in purpose-built student housing in the McMaster off-campus area in the coming years. Purpose-built student housing may help address issues in the existing housing landscape that our student representatives have fought for years to resolve. On the other hand, as we conducted research over the past year, we also learned of some harmful consequences that may arise if new developments do not prioritize students' needs, including decreased affordability, which is a particular concern for students. This article outlines information our MSU advocacy team gathered through literature reviews, consultations, and a student survey to demonstrate the housing situation at McMaster and offers lessons

and potential next steps for McMaster and other post-secondary communities facing similar situations.

HOUSING AT MCMASTER

Many students live in the neighbourhoods bordering McMaster's campus, including Ainslie Wood and Westdale. Westdale has a unique historic character, with most homes built before the 1930s, and development in the area has been contentious in the past.²⁸ Nonetheless, high demand has led to many of the single-family homes being renovated and divided into multiple units to accommodate large groups of students. In the MSU's Your City survey, conducted in January and February 2021, students living in Hamilton most frequently indicated that they shared housing with 5 other people (student houses usually have living rooms and other spaces converted into bedrooms to fit this many tenants). Some even live with as many as 8 or 9 others.

McMaster's student population has grown over the past few decades, including a 50 percent increase in full-time undergraduate students between 2000 and 2007;²⁹ a 19.4 percent increase in total undergraduate students between 2010 and 2019;³⁰ and an especially large first-year class admitted last fall.³¹ This rapid growth has likely put pressure on the local housing market, given that the number of undergraduates living off-campus at McMaster increased by 21.5 percent between 2010 and 2019.³² While McMaster opened a new residence building and is constructing two more, they are specifically catered to first-year and graduate students.³³ Through consultations



with McMaster officials, we learned that there are no plans to increase campus housing to accommodate non-first-year undergraduates.

The precise change in demand for off-campus housing is difficult to ascertain because McMaster's statistics about the general student population combine students living in Hamilton with those commuting from other cities like Mississauga, and they do not collect data that would distinguish these groups or identify how many students actually require off-campus housing in Hamilton. This gap in data impedes stakeholders like the MSU, developers, and the municipal government from meaningfully understanding the off-campus housing market.

To supplement this data (or lack thereof), we can consult other sources to get a better understanding of the off-campus housing market around McMaster. First, reports from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation indicated that Hamilton's West End, where most students live, had vacancy rates lower than Hamilton's overall average in both 2017 and 2018, and this rate decreased by 2.8 percent in 2017 alone;³⁴ demand was later impacted by the new first-year residence and the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁵ Further, the MSU's Your City survey data indicates an increase in average rent: in 2016, the largest share of student respondents paid a monthly rent between \$400 and \$500,³⁶ while in 2021 most paid

between \$481 and \$630. The increase in rental pricing can, in part, be attributed to the limited housing stock that decreases students' power to negotiate lower rents. In addition, both MSU and McMaster officials have anecdotally observed the consequences of limited housing, including high competition for leases.

If these indicators are correct, and if student admission rates at McMaster continue to outpace housing development, then students will ultimately shoulder the burden. Poor housing conditions, exploitative landlords, and increasing rent prices may continue to characterize McMaster's off-campus housing. Student life, ranging from well-being to academic success, is negatively affected by stressful and unsatisfactory housing, which should make this issue an urgent concern for the University. Furthermore, the City of Hamilton is impacted because students who may have been drawn to live there and contribute to the local economy might increasingly choose to commute from other cities during their university years. In addition, several students who participated in the 2021 Your City survey indicated that their impressions of Hamilton as a city are negatively impacted by their student off-campus housing experiences. It is possible that these experiences could make them less likely to live and work in Hamilton after their university years.

The following comments from the survey



were provided in response to a question that asked whether they would consider living or working in Hamilton after graduating:

- If rent prices becomes [sic] more steady and houses are renovated to meet basic standards I would consider living in Hamilton for work.
- Poor housing. A lot of old houses. Not safe.
- Hamilton is nice, but could not live in the old student housing anymore after my undergrad - too dirty and cramped.
- My biggest concern is finding affordable and liveable (as in well-kept) housing right now, especially amidst a pandemic.
- Would prefer to explore more housing options in other cities.
- Housing is not cheap. Was hard for me to find something affordable and safe. Even now I do not love the community I live in and pay more then [sic] I would like to.
- I like the city for it's [sic] location and culture but it would depend on if I could afford more preferable housing.

CONSIDERING PURPOSE-BUILT STUDENT HOUSING AS A SOLUTION

Given the issues outlined above, there is a clear need for a different approach to student housing, and new private housing developments, such as purpose-built student housing, may be a solution that will benefit students. These residences tend to be high-density buildings and are similar to campus housing in that they are designed for student life; they often offer services like gyms, laundry, or catering; social spaces like lounges; and high-quality amenities like fast Internet.³⁷ So not only will they rapidly expand the limited stock of off-campus housing, but they may provide more appropriate living conditions for students when compared to renovated, single-family homes. Further, while casual off-campus rentals may “slip under the radar of Landlord & Tenant Acts”, purpose-built student housing buildings are less precarious in this sense and therefore have greater accountability to provide the quality and safety legally required.³⁸ 73 percent of respondents to the 2021 Your City survey considered improvements to landlord regulation and housing quality as a high priority issue (assigning a score of 8 or higher on a scale of 1-10, where a 10 meant “very important” and a 1 meant “not important at all”).

Their suggestions for off-campus improvements reinforced the urgency:

- More regulations for landlords would be really helpful! Also, having a service that can help with legal issues when it comes to leases and landlords.
- We need to regulate landlords in the nearby areas for housing. They are predatory, take advantage of students, charge insane amounts, justify anything to be a room (ceilings below 6ft), raise rents aggressively year by year, charge students for repairs to the house, capitalize on laundry, parking, AC, internet (pocket money where ever they can). Allow unsafe people to live in the house. There is no recourse for students, they get scammed and live in horrible living conditions.
- Rent pricing regulations, not having to live with 6+ people in a single house, more affordable options, increased flexibility in lease agreements.

However, despite the potential benefits of purpose-built housing, the MSU is seriously concerned with the issue of unaffordability that may arise with these new developments. McMaster students are already concerned about housing costs; they want more affordable housing around campus (averaging 8.38 on scale of 1-10 for potential off-campus changes, where a 10 meant “very important” and a 1 meant “not important at all”) and 75 percent consider affordability to be one of the top three factors influencing their housing decisions. Almost half of the Your City survey respondents favoured a shared detached house rather than housing types that are common for purpose-built student housing

like apartments and condos, and several justified the choice by referencing how a higher number of roommates lowers costs. As one student commented about the local housing market, “there are plenty of condos and apartments available but they need to be more affordable [so] people can actually opt to rent”.

Purpose-built student housing has been called “a lucrative niche for investors.”³⁹ One reason is that students are considered reliable rent payers since many have financial support from parents.⁴⁰ Universities also create an exceptionally stable and resilient market because demand is consistent and even during economic downturns, students continue to require housing.⁴¹ Some investment publications cite the increasing number of international students at Canadian universities to explain rising demand for housing.⁴² They also emphasize the higher average rent prices near universities, and studies of Waterloo’s student housing market further reinforce how purpose-built student housing affects housing affordability: average rents in Waterloo’s Northdale student neighbourhood were estimated to have increased by 25 percent between 2003 and 2014 when there was a boom in student housing development and “skyrocketed ... from 2011-2016.”⁴³ Some have found that students in Waterloo pay approximately 10 percent more rent than comparable employed households.⁴⁴

As such, while the benefits of upcoming housing developments at McMaster may meet some needs, these developments may also risk contributing to more unaffordable

off-campus life and put students at a greater risk of being exploited by unfair market conditions. New developments could also lead to segregation in off-campus student populations, as those with the means to afford the higher rent of this type of luxury housing – mostly students from families with higher socioeconomic status – are more likely to concentrate in the new buildings. These potential outcomes should concern the University because an unfair housing market and segregated or insulated off-campus communities will undoubtedly harm student life. It might also affect local residents through a process some have named “studentification”, where a concentration of students changes the character of neighbourhoods by displacing other residents and raising overall prices.⁴⁵ In this case, the trend of new developments in the university area may raise average rent and home prices in surrounding neighbourhoods, and new developments may replace older, affordable housing options that serve local families. Because of this, the City should be prepared to proactively mitigate against the risk of decreased affordability that, if unaddressed, will result from increased student housing developments.

Purpose-built student housing development around McMaster has the potential to resolve persistent issues that students experience in the current off-campus housing stock and provide direly needed improvements in local housing quality. However, such development could help the situation only if people involved realistically account for students’ circumstances and needs, including

their demand for affordable housing. We believe that the involved parties should use proactive and collaborative measures to ensure that purpose-built student housing is developed and designed to be an affordable, inclusive, and high-quality housing option for students.

LESSONS AND NEXT STEPS

This year, our goal at the MSU was to better understand the condition of housing stock available to McMaster students and how development would influence that. We took away the following lessons from our experience that should inform the work done in Hamilton and apply to any town and gown community looking to improve student housing:

- 1 **Proactive student representation:** As a student union, we should be aware of housing development and intervene where possible to protect students and voice their concerns. This involves understanding and acting on housing at a more upstream level: keeping track of newly approved permits in Hamilton’s Ward 1; attending public consultations by developers and management groups; attending municipal Planning Committee meetings about developments; and forming relationships with a range of stakeholders including developers, neighbourhood associations, and city staff. While one priority would be advocating for affordability in new units, we also need to do more research to understand ideal student housing design.

2 University responsibility and accountability:

The university also has an obligation to consider students' interests off-campus. Increasing admissions without paying careful attention to the issues and limits in the local housing stock is irresponsible and exposes students to unfair, unsafe, and unpleasant housing experiences. Given their considerable resources and experience in matters like land development, universities should take responsibility to ensure that future housing development occurs in a way that benefits rather than harms students.

3 Inclusive and strategic municipal governance:

Local government has an equally important role to play in student housing development. New developments are not all good or bad, and as we outlined above, they may resolve long-standing issues in the existing housing supply around campus. However, municipal officials should make sure that students' housing concerns are heard and have influence in conversations about housing, regardless of whether students enthusiastically approve of a new project or wish to raise critical questions about the plan. Some possible avenues for engagement include involving students in processes like building permit approvals or inviting student representatives to relevant public consultations. Municipal governments should also consider using policy tools to ensure new purpose-built student housing is affordable (though this often depends on the provisions of provincial legislation in Canada); for example, inclusionary zoning policies allow cities to mandate that new

developments include a certain percentage of affordable units.⁴⁶ Additionally, municipal governments should keep working to improve bylaw enforcement and landlord regulation in the older housing stock. Purpose-built student housing is no silver bullet for past issues with landlords and housing conditions—new development has been gradual in areas like McMaster with just one university. More importantly, given the expensive rents in purpose-built student housing developments, we expect them to be inaccessible to many students who will have to live in older housing.

4 A need for collaboration:

Scholars have observed that “purpose-built, well-planned student housing is more likely to provide positive outcomes than uncoordinated development and haphazard participation of students in the local housing market.”⁴⁷ Rather than reacting to the consequences of increased private housing development after it happens, parties like the university, the city, developers, and the student union should engage with each other early on and consider mutual interests. For example, universities may offer to affiliate themselves – and their reputable brand and credibility – with private developers who agree to meet certain requirements in their housing that benefit students. Municipal governments should also allow student representatives to have a greater role in approving new purpose-built student housing developments, such as including them as a party to comment on submitted development applications. Further, successful collaboration may allow universities and municipal governments to make stronger joint demands to private

developers for shared interests, like affordability and sustainable design.⁴⁸ They may also collectively advocate to higher levels of government like the Province to implement legislation that regulates new developments.

CONCLUSION

There is a clear need to address off-campus student housing issues at McMaster and at other Canadian universities. Issues like poor housing conditions and unaffordability affect students right now and the need to address these concerns will only increase with increasing enrolment and thus a larger demand for student housing. If not addressed, issues of student housing will affect not only students but have negative implications for universities and local communities as well. Purpose-built student housing may help to address some of these

issues, and given the current influx of such developments, their effect on students should be closely monitored. They may provide significant benefits to students if they are implemented carefully. However, as discussed, there are still concerns with these developments, including affordability and their effects on nearby communities. No matter the approach taken to tackle student housing issues now and in the coming years, we must emphasize collaboration and proactive engagement to ensure that any steps taken are inclusive, strategic, and effective.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

McMaster University is situated on the traditional territories of the Mississauga and Haudenosaunee nations, and within the lands protected by the Dish With One Spoon Treaty, an agreement to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes.



THE IMPORTANCE OF TENANT EDUCATION FOR STRONGER COMMUNITIES

Owen Bourrie

Wilfrid Laurier University Students' Union

ISSUE OVERVIEW/CONTEXT

With approximately 50,000 university and college students residing in the Region of Waterloo, the student housing rental market is massive. Common dwellings in the Region included single housing units, multi-low rise residential units, and an increasing number of high-rise units. With a growing number of students looking for accommodations, there is also room for predatory landlords to take advantage of tenants who are unaware of their rights and responsibilities. Many post-secondary students are renting accommodations for the first time and are not sufficiently aware of these rights and responsibilities which can lead to issues such as them being charged for unwittingly committing by-law infractions, living in unsafe environments, and being vulnerable to deceit. Unfortunately, there are limited protections and inefficient avenues for recourse when tenants' rights are violated, including long wait times at the Landlord and Tenant Board. Fortunately, many of these issues can be mitigated by ensuring that students are aware of their rights and responsibilities as tenants. This article explores the negative implications of inadequate housing education for students in the City of Waterloo and provides recommendations for ways to close this education gap.

TENANT RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

There are a wide range of tenant responsibilities that students are often unfamiliar with. Examples of such responsibilities include shoveling their sidewalk, maintaining their yard in accordance with municipal bylaws, and taking out garbage in accordance with municipal standards. As a result of this lack of education, students are less likely to meet their obligations as tenants, which can lead to poor neighbourhood/community relationships, as well as fines. The Wilfrid Laurier University Students' Union (WLUSU) has worked with the Waterloo Town and Gown Committee to help strengthen community development and cohesion between the city's student population and permanent residents. However, some residents have noted their discontent with poorly kept student houses – which can also be the result of landlord negligence. While poorly kept student housing is rare, it can prevent community cohesion between neighbours, regardless of who is responsible. Additionally, the failure to abide by municipal bylaws can result in financial penalty that can unduly burden students. For example, failure to clear your sidewalk could result in a \$250 fine.⁴⁹

In order to promote community cohesion and prevent large fines, students need to be educated about their responsibilities.

It is also important to understand the common tenant rights that are violated by predatory landlords and the implications of these rights' violations for students and their communities. Common violations include safety concerns, such as exposed electrical wires, as well as health concerns that landlords fail to address including mould and bedbugs. Although landlords are required to ensure that units are safe and fit for living, they can fail to meet these standards due to the time and costs associated with addressing such issues. Because students are unaware of the responsibility of landlords to maintain the unit as well as how to ensure these responsibilities are met, they are often unable to hold them accountable. This leads to students living in unsafe conditions.

Additionally, there were instances at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic where predatory landlords were telling students that they had to sign agreements with additional clauses that would prevent them from accessing support that the government might afford them, such as rent and eviction freezes. As a result of insufficient education, students were under the impression that they were required to sign such agreements, which in turn created a potential barrier to accessing government supports. These are examples of issues that students face regularly and to which there are limited and insufficient legal options for redress.



ISSUES WITH EXISTING LEGAL PROTECTIONS

While more students are attempting to hold their landlords accountable, current legal protections and avenues for recourse are not sufficient. The majority of these avenues are reactive in nature, such as the Landlord and Tenant Board, where tenants are able to file complaints against their landlords for violating different aspects of their lease agreements. However, this process often moves slowly as a result of an underfunded and understaffed Board which prevents students from being able to address issues in a timely manner. Additionally, although the introduction of the standardized lease was a positive step in ensuring that students are given fair lease agreements, students continue to sign onto non-standardized lease agreements due to a lack of awareness. It is clear that, while there are protections in place, existing measures are insufficient without an accompanying push to proactively support and educate students.

CURRENT INITIATIVES

The WLUSU currently operates the Student Rights Advisory Committee (SRAC) which aims to support and educate students on matters related to landlord and tenant issues. The SRAC works to educate students by running house hunting workshops that provide advice on what students should be looking for in a rental unit and lease, as well as support for students who have disputes with their landlord. The service is funded by the students of Laurier and is overseen by the Associate Vice President of the WLUSU University Affairs department. Regardless

of the student's issue, the SRAC can provide guidance and information on all landlord and tenant matters.

Some of the major issues that SRAC commonly sees are landlords not upholding the maintenance of the rental unit and refusing to fix appliances necessary for the core function of the unit, such as heating systems. Often these issues are seen as a mere inconvenience, but some issues can severely impact the health and safety of the tenant. For example, in January of 2021, a student reached out to the SRAC when their landlord refused to promptly fix their heating system, telling the tenant that it was their responsibility to get this issue fixed. The SRAC was able to provide them with necessary information, help them draft a demand letter requesting the issue be resolved, and help them reach out to local by-law services. With the support of the SRAC, the issue was resolved, and the student avoided incurring the cost of fixing the issue and being without heat for an extended period of time. Examples like this illustrate why it is important to provide students with information as it empowers them to hold landlords accountable and ensures that they are residing in safe living conditions; if they are not aware of their rights, landlords could push the cost of these repairs onto student tenants who may assume it is their responsibility. While the SRAC does a good job of providing a reactive service, more emphasis needs to be put on proactively empowering students when it comes to landlord and tenant issues.

The City of Waterloo has also worked to

ensure that support and resources exist for tenants who are not aware of their rights and responsibilities. For example, the Region of Waterloo has [this](#) document that provides individuals with a simple breakdown of what to do in specific health and safety situations; however, there is opportunity to make more students aware of this resource. Additionally, the City of Waterloo engages with the Laurier community by setting up booths at different events as a way to engage with students and to inform them about their rights and responsibilities, but, again, there is room for this initiative to reach and engage with more students.

The above examples highlight that student associations and municipalities acknowledge that student tenants need to be aware of their rights and responsibilities and have taken steps to educate, but these efforts are currently siloed. If, however, these groups were to work together to educate students, there is a greater chance that students rights would be better protected and that they would be more attentive to their responsibilities.

WHAT CAN STUDENT

Educating students about their rights and responsibilities as tenants will empower them to hold their landlords accountable to maintain safe living conditions and proactively prevent them from unknowingly violating city by-laws.

ASSOCIATIONS AND MUNICIPALITIES DO TO SOLVE THIS ISSUE?

Student associations and local municipalities can work together to help educate students about their rights and responsibilities as tenants. Both student associations and local municipalities have tools at their disposal to educate students but there is a gap between what resources exist and what students know. It is important to note that neither student associations nor municipalities should be or are best equipped to deal with all matters relating to landlord and student tenant relations on their own. For example, municipalities have knowledge about the relevant bylaws and safety standards that are important for students to be aware of but lack the means to communicate such information to students. Conversely, student associations have the ability to communicate this information to students but lack all of the necessary knowledge that students need. Collaboration between these two groups will inevitably increase the quality and dissemination of information to benefit students.

During the WLUSU's 2021 Local Advocacy Week, student leaders met with Waterloo City Councillors and the Mayor to talk about how the City could work with the student associations to educate students on tenant rights and responsibilities. The WLUSU recommended creating a partnership with the City's By-Law Services Division, which was received positively by the City of Waterloo. While the plan has yet to be confirmed, the goal is to centralize key landlord and tenant information and relevant city by-laws onto one single page. This one-pager will include contact information about who to call to report specific health and safety concerns (e.g., broken heating system and faulty fire alarms), what responsibilities tenants might have (e.g., garbage and snow removal), as well as helpful FAQs (e.g., when is my landlord allowed to increase my rent and by how much?). Additional information on provincial-level protections could also be included to ensure recipients are provided with comprehensive information. Student outreach volunteers organized through the WLUSU would then be able to launch

a "Doorknocker campaign" and go out into the community to provide student tenants with this information. Additionally, the WLUSU would be able to share this information on social media platforms to expand the initiatives' reach.

Educating students about their rights and responsibilities as tenants will empower them to hold their landlords accountable to maintain safe living conditions and proactively prevent them from unknowingly violating city by-laws. Municipalities have important knowledge that can help reinforce tenant rights and responsibilities that can lead to safer dwellings and student associations have the ability to effectively share this information with their students. If the two groups work together, students will be further empowered to protect themselves, which will have positive implications for our communities as a whole.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Wilfrid Laurier University and its campuses are located on the Haldimand tract, traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples. This land is part of the Dish with One Spoon Treaty between the Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe peoples and symbolizes the agreement to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes.



NO FOOD FOR THOUGHT: HOW FOOD INSECURITY AND PERIOD POVERTY HOLD STUDENTS BACK

Hope Tuff-Berg
Brock University Students' Union

That sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach is not unfamiliar to students. It can be the result of anxiety before a test, anticipation to receive their marks, stress over making OSAP payments...or hunger. For many students, the financial stress of when they'll be able to buy their next meal or access needed period products is unseen, unheard, and rarely discussed. The direct correlation between food security and period poverty is often seen as puzzling despite its persistence, particularly in the Niagara Region where food banks are at maximum capacity with the few period products available to those who need them. There is fear of embarrassment around asking for food or period products from food banks, resulting in students going for days without food or using fresh period products, rendering little awareness of the very real problem of food insecurity and period poverty faced by students in Niagara and beyond. Further, the reduction of student job opportunities and increased financial pressures caused by COVID-19 make this conversation significantly pressing and necessary.

Post-secondary education culture has normalized ramen noodle-diets, skipping meals, and drinking absurd amounts of coffee to curb appetites and stay awake – especially when students are looking to avoid paying what can amount to one hour's wages on a meal at the cafeteria. When students budget to afford to eat they are often sacrificing their nutrition and the essential vitamins, fats, and proteins they need for their brain development. Without them, the structures in the brain that allow students to retain information, memorize theories, or articulate their thoughts in an essay are weak; hindering their ability to learn.⁵⁰ Even though students may signal that they're feeling fine, poor dieting habits have led students to develop acute acid reflux, eating disorders, and nutrient deficiencies that take time to recover from.

When menstruators signal that they're feeling fine, they may be hiding shame or anxiety over their financial state that prevented them from buying pads or tampons this month or forced them to cut their grocery budget or other expenses

to buy period products instead. The lived experiences and statistics of students who are food insecure and/or experiencing period poverty are essential to starting this conversation, raising awareness, and advocating for change.

Household food insecurity refers to the inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints.⁵¹ Although food insecurity was initially understood as a food problem, more research has made it clear that the deprivation experienced by individuals who are food insecure is not confined to food. Rather, the food challenges that define household food insecurity indicate much more significant material deprivation, including housing, tuition, transportation, prescription medication and other costs.⁵² Recent studies suggest that nearly one-third of Canadian university students struggle with food insecurity on a daily basis,⁵³ calling for urgent response from governments, institutions, and stakeholders to support students as they struggle financially, even more so now due to COVID-19.



Brock University Student's Union has noticed the effects of food insecurity on students in Niagara. A recent survey revealed that 37 percent of students report "skipping meals" or compromising on the quality of food they ate.⁵⁴ Nearly half of students surveyed said that they had forgone healthy food to pay for books, tuition fees and rent.⁵⁵ This addresses a pressing, underlying issue that students and residents of the Niagara Region face – 15.1 percent of whom experience food insecurity.⁵⁶ Food insecurity in Niagara Region is experienced at higher rates than the provincial and national rates at 13.3 and 12.8 percent, respectively.⁵⁷

Not only are residents of the Niagara Region experiencing an especially high rate of food insecurity, but period poverty is also rising. Period poverty occurs when a menstruator cannot afford safe, hygienic period products and must resort to alternative means to manage their periods. A 2018 study on Canadian menstruators under 25 revealed that one in three could not afford period products and were left to find alternatives to manage their periods, including reusing pads or tampons, or using toilet paper and even, in extreme cases, socks – all of which can lead to toxic shock syndrome, a deadly health complication.

The severity of period poverty is especially felt by students. Research indicates that nearly one in seven Canadian menstruators under 25 have either left school early, or missed school entirely, because they did not have access to period products.⁵⁸ Further, this research revealed that 70 percent don't attend work or social gatherings, and 83 percent don't fully take part in activities when on their period.⁵⁹ This silent, grim

reality faced by menstruators is largely due to the high fees of period products that, on average, cost 87 dollars per year per person, depending on the products used as well as the frequency, duration and amount of one's menstrual cycle, which varies for each individual.⁶⁰

The cost to menstruate with safety and dignity comes at a higher price to northern and rural menstruators, who can be expected to pay double the price for a box of pads or tampons compared to those in urban centres like Toronto. In Indigenous communities where a box of tampons runs from 16 dollars to more than 45 dollars, period poverty is compounded by a lack of food security and access to clean water.⁶¹ Further, the low supply of period products at food banks and shelters creates even more barriers for homeless and low-income menstruators to access the products they need. Although there is little research available on period poverty in the Niagara Region, the rise of advocacy groups like Period Promise, the Redbox Project, Period Purse, Brock University's on-campus food bank, Food First, and Brock University student clubs like Brock Menstruation REDefined indicate a growing concern within their communities. Together, they have put forward recommendations and opportunities to lift others out of period poverty. Likewise, in Spring 2021, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) released a set of recommendations to address student food

insecurity and period poverty that strive to ensure that students have the resources needed to learn, study, and succeed.

OUSA's recommendations were approved by students at our Spring 2021 General Assembly, where over 80 students across seven post-secondary institutions came together to edit, revise and pass the Student Health & Wellness Policy Paper. One of the recommendations included is for the provincial government to establish a grant for students to access for the purpose of addressing their food security.⁶² Another is to create a food sustainability certificate for student-led food banks to highlight

The cost to menstruate with safety and dignity comes at a higher price to northern and rural menstruators

resources and cost-effective strategies along with a grant that student-run food banks can use to maintain the infrastructure required to provide nutritious options. Additionally,

OUSA recommends that the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should partner with the Council of Ontario Universities and Meal Exchange to complete a system analysis of food insecurity and systems on university campuses.⁶³ If adopted, these recommendations will make serious advancements in providing students with the resources and opportunities to improve their own access to food security on campus – and turn down the volume of grumbling stomachs in class.

OUSA also makes recommendations to address period poverty, including asking the Ministry of Health to expand OHIP to cover the cost of menstrual products, up

to 200 dollars per year, for all people who need them.⁶⁴ The Period Purse, based out of Toronto, advocates for corporations, governments, and institutions to provide free period products on-site, which has led some colleges and universities to implement free period product dispensers in their washrooms.⁶⁵ In 2021, Brock University Student's Union partnered with Brock University to install six free dispensers in female, male, and gender-neutral washrooms across campus. Brock has also made adjustments to their existing coin operated machines to make them accessible at no cost in response to the pressing need for greater access to period products in Niagara.⁶⁶ However, advocacy groups have made it clear that we should not only be advocating to corporations, agencies, and post-secondary institutions. Organizations like Menstruation REDefined recognize that young menstruators are also subject to the stigma of period poverty, and are petitioning governments to provide free period products in elementary schools.⁶⁷

As we look to recover from COVID-19 and the financial hardships faced by students, greater advocacy for food security and menstrual equity will be essential to create better opportunities for students to learn, study, and succeed. Further research and data collection will also be necessary to better understand the changing trends of food insecurity and period poverty by geographic region and demographic and direct future policy recommendations. Overall, it is clear that students understand these widespread challenges in their regions, are highly capable of organizing, and will demand policy change; period.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Brock University is located on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples, many of whom continue to live and work here today. This territory is covered by the Upper Canada Treaties and is within the land protected by the Dish with One Spoon Treaty.

THE RESOURCES ARE THERE. OR ARE THEY?: ON HEALTH & WELLNESS RESOURCE COMMUNICATION IN OUR COMMUNITIES

Callista Ryan

University Students' Council at Western University

During campus elections, student leaders use their campaigns to highlight key issues that affect students. A yearly discussion during election season is the accessibility and availability of health and wellness resources – those that support an individual's physical, mental, and social well-being.⁶⁸ Health and wellness is holistic and intersectional and can include accessing parks and recreation, visiting a health practitioner, or finding the professional you need for a specific situation. Everyday, community members, including students, are managing financial insecurity, accessibility needs, challenges to their mental health and more, all of which impact their overall wellbeing. Access to a psychologist, a food bank, or a fitness class can be critical for a person's health and wellness and are examples of services provided by universities and community-based resources. However, these services may not be utilized by those who need them most. To address this, universities and communities should critically analyze how accessible and well-communicated these resources are.

Are the resources really there if they are not being accessed?

Universities and the cities they are situated in typically see a large influx of new and returning students every September. The student experience can be a rewarding one, but it is not without its challenges. Many students face unexpected or unanticipated trials with newfound independence (and possibly a more distant familial support system) and the additional stress of balancing a healthy lifestyle with the pressure to perform well academically.⁶⁹ When students are navigating new, unsuspecting, or additional challenges, the resources provided by the university and the local community can provide a great support system. However, most resources are not consolidated or adequately explained. Further, students may be impeded from utilizing services due to questions of cost.

For example, most webpages that link important health and wellness services at Western University do not provide clarity

or information on whether provincial health insurance or student health insurance covers the service (or if it is free to use for students). The confusion and inability to find a resource can prevent a student from accessing a service when they need it. In addition, confusion over what the best possible service is can be challenging. Questions on the difference between counselling, psychotherapy, and psychiatry are not explained and can lead to students booking an appointment where they ultimately get redirected to another service (at Western we often refer to this as, “the goose chase”). Monitoring and updating resources is important too. On Western’s “Enhance Your Wellness” page, the drop-down section for “Eating Disorders Support Group” includes no resources and is instead occupied by placeholder text.⁷⁰ Communicating resources is just as important as providing the resources in the first place. If students cannot find, access, or are discouraged from accessing a resource, a valuable resource may go under-used (which could put both the student and the program’s longevity at risk).

Online platforms for municipal governments, universities, and student unions have the opportunity and audience to centralize, sort, and provide information to those accessing, or looking to access, health and wellness resources. Often, finding the correct resource can be daunting. If

students and other community members have trouble accessing and finding the resources they need to navigate a difficult situation, the respective issue can worsen overtime. Prioritizing communication and access so individuals can find and use the resources they need can build stronger, more resilient communities where everyone has the opportunity to bounce back, prevent distress, and ultimately thrive.

Assessing the current communications strategies of large community stakeholders – specifically universities and municipalities – for sharing information about available health and wellness resources is a great place to start. For example, Western has a Mental Health and Wellness Resource Guide for students available on their “Health and Wellness” and “Student Experience” webpages, which also provide links to additional health and wellness resources.⁷¹ However, while Western does provide the information students need, the resources are not well-defined or organized in an easily accessible way. By contrast, the University of Waterloo goes a few steps further with an excellent layout and organization of resources. Waterloo categorizes different forms of wellness from foods and nutrition, life events, sexual health, and spiritual health (to name a few).⁷² There is an explanation provided for each topic and each link includes in-depth information on the topic, links to popular

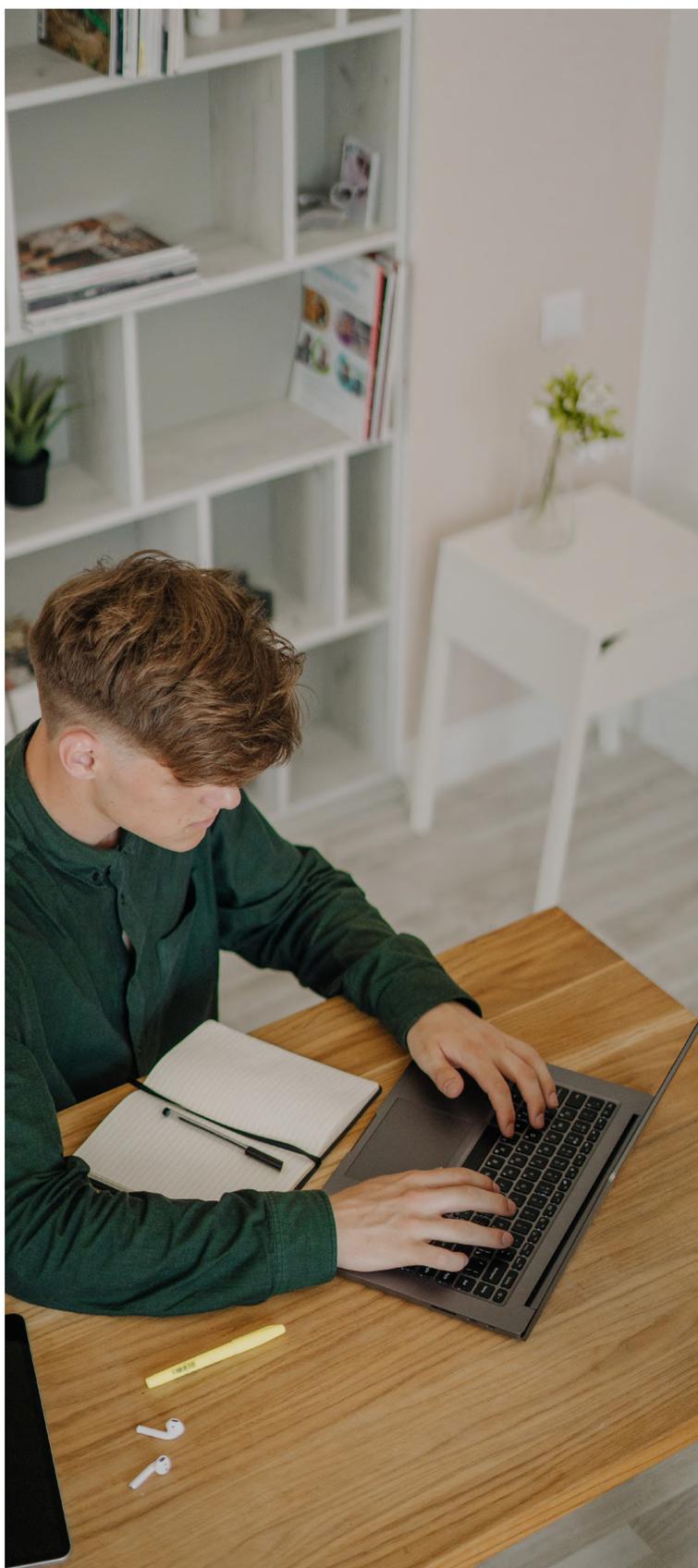
▾ Eating Disorders Support Group

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figure 1: Screenshot of Western University’s “Enhance your Wellness” webpage.

subtopics, and incorporates both on- and off-campus resources. The information is well sorted, explained, and includes relevant and updated links. A student looking for information on health and wellness will likely find the information they need quickly, along with a written explanation to better identify if the topic and linked resources will meet their needs. To ensure that all students can find and access the health and wellness resources they need, universities should place a greater emphasis on strategies that prioritize student-friendly and accessible communications of these resources.

Municipal governments also have an important platform to do the same for their community and ensure that all community-members, including students, can benefit from easy connection and access to health and wellness resources. For example, the City of Toronto created a searchable database that serves as a platform for all resources available across the city.⁷³ The database consolidates over 100 services and includes key topic headlines that users can click for more detailed information. Further, the webpage provides advice for how to search the database with key words (which is useful for those less accustomed to digital platforms). However, not all municipalities make information about health and wellness resources as accessible. This is the case with the City of London where online information about health and wellness resources is disconnected and poorly organized. For example, to find mental health supports on London’s municipal website, an individual would have to click through “Life in London”>”Community Services”>”Homeless Prevention”>



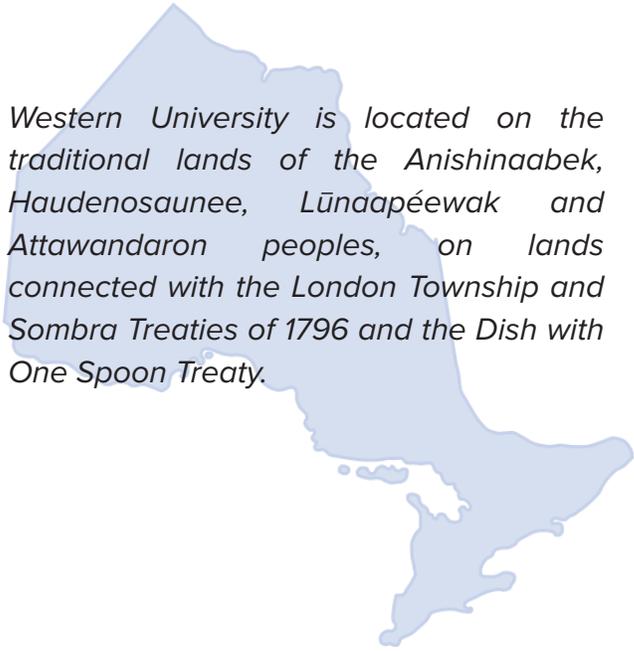
“Housing”>“Community Programs and Supports”>“Mental Health and Addiction Services Resources”> “Mental Health Support”.⁷⁴ This makes the mental health resources difficult to find as they are categorized under “homeless prevention” and while information about mental health resources should be available to those approaching their search from this context, the need for mental health resources extends beyond housing insecurity. This lengthy and confusing process leads to a list of only three organizations: the Canadian Mental Health Association, Kids Help Phone, and Reach Out. Of the three resources listed, Reach Out is the only regionally-based service which obscures the fact that within the City of London there are other mental health resources available, illustrating a clear gap in how these resources are communicated. The ability for London to connect its residents to services and resources is impaired by poor web design and gaps in resource compilation.

Students and community members should have equitable, comprehensive access to information about available health and wellness supports, but the current gaps reveal an opportunity to push for better health and wellness communications from their institutions and municipalities. As a starting point, we need municipalities to provide a well-organized online platform with information on available health and wellness resources in their jurisdictions. The information provided should include definitions of the services provided and associated costs (if any). Defining

terminology can also help connect individuals to the correct resource more quickly and directly so there is less bouncing around – which is definitely appreciated by students during midterm or exam seasons. There should also be a focus on communicating which services are available for free and which practitioners offer free intake appointments. Including information that will help an individual make the best choice for their health and wellness will support their endeavor in getting the resources they need more efficiently. However, until municipalities pick up this mantle, universities and student unions can fill this gap by investing in strategic and user-friendly resource communications. This not only supports students, but it sets an example by showing our communities what we want to see from our municipalities. Another advantage of consolidating available resources is that it can uncover gaps in services. Does a city have enough free legal clinics? Are there enough resources that provide free or discounted services for low-income residents? Does a borough or neighbourhood have an affordable or accessible health clinic? Are there community-based mental health resources close to the university campus? This allows us to better analyze and assess the scope, accessibility, and availability of community health and wellness resources. It also provides student unions with additional leverage to advocate for better services from their respective administrations and municipal governments (maybe even provincial and federal ones too!).

Communications is more than just a website, ad, or social media post. It is a medium to share. To listen. To support our community. Prioritizing health and wellness resource communications can improve accessibility and simultaneously de-stigmatize support services as well. Our communities depend on municipalities and universities to share the information they need to get the support they deserve. We need to prioritize investing in strategies to enhance communication of health and wellness resources. Especially with COVID-19, the importance of online resources and accessibility has only increased. Municipalities, student unions, and universities are important hubs for information sharing, increasing awareness of resources, and educating on terminology, as well as offering an avenue to find the gaps in a community which are essential for the health and wellness of everyone.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



Western University is located on the traditional lands of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak and Attawandaron peoples, on lands connected with the London Township and Sombra Treaties of 1796 and the Dish with One Spoon Treaty.

ALLYSHIP IN GOVERNMENT AND ITS HYPER-CRITICALITY IN MUNICIPAL WORK

Hae Eun (Hayley) Lee

University Students' Council at Western University

Allyship has become a buzzword; we all know it. Lately it seems as if it is simply a term thrown around as a blanket statement to curate a certain image of an organization or leader. But I ask you, the reader, a question... Do you know what allyship is? Or means? Do you know how important it is to advocacy and policy work? And, most importantly, are you aware of how allyship impacts the work done by student leaders and municipal representatives in our communities?

As a disabled queer woman of colour, both allyship and advocacy have been my life – and most recently as the Associate Vice President (AVP) of Public Affairs at the USC, I have become acutely aware of how integral allyship is in communications and advocacy. In particular, I have realized its exigency in municipal work.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines allyship as, “the state or condition of being an ally: supportive association with another person or group.”⁷⁵ With greater educational and representative content being disseminated on social media platforms, society has become much more aware of how allyship can manifest in

various ways. Further, we have learned how allyship is specific to each marginalized group. Different groups require specific forms of support and advocacy – and as leaders pushing anti-racism along with equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), it is our responsibility to learn and educate ourselves about how to do so.

Allyship is necessary at all levels of advocacy and policy work; however, during my term as AVP I have worked with all forms of government and have recognized the heightened criticality of allyship in municipal government. Municipal advocacy work primarily consists of working on a local and direct level with communities. The intimate connection fostered requires a crucial understanding of allyship to ensure that all stakeholders feel safe to participate and work collaboratively.

Subsequently, these direct interactions and experiences can shape citizens' understanding of their municipal government and its reputation in their local communities. These personal experiences can then be carried across a multitude of networks and other levels of government. For example, municipal politicians have

the power as allies to translate their support into greater community action and involvement. Personally, I have experienced that politicians who are active allies better engage with citizens and are more likely to encourage them to get involved within their community.

Thus, through allyship, leaders can effectively support their community's initiatives, cultivating a safe and welcoming culture. It is through the practice of allyship that safe spaces – physical, emotional, and mental – can be formed and sustained for years.

Furthermore, although not always evident, these relationships, networks, and actions ultimately drive national change. Practicing allyship at the municipal level creates the groundwork that higher levels of government can build upon and educate themselves through. Allyship on the municipal front can set the tone and expectations for what leadership looks like across all levels of government. This can strengthen the education, understanding, embodiment, and practice of allyship in these spaces – positively impacting marginalized communities and how they feel about and in these organizations.

Moreover, what occurs at the municipal level is usually the most accessible to a community. For instance, city councillors will organize town halls in which citizens are given opportunities to sit on municipal sub-committees, and public participation and debates are frequent, open, and encouraged. Additionally, the municipal government is responsible for actions that more directly impact citizens' everyday lives, such as garbage collection, green bins, snow removal, and transit.

It is through the practice of allyship that safe spaces – physical, emotional, and mental – can be formed and
sustained for years.

Therefore, allyship is once again even more critical to municipal government. If the supposedly most accessible form of government is not accessible, how can we as leaders and as citizens expect it to change provincially or federally? By ensuring allyship is taught and actively practiced, leaders can ensure government work and advocacy is truly accessible, approachable, and accommodating to all groups in their community.

There is no allyship without the inclusion and integration of accessibility and the dismantling of ableism. For instance, leaders should always wear an accessibility lens when practicing allyship and normalize this in any form of government or advocacy work. One example of this would be always having sign language interpreters present at events. This allows for those who are hard of hearing or deaf individuals to still understand and participate in the ongoing communication. Likewise, politicians should consistently provide online recordings to those who could not or cannot physically attend, in addition to hosting activities and events in spaces that have accessible infrastructure such as ramps and gender neutral bathrooms.



Beyond physical inaccessibility, language inaccessibility is also a barrier and should be considered in communications, including city agendas. In particular, for citizens who do not speak English as their first language, providing translations is one way to increase accessibility. Additionally, the heavy usage of political jargon can intimidate, discourage, and divert citizens' attention and passion to get involved. By being conscious of inaccessible language, politicians can work towards enabling citizens to confidently engage with, influence, and form their institutions.

Furthermore, COVID-19 has forced all of us to recognize the barriers that make our governments inaccessible. A silver lining to this is that it has pushed for all stakeholders to rethink how the government interacts with citizens and strengthen accessibility and allyship in their work. These changes have been extremely influential in improving citizen participation and agency, cultivating a more inclusive space and mobilizing civic engagement.

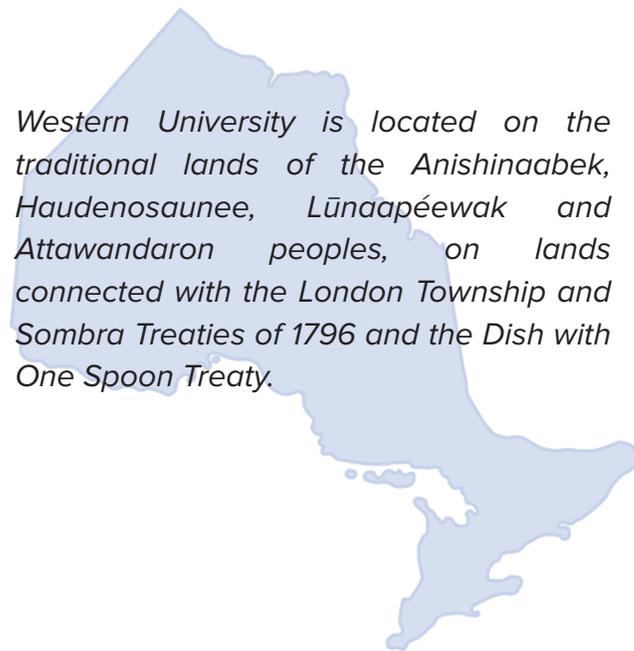
Ultimately, allyship should always be centred in any campaign, event, policy, or advocacy work. It is intersectional, and at times, complex. However, it is through the active education and practice of allyship that all municipal leaders and stakeholders can create, provide, and sustain safe spaces to strengthen their communities. No matter your position or role, you have power, and with power comes responsibility.

Three ways you can be a better ally in the municipal level of government as a politician, community leader, or as any form of advocate are:

- 1** Help promote and attend different events organized by marginalized groups and simply listen. Listen and broaden your understanding, perspectives, and networks.
- 2** Understand that your marginalized friends, peers, and coworkers are not your tokens. Do not ask these individuals to be your sole educator or share their own personal trauma(s) as a means for you to learn. Dedicate time for yourself to read and listen to the myriad resources available for free on the internet.
- 3** Understand your own privileges and unconscious biases – be aware, alert, and active in deconstructing negative social norms and ideals and be open to learning and unlearning.

Ultimately, allyship is something that we as individuals need to make a natural, automatic, and collaborative responsibility. Allyship improves our leadership, it makes us better at advocacy and policy work, but most importantly, allyship makes us better friends, co-workers, peers, strangers, and humans. Allyship transforms our society and can save lives. By being active allies through a collective effort and action, we ensure our communities on a local and national level are supported and empowered. Allyship-focused leadership on a municipal level starts the catalyst and sets the foundation for the work, tone, and culture that provincial and national levels of government can continue to build upon.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



Western University is located on the traditional lands of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak and Attawandaron peoples, on lands connected with the London Township and Sombra Treaties of 1796 and the Dish with One Spoon Treaty.

THIRD SPACES IN THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

Matthew Nicholas Schwarze & Catherine Dong
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For over a year now, students at the University of Waterloo and most other institutions across the province have been forced to confine the three core aspects of their lives – living, studying, and socializing – to single buildings, or even single rooms. Since physical campuses shut down to students in March 2020, living, studying, and socializing have all occurred under one roof and in one space.

Prior to March 2020, students had the freedom to move between spaces as desired. They lived in residences, apartments, and houses, having the option to go home and eat, sleep, and study as their days necessitated – these were their ‘first spaces,’ where they lived and interacted in private with some of their immediate family and friends.

Each day, students would attend lectures in large halls surrounded by their peers before retreating to a lounge or library for further study. These ‘second spaces,’ which also included the workplace for those who were employed or were in co-op work-study programs, are where students worked and studied.

In these environments, students were surrounded by fellow students, coworkers, and other professional relationships.

‘Third spaces’ are broadly defined as the environments that are distinct from first and second spaces; they are the physical spaces where we engage with society around us and establish a sense of belonging. For students, third spaces are often student centres, club rooms, restaurants, and nightclubs, however the global pandemic has rendered many of these spaces inaccessible to us.

With the revolving door of lockdowns, shutdowns, and stay-at-home orders over the last year, these physical third spaces have become out of reach. In some cases, these have been temporary closures in response to the coronavirus pandemic – in others, business has been permanently shuttered due to the stunted traffic through their doorways. With all of this has come a sudden lifestyle shift for both students and the rest of society. Separating the distinct aspects of the three spaces has become incredibly difficult, and this third space has become a predominantly virtual one.

Virtual spaces for socialization have commonly existed for quite some time, taking several forms including online forums, social media platforms, messaging clients, and gaming platforms. However, since the beginning of the pandemic, students at Waterloo have increasingly turned to platforms like Reddit and Discord for community interaction like never before. While virtual third spaces used to complement physical ones, they have now, for many students, become the only way to relax in an environment distinct from their homes and workspaces.

In a world where our second places have moved online as well, independent third spaces have continued to become more and more difficult to establish. We spend our days moving between our beds and a kitchen table, and our school and work operate on the same devices that we use to access any potential third spaces. As this pandemic drags on, students have little choice but to spend their waking hours in different computer windows, hopping between video calls and message clients that all feel the same. When your co-op interviews take place in the same space as a game night with friends – which very likely all happen in your bedroom – your first, second, and third spaces become blurred in a way they were never meant to be.

These online spaces are the third spaces of our time. However, each time provincial restrictions are loosened, and doors are opened, there has been a surge to return to the physical spaces that have been shut down for many months.

While these places look different than they did before – public health measures have necessitated this – but given every opportunity, we have seen outdoor restaurant patios and local parks filled with people eager to return to the physical third spaces that are distinct from where we live the rest of our lives.

This prompts the question of what third spaces will look like beyond the pandemic. Wherever and however possible, governments and local businesses have attempted to restore pre-pandemic third spaces or create new ones that balance safety and social needs.

Many spaces, such as gyms, restaurants, and theatres have been modified to comply with public health requirements – this is an uninteresting, pragmatic change that is unlikely to last beyond the pandemic. More interesting, however, is the increased utilization of outdoor spaces that today pose a much lower risk of transmission and tomorrow hold the potential to be the preferred recreational space of many people, students and non-students alike.

Here in Waterloo, the regional and municipal governments have experimented with closing streets to vehicular traffic to widen the availability of outdoor dining and other social activities, creating inviting third spaces reserved for pedestrians. These streets are at the heart of local municipalities: designed to move traffic between arterial roads, they are now destinations themselves in the uptowns and downtowns of Waterloo and other cities across Canada.



Similar concepts have been explored by isolated municipalities in the past, but this wide trial across the country is unprecedented, and many residents of Waterloo, including students, are happy with the change and excited to see these highly flexible and central third spaces last beyond the pandemic as a positive relic of the time.

Other effects on our future third spaces may be less about urban planning and businesses, and instead more about social preferences.

Long before the pandemic, students would spend some of their social time outside, but most students still largely frequented indoor establishments as their third spaces. Over the last year, however, the limitations and public health recommendations of the pandemic have pushed many to look outdoors for the vast majority of their social time. Encouraged by blue skies, students flock to Waterloo Park – of course accessorized appropriately with masks and two-metre distancing – in numbers that look convincingly pre-pandemic, despite the far lower student population the city currently supports.

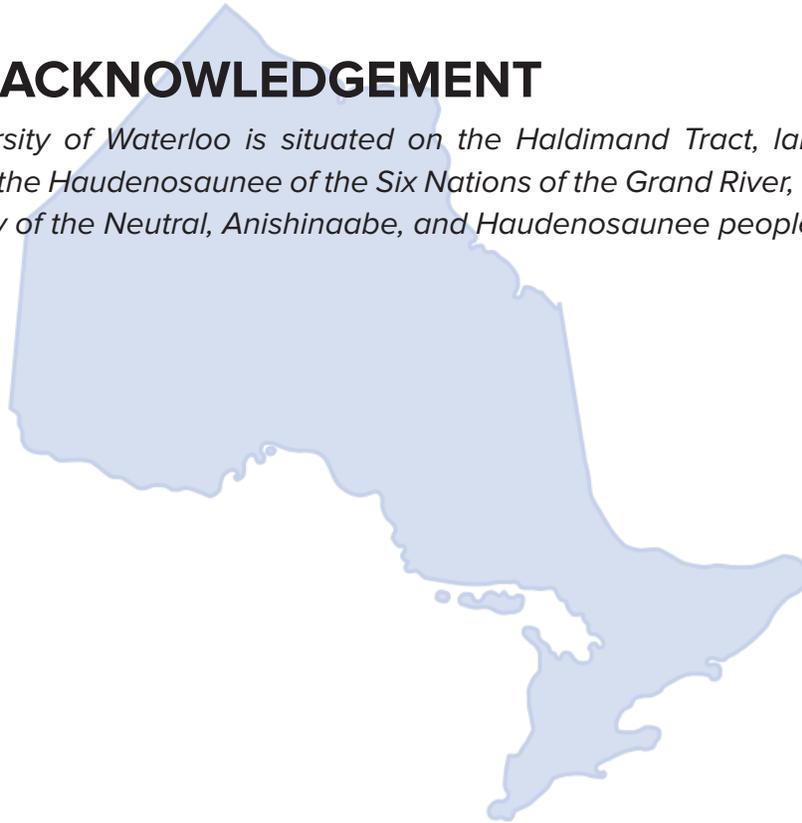
n a more decentralized fashion, more than a few students have taken up social fitness activities amid the public health crisis, and their desire to stay connected with friends has seen them embracing a level of physical activity they would not have previously considered when games nights or movies were an option. Whether this tendency sticks around post-pandemic remains to be seen, but this shift that accompanied the warmer weather may be another vestige of the pandemic that leaves us counterintuitively healthier and happier than we would have been otherwise.

For students especially, the people they engage with in their first, second, and third spaces often overlap – their roommates, peers, and friends are one and the same – so the ability to physically differentiate the spaces they interact with is incredibly valuable. The loss of many of students' habitual third spaces has taken its toll, but through the months, they have gratefully found ways to manage and replace what they can.

These virtual third spaces that we have built and strengthened over the past year will likely live on, and there is no doubt that they have great potential to enrich many people's lives moving forward. However, if the bustling tables and sidewalks around our campus plaza are anything to draw conclusions from, students are gearing up to return to our physical third spaces as soon as they get the green light.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The University of Waterloo is situated on the Haldimand Tract, land that was granted to the Haudenosaunee of the Six Nations of the Grand River, and is within the territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples.



UNDERGRADUATE EPIDEMIOLOGY: USING PEDAGOGY TO CONTRIBUTE TO MUNICIPAL COVID-19 RESPONSE

Luke Horton

Trent Durham Student Association

The medical study of diseases and epidemics, epidemiology, has been relevant since the early 1800s.⁷⁶ The importance of this field of study is to generate works of scholarship about epidemics to aid in the generation of new methods and procedures to limit the spread of diseases—making it especially important in our understanding of COVID-19. Over the last year, universities like Trent University (Durham GTA; “Trent Durham”) have worked tirelessly to incorporate COVID-19-specific epidemiology into undergraduate learning and to bridge the divide between academic study and community response. Through these efforts, Trent Durham, and its partners have contributed significant support to address municipal-level issues that have been raised in the Greater Toronto Area because of COVID-19. Specifically, the university has done a great job creating an “undergraduate epidemiology” by bringing the pandemic into the academic sphere and connecting this learning to understanding and responding to municipal-level issues by creating and implementing new project courses; revamping existing academic courses; and incorporating extra-curricular collaborative projects into the undergraduate experience.

CITY IDEA LAB COURSE

In April 2018, the Durham Workforce Authority (DWA) published a statistical report detailing the much-needed collaboration between Canadian cities, local organizations, and residents. The report described Oshawa as “a community divided along [the] lines of social and economic inequality, with distinct neighbourhood boundaries helping to define these divisions.”⁷⁷ The social and economic barriers defining the City at the time limited the creation and development of solutions to municipal-level issues—namely, developments in industry and the labour market, health care and education investments, infrastructure, and diversity and inclusion.⁷⁸ Many of these issues persist today, and the outbreak of COVID-19 has meant that work being done to address these issues has become a challenge and new issues have emerged. Luckily, academic institutions in the region have taken on these challenges and are contributing to solving these issues.

On May 14, 2018, the project “City Idea Lab” was officially founded.⁷⁹ City Idea Lab is a “curriculum-based and experiential learning program designed for creatively minded

“It’s exciting to see how providing experiential learning opportunities for students can lead to the improvement of the lives of residents in Oshawa and the surrounding region.”

– Dr. Steven Murphy, President and Vice-Chancellor of Ontario Tech University

university and college students. Students [...] work directly with faculty and City staff to co-design potential solutions to specific City-identified projects.”⁸⁰ In the summer of 2020, the project came together with Trent Durham and Ontario Tech University to launch an online course—“Strengths-based and Cooperative Community Development during Extended Crises”—for upper-year students.⁸¹ This was the first bi-institutional course offered by City Idea Lab that was offered to students of various programs at both Trent Durham and Ontario Tech University.⁸² Students in this course examined the municipal-level issues identified in the 2018 DWA report in the context of COVID-19 and developed solutions to these issues. Course instructor and political studies professor, Brandon Tozzo, explained that students pitched their ideas to City staff, and some of their ideas will be implemented at the municipal level.⁸³ Some of the proposed ideas included an internship program for Black, Indigenous, and youth of colour (“BIPOC youth”); enhancement of website information for the non-profit sector; and a website for older adults to educate them in a digital literacy program.⁸⁴

“It’s exciting to see how providing experiential learning opportunities for students can lead to the improvement of the lives of residents in Oshawa and the

surrounding region.”⁸⁵ – Dr. Steven Murphy, President and Vice-Chancellor of Ontario Tech University

CITYSTUDIO DURHAM

CityStudio Durham (CSD) is a community-led project aimed at helping post-secondary students learn and apply skills to projects with real-life applications. Some notable project partners include Trent Durham, Ontario Tech University, Durham College, the Regional Municipality of Durham, and Durham Regional Police Service.⁸⁶ CSD’s mission “is to innovate, co-create and experiment within municipal services, while teaching students the skills needed to succeed in today’s economy and inspire action in the community and government.”⁸⁷ Not only does this initiative help to mitigate the social and financial problems highlighted in the City Idea Lab course, it also offers extra-curricular collaborative projects for students to engage in. Initially, the project was created to focus on issues in the Durham Region, specifically related to wastewater infrastructure, municipal planning, long-term care, social housing, and climate change.⁸⁸ More recently, CSD has applied a COVID-19 lens, focusing on pre-existing issues with an emphasis on what can be done during and after the pandemic.

One of these collaborative projects is “Redesigning Durham’s Urban Core”, a research project that “focuses on the aftermath and future planning of urban cores in light of attracting citizens to the downtown area, keeping in mind social distancing, should there be another outbreak.”⁸⁹ This project is particularly relevant to support the health and safety of those living in Oshawa’s urban core during the pandemic. According to a report from Public Health Ontario: “The most ethno-culturally diverse neighbourhoods in Ontario, primarily those concentrated in large urban areas, are experiencing disproportionately higher rates of COVID-19 and related deaths compared to neighbourhoods that are the less diverse.”⁹⁰ Based on statistics from 2016, out of the 159,458 residents living in Oshawa, roughly 23 percent, or 37,375 residents, live in urban areas.⁹¹ Considering that there is only one residential building housing 200 students on the Trent Durham campus, many students live off-campus in the surrounding urban areas.⁹² Bringing COVID-19 response into the academic sphere is an important way to equip undergraduate students with accurate and adequate knowledge of how to safely govern themselves in their communities. CSD has been an important avenue to making the pandemic academically relevant to students, which is not only an important way to equip them with accurate and adequate knowledge to safely govern themselves in their communities, but it also allows them to contribute to solutions and be active citizens through participation in courses and extra-curricular activities.

REVAMPING COURSES

It would be a gross understatement to say that educators have had a more challenging time over the past year of schooling, be it at the primary, secondary, or post-secondary level. However, this year has also created new opportunities for course content and design. At Trent Durham, some courses that have been offered for years were purposefully revamped to assess and evaluate the pandemic in present times, in correlation with the course material. For example, I was in the course “ENGL 2609H – Contagion”, which in previous years focused on works of literature surrounding the Black Plague, tuberculosis, AIDS, etc. This year, however, course instructor Professor Emily Bruusgaard worked hard to make the course relevant to our current context by drawing comparisons and reviewing news articles on COVID-19 and the issues faced by Durham Region.⁹³ The following information is from an online exchange between me, and Professor Emily Bruusgaard, the teaching instructor of ENGL 2609H – Contagion.

Professor Bruusgaard highlighted two broad themes about her approach to revamping the course: (1) shifting the course to an online environment; and (2) connecting to students on a meaningful level. Professor Bruusgaard shared the following about the process of shifting to an online environment during the pandemic:

“There were two parts to putting my courses online. First, I had to think through the whole lecture in advance. When I teach in a class in-person, I will often come

prepared with 3 or more avenues for us to discuss, and allow the class response to the text to guide my teaching. [...] Moving online meant trying to anticipate how the texts would be read and still allow space for personal and class interpretation. [...] The second part of moving online was to think about how the texts that I was teaching might make different sense, and different touching points in a Covid reality. Part of my teaching is to always normalize mental and emotional health, as studies show that trauma makes absorbing and retaining new information difficult. I did regular check-ins, Monday emails, and made myself available to students regularly through email and Zoom. Both of these made preparing my classes more challenging and more work. Recording lectures [means] recording them, doing and editing close captions, and putting them online. This is twice the work that I normally do, and doing it in the dark – as in not knowing what I might be triggering for students. I also knew that students would be struggling with their own deadlines and workload. I changed all my assignments to shorter blog posts, and shortened my lectures to what I knew I was capable of taking in, so instead of 3 hours, I made most of my lectures 1.5 hours with lots of questions and commentary for further examination.”⁹⁴

It is evident that a lot more planning needed to be done, not only to shift the course to an online environment, but in preparation of how the students will receive the course material, along with making the course feasible for both the students and for Professor Bruusgaard. There were also new challenges and opportunities to being

able to connect with students through the new online environment:

“It’s been different. I miss in-person teaching for sure. But the emails and Zoom calls have created a different kind of community that I have enjoyed and tried to foster as much as I can. I don’t think it can ever replicate what the classroom does, but at the same time, I have gotten to know students better, and I have been profoundly grateful for their trust in me, when they have shared their personal challenges or reached out to me to look for more help in dealing with their situations. While I am always careful to say that I am not trained, and I am not a therapist – the most important thing for all of us has been to know that we are not alone, for me as well as students.”⁹⁵

The revamping of this course and other courses to focus on the current pandemic sets up students to better understand the COVID-19 response, as well as to be more active and engaged in their current environment. Students are valuable community members, so having this education allows them to be more informed citizens.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Trent University Durham-GTA is located on the traditional territory of the Michi Sagiig Anishnaabeg, which is made up of Curve Lake First Nation, Alderville First Nation, Hiawatha First Nation, and the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation, and is covered by the Williams Treaty

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