

## **MAROON PAPER**

### **PREAMBLE**

The mental health and wellbeing of students at McMaster is of great importance to the MSU. The MSU has responded by providing both identity based and general peer-support to students. While the peer support movement is relatively new, it is an extremely valued and integral component of the MSU's services. The MSU's concerns and recommendations stem from conversations, experiences, and the research of individuals, managers, and professionals within both McMaster and the larger post-secondary sphere. This policy paper will serve as a guide for the implementation of future initiatives and to direct lobbying efforts.

### **Principles:**

- McMaster University students should have access to a number of options when looking for support, including peer support.
- McMaster University students should have a clear understanding of the various supports available to them, including peer support.
- Student managers should receive the training that gives them the ability to operate all facets of their service with confidence.
- Student managers should have quick and easy access to a resource person that is knowledgeable in their service and peer support issues.
- Student managers should have access to training materials that are designed specifically for university peer support volunteers.
- Peer support volunteers should have access to additional trainings and professional development opportunities throughout their time as a volunteer.
- All students should be able to access a centralized gateway to the broader supports that they are looking for.

### **Concerns:**

- Peer support is not clearly defined within the McMaster Students Union and in the greater campus community, as many of our services can be deemed as delivering "peer support".
- Student managers rely on multiple university staff and community partners for training materials and resources, and may not be present during the summer months to foster these relationships.
- Creating service specific training materials is time and resource intensive.
- Training materials received from other organizations and institutions are not always designed for peer-support within the McMaster context.
- Students are forced to visit decentralized peer support resources, adding unnecessary burden to the process of seeking support.

**Recommendations:**

- The definition of peer support and minimum training standards should be clearly defined within the MSU and across the university.
- The university should allocate funding to support the MSU peer support endeavours, as they compliment the options available through the university.
- McMaster University should allocate funding to hire a counselor who is responsible for overseeing and training all peer support volunteers on campus.
- The University should allocate funding and space to aid with the development of a Peer Support Network or Centre.

**FURTHER READING**

For more information about Peer Support, visit the General Policies section of the MSU website to read the full Policy Paper.

## **POLICY PAPER**

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### **Peer Support**

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## Introduction

The transition from high school to university can be a particularly challenging time. Students that fall within the post-secondary age range are the most likely to suffer the effects of mental illness<sup>1</sup>. In addition, a recent study from the Association of American universities, highlight that 11.7% of student respondents experienced non-consensual sexual contact since they enrolled in university<sup>2</sup>. The ability for students to access reliable support while studying at McMaster University is of great importance to the MSU.

At its most basic level, peer-support is the support provided by someone that may share a lived experience in common with their peer<sup>3 4</sup>. This peer support may include both emotional and social support. Peer-support aims to consider the entire wellness of the person, rather than focus on a specific illness, issue, or disability<sup>5</sup>. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has been at the forefront of advocating for the importance of peer support. In 2010, they released the *Making the Case for Peer Support* report which included a literature review and focus groups data, to evaluate the current status of peer support in Canada<sup>6</sup>. The MHCC identifies peer support as being an essential component of the mental health system as cited in their 2012 Mental Health Strategy for Canada entitled *Changing Directions, Changing Lives*<sup>7</sup>. In 2013, they released a set of national guidelines to advise and inform the practice of peer-support entitled *Guidelines for the Practice and Training of Peer Support*<sup>8</sup>.

Peer-support plays a significant role in helping students successfully transition into university life. A number of studies have been completed addressing the role of peer

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<sup>1</sup> American College Health Association (ACHA). (2009). Executive Summary. American College Health Association National College Health Assessment II.

<sup>2</sup> "AAU Campus Survey On Sexual Assault And Sexual Misconduct," Association Of American Universities, <https://www.aau.edu/Climate-Survey.aspx?id=16525>

<sup>3</sup> Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) (2010). Making the Case for Peer Support. Retrieved from: [https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/system/files/private/document/PS\\_Making\\_the\\_Case\\_for\\_Peer\\_Support\\_Report\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/system/files/private/document/PS_Making_the_Case_for_Peer_Support_Report_ENG.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> "Peer Support," Mental Health Commission of Canada <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/issues/peer-support>

<sup>5</sup> "Peer Support," Mental Health Commission of Canada <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/issues/peer-support>

<sup>6</sup> Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) (2010). Making the Case for Peer Support. Retrieved from: [https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/system/files/private/document/PS\\_Making\\_the\\_Case\\_for\\_Peer\\_Support\\_Report\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/system/files/private/document/PS_Making_the_Case_for_Peer_Support_Report_ENG.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) (2012). Changing directions, changing lives: The mental health strategy for Canada. Retrieved from: [http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/system/files/private/MHStrategy\\_Strategy\\_ENG\\_0.pdf](http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/system/files/private/MHStrategy_Strategy_ENG_0.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) (2013). Guidelines for the Practice and Training of Peer Support. Retrieved from: <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca>

support in helping students access the curriculum and adjust to student life. For example, peer support has been shown to play a larger role in the successful psychological adjustment of first generation visible minority students, than parental support. Students perceive their peers as being better equipped to help them navigate the support they need in college in comparison to their parents <sup>9</sup>.

The following concerns and recommendations stem from conversations and experiences of individuals and professionals within the McMaster community. The scope of this paper highlights the intersection between both institution specific issues and broader recommendations on peer support. The goal of this paper is to establish the peer support needs of our campus, the best way to support our student staff, and to determine the framework that will help guide future initiatives and direct lobbying efforts.

**Principle One: McMaster University students should have access to a number of options when looking for support, including peer support.**

**Principle Two: McMaster University students should have a clear understanding of the various supports available to them, including peer support.**

**Concern One: Peer support is not clearly defined within the McMaster Students Union and in the greater campus community, as many of our services can be deemed as delivering “peer support”.**

**Recommendation One: The definition of peer support and minimum training standards should be clearly defined within the MSU and across the university.**

**Recommendation Two: The university should allocate funding to support the MSU peer support endeavours, as they compliment the options available through the university.**

Students have diverse experiences and needs when it comes to accessing and seeking out support. Some students may benefit from a medicalized model, whereas others may benefit from a peer centered model. McMaster offers a number of different resources and supports for students.

### ***McMaster Services***

The Student Wellness Centre (SWC) at McMaster University offers a number of different services for students ranging from Counselling Options, Medical Services, and

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<sup>9</sup> Rodriguez, N., Mira, C. B., Myers, H. F., Morris, J. K., & Cardoza, D. (2003). Family or friends: Who plays a greater supportive role for Latino college students? *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 9, 236-250.

Wellness Education. They offer friendly, accessible, and confidential services to students. The SWC also has a diverse team of healthcare practitioners that includes psychiatrists, counselors, physicians, and mental health nurses. They also offer wellness education through the Student Wellness Education Lower Lounge (SWELL), which houses two full time staff members. The SWELL offers a variety of programming for students, including Wellness Outreach programming that is run by the Student Success Leaders (SSL's) from the Student Success Centre (SSC).

The Human Rights and Equity Services (HRES) office works with campus and community partners in order to ensure that students, staff, and faculty are treated equitably and respectfully in all areas of campus life. The HRES office has three program areas: Human Rights, Equity Services, and AccessMAC. The Human Rights program strives to deliver confidential complaint resolution according to the University's Sexual Harassment, Anti-Discrimination and Accessibility Policies, while the Equity Services program provides educational opportunities related to harassment, discrimination, anti-oppression, accessibility, accommodation, and other human rights-related issues. Lastly, the AccessMAC program provides advice and consults on identifying and removing barriers to accessibility within the University's systems, policies, and structures. This office has also hired a Sexual Violence Response Coordinator in response to recommendations from the "It's Time" campaign<sup>10</sup>. (find it's time report)

### ***McMaster Students Union Services***

The McMaster Students Union operates and runs 20 student-run services ranging from leadership conferences, diversity services, peer-support based services and more. The MSU currently operates four services that facilitate "peer-support" via trained volunteers: the Women and Gender Equity Network (WGEN), Peer Support Line (PSL), Queer Students Community Centre (QSCC), and the Student Health Education Centre (SHEC). The MSU will also be adding a "peer-support" service centered around students identifying with visible and invisible disabilities called MSU Maccess, set to have a full launch in September 2016.

#### **I. Defining Peer Support**

Loosely, peer-support is defined as support programs that offer encouragement, hope, and support in a peer-to-peer setting. However, peer-support delivery falls along a spectrum, from formalized peer support in a structured setting to informal support. The MHCC defines peer support as "a supportive relationship between people who have a

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<sup>10</sup> It's Time: To End Violence Against Women On Campus (2014). McMaster Project. Retrieved from: [http://ywcahamilton.org/system/assets/attachments/000/000/119/original/Its\\_Time\\_Recommendations\\_Report.pdf](http://ywcahamilton.org/system/assets/attachments/000/000/119/original/Its_Time_Recommendations_Report.pdf)

lived experience in common”<sup>11</sup>. This definition is very vague and may be applied to a number of mentorship relationships that exist within various MSU services. “Informal peer support” is most closely aligned with the type of peer-support that we offer through the MSU, whereby peers identify similar lived experiences and in turn listen to and support each other<sup>12</sup>. Internally, the MSU loosely identifies the peer-support services as the WGEN, the PSL, the SHEC, the QSSC, and the newly added MSU Maccess. There is currently no formalized definition for peer-support on campus, which is confusing for both students and stakeholders. It is critical that the university and the MSU create a mutual understanding of the definition of peer support.

The peer support services of the MSU provide critical support to students. The goals of peer support surround empowerment, recovery, and hope<sup>13</sup>. The student centric peer support that is offered on campus, enables students to be an active participant in their recovery process, and helps them to develop the skills that the need to work towards overall wellbeing. In addition, the MHCC highlights the importance of peer support, as it associated with a reduction in distress related to symptoms, reduced re-hospitalizations, improved quality of life, and improved social supports<sup>14</sup>. An important note to highlight may be the impact that well resourced peer support may have on barriers to accessing care. By assisting students to develop resiliency, hope, and a reduced risk of readmission, we may be able to lessen the number of students accessing the SWC on a regular basis. As a result, we may be able to have a positive impact on wait times for SWC appointments.

The university is a key stakeholder in designing, providing, and delivering training to MSU peer support volunteers. The MHCC has outlined three key themes to include in training in their “Guidelines for the Practice and Training of Peer Support”: 1) fundamental principles of peer support, 2) the social and historical context, and 3) concepts and methods that promote peer-to-peer effectiveness<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, it is important that the university and the MSU agree upon the minimum training requirements for peer support volunteers on campus while keeping the MHCC

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<sup>11</sup> Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) (2013). Guidelines for the Practice and Training of Peer Support. Retrieved from: <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca>

<sup>12</sup>“Peer Support,” Mental Health Commission of Canada  
<http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/issues/peer-support>

<sup>13</sup> Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) (2010). Making the Case for Peer Support. Retrieved from: [https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/system/files/private/document/PS\\_Making\\_the\\_Case\\_for\\_Peer\\_Support\\_Report\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/system/files/private/document/PS_Making_the_Case_for_Peer_Support_Report_ENG.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) (2010). Making the Case for Peer Support. Retrieved from: [https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/system/files/private/document/PS\\_Making\\_the\\_Case\\_for\\_Peer\\_Support\\_Report\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/system/files/private/document/PS_Making_the_Case_for_Peer_Support_Report_ENG.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) (2013). Guidelines for the Practice and Training of Peer Support. Retrieved from: <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca>

guidelines in mind. Adhering to minimum training standards would ensure that peer support volunteers are adequately prepared to assist other students.

Each student-run service of the MSU has at least one Part Time Manager (PTM) that is responsible for overseeing the budget, managing the executive and volunteers, and ensuring that the day-to-day operations are carried out effectively. Part Time Managers receive the bulk of their training from the Vice President Administration, the Vice President Finance, and the Student Life Development Coordinator on a number of topics ranging from volunteer management, to filling out a purchase order. PTM's are also required to complete EOHSS training modules and AODA. Many services also have long standing partnerships with community and campus partners, which may act as a valuable resource to the PTM, the executive, and the volunteers. "Peer support" managers are also trained in SafeTalk and Mental Health First Aid to help them have the breadth of knowledge required to run their service.

The MSU "Peer-support" services offer more than just peer support. Therefore, some student managers may not be well versed in peer-support and may not feel comfortable designing and leading training. Currently, the student managers of our peer support services rely on university staff and community partners for a large portion of their training. Particularly, we rely on the Student Wellness Centre and the SWELL staff to provide suicide alertness training and general mental health resource training.

While we value this relationship, it creates undue strain on the services, the managers, and the university partners. For example, SafeTalk training is a comprehensive 3-hour course<sup>16</sup>. At the end of the course all participants receive a certificate. However, one of the more burdensome pieces of SafeTalk training, is that it has a maximum capacity of 30 students. With approximately 150 volunteers that require training, it is logistically challenging to coordinate multiple trainings with our campus partners, and places immense time pressures on their already busy schedules.

The peer support service managers are not required to be present on campus throughout the summer. However, they are allocated 100 variable hours to use at their discretion in the summer months. These hours are often utilized for researching, liaising with university partners, and for the creation of service specific training materials. Despite having variable hours, many student managers return to their family home in the summer and this renders them unable to commit to meetings on campus. Being unable to attend meetings on campus can often prove problematic when mapping out and planning new training models, and often leaves student managers in a position

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<sup>16</sup> LivingWorks (2015). safeTALK half-day training. Retrieved from: <https://www.livingworks.net/programs/safetalk/>

where they may have training materials that do not meet the nuanced needs of their service.

In order to deliver peer support, volunteers must undergo training that is provided and coordinated by their respective peer support service. In fall 2015, the MSU piloted a peer-support training weekend, to co-ordinate the training pieces that are received by all four peer support services. This training was held the first weekend after Welcome Week, and this in itself proves to be a large barrier in designing and delivering training. Many student managers are heavily involved in Welcome Week as a planner, representative, or campus partner, especially in relation to the strategic priorities. The placement of the training so close the end of summer, inhibits the ability of student managers to have adequate prep time. This limitation hinders the ability to have training that is both fully comprehensive and tailored to the nuances of each service.

The Student Wellness Centre and the staff at the SWELL are the primary stakeholders that assist the MSU in delivering training for peer support volunteers. There are nearly 150 student volunteers that require training to be able to deliver peer support. The sheer volume of students places a strain on our stakeholders. This is further compounded by the fact that certain training components take 3 hours (ie; suicide alertness and Anti Oppression Training), or have limited capacity. Therefore, it is critical that the university and the MSU work together to coordinate training for volunteers in a way that make sense to both parties.

There are a number of resources that can be found online or from community and campus partners that discuss how to train peer supporters. One such example is the Guidelines for the Practice and Training of Peer Support that was released by the Canadian Commission on Mental Health<sup>17</sup>. However, these materials are often not designed with a university aged student in mind. The onus is then put on the student manager to contextualize materials for a university and service setting. This leaves the student manager in a vulnerable position, as they are responsible for creating their own materials when they may have never done so before. In addition, many institutions across Canada are willing to share resources and materials which they have personally developed, however, these lack MSU context and specificity. However, the field of peer support is relatively new, and

The literature in support of peer support and highlighting best practices is rapidly changing. Keeping up with new publications is challenging and requires a large time investment from the student manager. When speaking to past PTM's on the time they spent designing peer support training, many highlighted that they often spend upwards

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<sup>17</sup> Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) (2013). Guidelines for the Practice and Training of Peer Support. Retrieved from: <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca>

of 40 hours during the summer developing their training. This is nearly half of a PTM's allocated summer working time. This time investment may detract from many of the other responsibilities that they must upkeep throughout the summer, including building campus and community partnerships, hiring executives and volunteers, and holding meetings as required.

**Principle Six: All students should be able to access a centralized gateway to the broader supports that they are looking for.**

**Concern Five: Students are forced to visit decentralized peer support resources, adding unnecessary burden to the process of seeking support.**

**Recommendation Four: The University should allocate funding and space to aid with the development of a Peer Support Network or Centre.**

The ability for volunteers to carry out effective, appropriate, and meaningful peer support is contingent on having adequate training. Currently, there are limited resources on campus to ensure that student peer support volunteers are receiving adequate training. The training is both resource and time intensive, and this has been downloaded by the staff at the Student Wellness Centre, campus and community partners, and student managers.

It has been made clear by all partners that more resources are necessary in order to keep up with the need for peer support services on our campus. In Ontario we can look to Western University and the Western University Students' Council (USC). Together, they recently launched the re-opening of their Peer Support Centre<sup>18</sup>. This centre is a centralized peer support service for students that provides support related to gender, sexual orientation, culture, faith, ability, and any other identifying factors. Notably, this centre is overseen and supported by a counselor. This counselor is jointly funded by Western University and the Western USC who has half of their time delegated solely to the creation of training materials, hiring, and training volunteers in partnership with the Western USC. In speaking with the counselor, she cited hundreds of hours spent over the summer months developing materials that fit the context of peer support within the university setting. The experience of this counselor strengthens the argument for increased resources being allocated towards the training and development of peer support volunteers at McMaster. Other student unions that offer a centralized model

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<sup>18</sup> The Peer Support Network. Western University Students' Council. <http://westernusc.ca/service/the-peer-support-network/>

include the University of Windsor<sup>19</sup>, the Queen's Alma Mater Society<sup>20 21</sup>, McGill University<sup>22</sup>, the UBC AMS<sup>23</sup>, and the University of Alberta<sup>24 25</sup>. Overall, these services provide a centralized access point for any student seeking support outside of the medicalized model.

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<sup>19</sup> Peer Support Centre. University of Windsor. Retrieved from: <http://www1.uwindsor.ca/psc/>

<sup>20</sup> Peer Support Centre. Queen's Alma Mater Society Student Government. <https://myams.org/team-details/peer-support-centre/>

<sup>21</sup> Welcome to the AMS Peer Support Centre. Retrieved from: <http://amspeersupport.com/>

<sup>22</sup> Peer Support. McGill University. Retrieved from: <https://www.mcgill.ca/morsl/morsl-programs-and-resources/peer-support>

<sup>23</sup> Speakeasy. Student Society of UBC Vancouver. Retrieved from: <http://www.ams.ubc.ca/services/speakeasy/>

<sup>24</sup> Peer Support Centre. University of Alberta. Retrieved from: <https://alberta.collegiatelink.net/organization/psc>

<sup>25</sup> Peer Support Centre: We're Here To Listen. University of Alberta Students' Union. Retrieved from: <https://www.su.ualberta.ca/services/psc/>

## **POLICY STATEMENT**

### **Whereas:**

- Peer support is not clearly defined within the McMaster Students Union and in the greater campus community, as many of our services can be deemed as delivering “peer support”.
- Student managers rely on multiple university staff and community partners for training materials and resources, and may not be present during the summer months to foster these relationships.
- Creating service specific training materials is time and resource intensive.
- Training materials received from other organizations and institutions are not always designed for peer-support within the McMaster context.
- Students are forced to visit decentralized peer support resources, adding unnecessary burden to the process of seeking support.

### **Be It Resolved That:**

- The definition of peer support and minimum training standards should be clearly defined within the MSU and across the university.
- The university should allocate funding to support the MSU peer support endeavours, as they compliment the options available through the university.
- McMaster University should allocate funding to hire a counselor who is responsible for overseeing and training all peer support volunteers on campus.
- The University should allocate funding and space to aid with the development of a Peer Support Network or Centre.

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Speakeasy. Student Society of UBC Vancouver. Retrieved from: <http://www.ams.ubc.ca/services/speakeasy/>

Welcome to the AMS Peer Support Centre. Retrieved from: <http://amspeersupport.com/>