Student Engagement and Retention Policy

Introduction

Students want to be involved in the City of Hamilton but there are several barriers preventing them from doing so. These barriers range from deficiencies in public transit to a lack of awareness of opportunities available in the city. Furthermore, while McMaster provides a wide breadth of different, high-quality learning, many students are not staying in Hamilton after they graduate.

Engaging students throughout the community will undoubtedly improve retention of students following graduation, as they will be given increased exposure to the city. Over the past couple of years, McMaster Students Union (MSU), McMaster University, and the City of Hamilton have begun several new partnerships and ventures, such as the Municipal Advocacy Week, Discover Your City Campaign, and Change Camp. Furthermore, new developments in the city, such as Light Rail Transit (LRT), are continuing to make Hamilton an exciting city to work and live in. These recent events have begun the process of bringing together students, the university and the city in a communal improvement process. This policy builds on the findings of the Your City Survey 2.0 to provide clear areas of concern for students. By addressing these areas, the MSU, City of Hamilton, and McMaster University can continue to build a strong foundation for a city that engages and retains its students.
Principle One: The MSU believes that student retention relies on proper coordination and communication between the City of Hamilton and McMaster University.

Concern One: McMaster University and the City of Hamilton inadequately promote awareness of the job opportunities available to students in Hamilton.

Recommendation One: The City of Hamilton should invest more resources into effectively using social media to communicate opportunities to students.

Recommendation Two: To facilitate successful coordination and communication between the City of Hamilton and McMaster University, students should be allowed fair representation in municipal affairs.

In the Your City Survey 2.0, 80% of students valued a broad choice of places to work and professional job opportunities in their local community (McMaster Students Union 2016). Yet, 51% of the people surveyed responded that McMaster University fails to provide advertised opportunities for students to get involved in the city of Hamilton, such as internships, volunteering, and job shadowing (McMaster Students Union 2016). There is a large number of highly qualified students currently attending and graduating from McMaster University, but a constant issue is the fact that there are not enough jobs available following graduation. In today’s economic climate, where the job market is not seen as particularly promising for students, ensuring that these jobs do exist within Hamilton is vital to increase student retention and to change the potentially negative stereotypes of the city.

One of the biggest reasons why students are not getting involved in or finding employment Hamilton is a simple lack of awareness of what is being offered. Social media is currently a critical part of how information is disseminated to students. For example, effective avenues include creating and being active on Facebook pages and/or Twitter accounts. If that is not possible, there are contacts at McMaster University that could help in forwarding information to the student body such as the Student Success Center or services specific to the opportunity (e.g. a food bank in Hamilton could reach out to Mac Bread Bin). It is worth noting that, as the Student
Success Center is currently one of the key services in distributing information about opportunities both within and outside the McMaster community to students, it should also improve its methods of communication, especially with respect to social media.

Lastly, municipal committees associated with economic development, transit and transportation, housing, and community relations should engage with McMaster and its students to develop mutually beneficial goals by creating student seats on said committees. This will also allow for the externally focused groups in the MSU, such as the Student Community Support Network, the Advocacy Street Team, the External Affairs Committee, and the Community Engagement Coordinator, to maintain effective and efficient communication with the city of Hamilton.

**Principle Two:** The MSU believes that student retention relies on both proper coordination and communication between local business and students and strong opportunities to foster entrepreneurship.

**Concern Two:** Students feel that there are not an appropriate number of job opportunities available to them.

**Recommendation Three:** The MSU recommends Hamilton Hive become further integrated into the McMaster community.

**Recommendation Four:** The City of Hamilton and local businesses should establish a stronger physical presence on campus to promote events and job opportunities.

**Recommendation Five:** To help students gain experience in the workplace, become employed in their relevant fields of work and study, as well as support internships, co-op placements, and volunteer opportunities within Hamilton, McMaster’s job posting system, OscarPlus should be improved.

As previously mentioned, 51% of McMaster students believe that there is a lack of advertising with regards to co-op opportunities, volunteer placements, and internships within the Hamilton community (McMaster Students Union 2016). The Your City survey states that almost 42% of respondents believe that there are few professional and volunteer opportunities within Hamilton (McMaster Students Union 2016). However, the
Workforce Planning Hamilton released data in January of 2016 stating that in 2015, of the 24,660 vacant jobs postings online, 5439 were job postings for university educated individuals (Workforce Planning Hamilton 2015). This highlights a fundamental gap in communication between employers and students seeking employment.

A common problem for many students is that the lack of advertisement for job and volunteer opportunities can make it difficult for them to engage within the Hamilton community. Of all of the respondents who took the survey, 74% of students at McMaster stated that having a “[a] broad choice of places to work, professional job opportunities, and an environment that is a friendly to entrepreneurs” is crucial to them (McMaster Students Union 2016).

The Hamilton-based organization Hamilton Hive is an excellent resource for young professionals\(^1\). It would greatly enhance students’ professional network opportunities if this organization became increasingly involved with the MSU and McMaster University. Hamilton Hive can engage with the McMaster community through workshops and events to further mentor new professionals. Hamilton Hive’s mission is to provide young professionals with up-to-date information and networking opportunities as a means of advancing their careers in the Hamilton area. If a partnership is established with Hamilton Hive and the MSU, there can be a variety of programs, workshops, and events that can help students become further engaged with the working community of Hamilton. Mentorships, such as the Female Mentorship with YWCA and Hamilton Hive, can be another initiative integrated with McMaster University. Student mentorship and networking with other young professionals is vital in advancing careers and strengthening networks.

Furthermore, if local business or companies had a stronger presence on campus, these job postings could be brought towards the many soon to be graduated McMaster students. “The Majority of employers find recruitment a somewhat challenging issue” (Workforce Planning Hamilton 2015). Considering the large number of students in need of summer employment or post graduation employment, bringing business to campus to advertise jobs and promote their companies would make recruitment much easier for them as well as McMaster students. This on-the-ground effort could be facilitated

\(^1\) For more information, visit: http://www.hamiltonhive.ca/
through the Student Success Centre, for example by actively recruiting local businesses to their career fair and including those seeking summer employment in the fair. Furthermore, the Student Success Centre and McMaster University should ensure that businesses looking to provide employment information on campus are able to do so in an easily accessible manner. Currently, participation in employment fairs on campus requires paying hundreds of dollars in fees.

Worryingly, 24.7% of students stated they would not stay in or commute to Hamilton for their career and 34.7% of students were unsure if they would create jobs in Hamilton (McMaster Students Union 2016). If Hamilton created new jobs, internships and volunteer opportunities it could generate an interest in graduates to stay within Hamilton or commute to Hamilton for their careers. Student retention could also be improved by providing jobs for students engaged in internships and co-op placements as part of their degrees. It is not unusual for a student to be offered a full-time job with the same organization they have previously worked with upon graduation, so if the city could provide positions such as these, it would significantly increase the chances of students staying in Hamilton following graduation. Therefore, it is recommended that these internships, co-op placements, volunteer opportunities, and jobs are both advertised in collaboration with the University. Such a venture would not require the creation of a new posting portal but could conceivably take the form of improvements to OscarPlus, such as increased postings of local businesses and highlighting the employment available locally.

**Principle Three: The MSU believes that students should live in a city that is financially and travel-accessible.**

**Concern Three: Students feel as though public transit in Hamilton is a barrier to their participation in activities around the city.**

**Concern Four: Many students believe Hamilton is not an affordable city to live, work, and play in.**

**Recommendation Six: The city of Hamilton should further invest in improving transit services, working with the MSU to ensure that the concerns of students, who are a significant portion of their ridership, are being heard.**
Recommendation Seven: The City of Hamilton should collaborate with McMaster University and the MSU to make available cost-effective and free opportunities for cultural experiences around the city and ensure said opportunities are effectively promoted.

Given that part of accessibility includes financial accessibility, it is crucial that students find the city of Hamilton a financially secure place to live. 82% of students stated that it was a very high priority for them to live in an affordable city, and 61% rated it as the highest priority (McMaster Students Union 2016). Nearly 50% of students stated that affordability was very important when deciding where to live and work post-graduation (McMaster Students Union 2016).

While considered fairly affordable by students, there is still a large percentage of students who state that Hamilton is not an affordable city to live, work, and play in. 23% of students responding to the Your City Survey 2.0 that a barrier to their involvement in cultural experiences around the city is finances (McMaster Students Union 2016). Part of the problem with affordability may be related to the fact that many students do not feel as though job/career opportunities are well publicized or available to them, making employment difficult to find.

Another part of accessibility includes travel accessibility. Public transit should always be available to students during operational hours, and operational hours should be accommodating for students of all schedules and mobility capacities.

Almost 30% of respondents felt that the city was below average for accessibility via public transit (McMaster Students Union 2016). A common problem for students, as well as transit passengers in general, is that buses will often pass them two or three times in a row because they are already so full of passengers. This is referred to as a “pass by” and is increasingly a problem in Hamilton (Craggs 2016). As well, service standards for the HSR include frequencies of half an hour, even during peak times, which, for students trying to get to class, work, or around the city can oftentimes cause them to be late. Peak time ridership is also set to be a standard of 125% of seating capacity on buses, while not uncommon to see during high traffic hours, is likely to increase during said times. As it is a standard, and not a measure of actual ridership, it
is probable that ridership on buses has been much higher than 125% during peak, and even non-peak hours (City of Hamilton 2016).

The new 2016 Operations Budget for the City of Hamilton gives three possible options for improving the HSR services offered by the City, all including increased numbers of buses 'on the road' (City of Hamilton 2016). The most expensive option also recommends added bus shelters, another garage on the Mountain for more bus storage, improved and added terminals, and better branding. Bus routes need to be timely and within walking distance of most locations in the city of Hamilton, and need to be able to accommodate riders at all times. The MSU recommends that adding buses to the road as well as bus shelters be a priority of the city of Hamilton to address some of the problems facing those students who often wait very long times for buses, potentially in the rain, wind and/or snow. As of March 1, 2016, the decision to add 11 buses to the current fleet as well as more shelters along the B-line (a common express route for students) was made. Whilst this is a good first step in the right direction, this still does not take into account the rate at which ridership is increasing in Hamilton and will not be able to provide much of a tangible change to students. Therefore we also recommend that this decision be re-evaluated in light of the sheer size of the problem facing Hamilton transit and McMaster students.

Improved transit would increase the amount of students throughout the city. In addition to employment, it is also important to encourage exploration of Hamilton’s cultural events. Therefore, the city of Hamilton and the MSU need to have a more constant and open avenue of communication so that events, activities, and opportunities can be presented to the Student Union in a timely manner. The city of Hamilton also needs to be actively engaging and promoting cultural events itself and engaging with its residents and businesses in a visible manner. One successful recent example of such a venture is the fall Supercrawl².

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² For more information: http://www.supercrawl.ca/
Works Cited


Craggs, Samantha. 2016. “HSR: When the Bus Finally Comes... and Just Keeps on Going.” *Canadian Broadcasting Company*, February 6.
