



POLICY PAPER

First-Year Transition

Prepared By:

Blake Oliver, Vice-President Education, 2016-17
Ryan MacDonald, Vice-President Finance 2016-17

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Introduction

The first-year population at McMaster University is made up of approximately 6,000 new undergraduate students with diverse backgrounds and needs. First-year students, like the larger undergraduate population, have a variety of experiences and circumstances. However, they face common barriers in transitioning into university life. This paper serves to address and propose solutions to enhance and strengthen the transition into McMaster University for first-year students. While this paper strives to be comprehensive in addressing barriers that all first-year students face, this paper is generally geared towards traditional students, and does not address barriers experienced by mature and non-traditional students entering McMaster University.

The MSU itself provides multiple avenues in which to engage first-year students and ease transition into McMaster. The MSU Horizons Conference is a 3-day conference that takes place each August for approximately 200 incoming students, emphasizing leadership skills and familiarity with campus life. MSU Spark is a service that operates throughout the academic year, and pairs 8 - 10 first-year students with 2 upper-year "team leaders" who meet weekly to aid in transition and provide mentorship. As well, the MSU hosts a governing body for first-year students known as First Year Council which is empowered to advocate on behalf of first year students. Outside of these opportunities, there are many other student-run and University-run programs and services that seek to address first-year students, which is addressed in this paper.

For many first-year students, enrolling at McMaster is synonymous with living away from home for the first time. One unique quality of the first-year population is that a large proportion live in McMaster University's residence system. For those who do not reside on-campus, many students live in the surrounding neighbourhood of Ainslie Wood - Westdale. As well, many first year students who do live in residence begin to seek out housing in the community in preparation for their second year. This paper seeks to address issues that first year students face in on-campus housing, and both living in and seeking off-campus housing. Within the same vein, this paper will address food and meal plans offered to residence students on campus. The paper recognizes that not all students who live in residence are in their first year of studies, and that this section may not apply solely to first-year students. This paper also addresses the challenges faced by first-year students who live off-campus.

In addition, a big adjustment for first-year students is changes to the academic environment. Students coming directly from high-school experience difficulty adjusting to larger class sizes, higher-weighted assignments, less accessible instructors, and more. This paper will also address the transition into the University classroom and learning environment.

Students entering university for the first time will also encounter their first interaction with the financial aid system in the province and the University. While the MSU has taken stances on student financial aid in our paper on Tuition & Post Secondary Education Affordability, this paper will specifically look at the informational barriers that first-year students may face when accessing aid.

Finally, the above barriers and issues interact to make the first-year of university a stressful and ultimately difficult time for many. While the MSU has addressed mental health in our

Mental Health Policy Paper, this paper will seek to address first-year specific stresses and well-being.

Residence

Access to Residence

Principle: All first-year students should have the opportunity to live in residence.

Principle: First year students should have the same residence experience with respect to quality of maintenance and support systems put in place, regardless of the location and size of their building.

Concern: A spot in residence is not guaranteed for first-year students.

Concern: High costs for living in residence can be prohibitive and act as a barrier for some first-year students, in particular, for students accessing OSAP.

Concern: Other institutions have created affiliated privately run residences not directly connected to the Residence Life network.

Concern: There is a significant variation in cost to students between different residence styles that will incentivise institutions to invest in new residence spaces that are at a higher cost to students.

Recommendation: McMaster University should provide a first-year residence guarantee.

Recommendation: Future residence developments should ensure a variety of room types and applicable pricing models.

Recommendation: McMaster University should ensure that all off campus residence opportunities are up to the same standard of quality and support as on-campus Residences.

Recommendation: In the interim, McMaster University should eliminate the Residence Admission cut-off and provide spaces that take into consideration priority applications for students with disabilities, Crown wards, first generation students, and Indigenous students.

Recommendation: McMaster University should create financial assistance options specific for low-income first-year students wanting to access residence.

Recommendation: McMaster University should provide the option for students to make two payment installments on their residence cost, consistent with the two payment installment of OSAP.

It is well-documented that living in residence provides additional supports and programming to first-year students transitioning into university. Students who live in residence halls are more likely to grow their social network, make higher grades, have access to leadership opportunities, and build time management skills¹. At McMaster, Residence Life offers academic skills programming, designated study spaces, social programming, and support via

¹ <https://housing.mcmaster.ca/the-residence-advantage/>

community assistants. These factors enhance student success in first-year, but they are not provided to all first-year students.

Of all universities in the province, McMaster is one of only two that does not provide a first-year residence guarantee. Due to lack of space, McMaster determines a “Residence Admission cut-off” each year based on a student’s entrance average, in which students who meet or exceed the cut-off are guaranteed residence, and students who do not meet the cut-off are placed on a waiting list. In 2017-18, the Residence Admission cut-off was 83.5%.

Students are concerned with the Residence Admission cut-off as the supports provided in residence, particularly academically, are particularly essential for students who had lower grade point averages when entering McMaster. Students do not believe that incoming students with higher grades should be given priority within the residence system. Instead, students believe that all residence spaces should be allocated via a lottery system.

In the long-term, students hope to see McMaster grow its capacity and offer a first-year guarantee for all residence students. With the upcoming constructions of the Living and Learning Centre, due to provide accommodations for 500 students², as well as the purchase of property on Traymore Ave. for the purpose of building a residence with a capacity of 800 beds³, McMaster is positioned to be able to offer a first-year residence guarantee in the near future. While students are supportive of the idea of the first year residence guarantee, it is critical that these housing developments off campus are up to the same quality and care as on campus residences. Institutions such as Waterloo University among others have a decentralized system for Residence and have affiliated University College Residences that are run independently from the institution.⁴ McMaster Students firmly believe that to best provide support to first year students a collaborative model of support should be ensured and as such, quality and support should not differ between on campus and off campus residences.

In addition to availability of spaces, students are concerned with the high cost associated with living in residence. At the MSU’s 2015 First Year Feedback Forum, students who did not live on-campus in first year expressed that the primary reason they chose to live off-campus was the financial burden of residence⁵. The following fees were assessed for the 2016-17 year⁶:

Room Type	Cost
Bunk & Loft Triple Room	\$5,028

² <http://dailynews.mcmaster.ca/article/multipurpose-living-learning-centre-to-be-built-on-campus/>

³ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/mcmaster-sale-development-1.3990442>

⁴ <https://uwaterloo.ca/housing/residences>

⁵ MSU First Year Feedback Forum, 2016.

⁶ <https://housing.mcmaster.ca/residence-admissions/residence-fees/>

Bunk & Loft Triple Room with Access to Single-User Washroom	\$5,330
Quad Room	\$5,604
Triple Room	\$5,604
Double Room	\$6,129
Double Room with Access to Single-User Washroom	\$6,507
Double Room with Ensuite Washroom	\$6,710
Single Room	\$7,005
Single Room with Access to Single-User Washroom	\$7,413
Single Room with Ensuite Washroom	\$7,633
Apartment	\$7,812
Suite	\$8,465

Even at the lowest cost of \$5,028 for a Bunk & Loft Triple Room, the cost of residence is significantly higher than off-campus housing in the surrounding community. Students understand that Residence Life offers many programs and supports to students not provided off-campus, which are costly, however students also believe that students from all backgrounds should be able to access residence. Students hope to see an institutional financial assistance program for low-income incoming students who wish to live in residence. In addition, many students who live in residence also access the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), which remits funds to students in two installments: September and January. In recognition of this, McMaster offers the Flex Plan for tuition payments, in which students may pay their tuition costs split over two payments. Students believe that residence payment should also be able to be paid over two terms, similar to tuition, for students on OSAP.

The last two McMaster University constructed residences, Les Prince Hall and Mary Keyes Residence are currently in the top 3 in terms of cost for room type. The Living and Learning Centre is slated to introduce a new style of room type with double beds and washrooms. It is clear that the University has an incentive to build new residence buildings, where room types will be a significant cost to students.. Students believe that guaranteeing a residence space for all first year students means providing options that are financially accessible. While students are in full support of the Living and Learning Centre and the Traymore projects, we are concerned that the average cost of residence will rise significantly with more high cost room types being provided. McMaster University should ensure that future developments,

including the Traymore project have a wide variation of room types and applicable pricing models.

Residence Life Activity Fee

Principle: Students in residence should have autonomy over ancillary fees that exist to enhance student life within residence.

Concern: The Residence Life Activity Fee, an ancillary fee for all students in residence for the purpose of enhancing student life within residence, was levied onto students without student consultation.

Recommendation: Any future changes to the Residence Life Activity Fee should be put to referendum of all residence students, with clear parameters for the use of the fee.

Recommendation: Students should have considerable control over the use of the Residence Life Activity Fee.

As established previously, students pay high costs to live in residence which can often be a burden. In addition to the above fees and the mandatory meal plan fee, students in residence also pay the Residence Life Activity Fee, assessed at \$48.24⁷. The history of this fee is complex and unique: until 2016, the Inter-Residence Council (IRC) existed within residence, and was a student organization that provided a governance structure, resources for advocacy, and programming for student life in residence. During its tenure, the University approved a fee to be levied off of all residence students to fund the organization. As it was a student organization, at the time the way the funds were used was directly in the hands of residence students. However, when the IRC's status as a recognized student organization was revoked in 2016, the fee continued to be charged to residence students under its new name, the "Residence Life Activity Fee".

Students believe that residence students should have autonomy and be consulted on all fees relating to student life in residence. A fee such as the Residence Life Activity Fee, which exists specifically to enhance student life in residence and was formerly managed by students for that purpose, clearly fits into this definition. Therefore, students believe that any future changes to the Residence Life Activity Fee should be put to a referendum to residence students, similar to any other compulsory ancillary fee. In addition, Residence Life should continue to work with the McMaster Students Union to ensure that students have considerable input into how the current fee is spent to better student life.

⁷ <https://housing.mcmaster.ca/residence-admissions/residence-fees/>

Fees for Keys in Residence

Principle: Students in residence should not be charged unjustifiable fees for services or products.

Concern: Students are charged a high fee as a penalty for being locked out of a residence room, which is unjustifiable.

Recommendation: Housing and Conference Services should remove the penalty fees for lock out keys.

Students are concerned with a particular fee that Housing and Conference Services charges residence students when they accidentally lock themselves out of residence rooms. The fee structure for this penalty is outlined below⁸:

Occurrence	Fee
1st	Free
2nd & 3rd	\$3 each
4th & 5th	\$5 each
6th & 7th	\$10 each
8th & 9th	\$15 each
10th & onwards	\$20 each

Students feel that this fee structure is unfair as the fee does not do anything to dissuade students from forgetting keys, as this is purely accidental and not preventable. Students should not be penalized financially for incidences that arise accidentally - in this case especially, a student is already inconvenienced by having to travel away from their residence to pick up a temporary key, so they are incentivized not to lock themselves out. In addition, students fail to see the cost associated with Housing and Conference Services allowing students to sign out temporary keys while they retrieve their personal keys from their residence rooms. Therefore, students recommend that Housing and Conference Services

⁸ <https://housing.mcmaster.ca/residence-admissions/residence-fees/>

remove the lock-out keys fee. If Housing and Conference Services is for some reason unable to remove this fee, students recommend a cost reduction as current costs are prohibitive.

Meal Plans

Principle: Students in residence should not be forced to purchase goods or services that they do not intend to use.

Principle: All residence students should be able to dine on-campus, regardless of dietary restriction.

Principle: The mandatory meal plan should not be a financial barrier for students to live in residence.

Principle: The mandatory meal plan should ensure food security for all students living on residence.

Concern: All residence students, including those with access to a kitchen in Mary E. Keyes Residence and Bates Residence, are required to purchase a meal plan.

Concern: The Reduced Meal Plan is offered only to students living in Mary E. Keyes Residence and Bates Residence.

Concern: The large upfront cost for the mandatory meal plan creates a barrier to students on OSAP who must purchase a meal plan.

Concern: Locations on campus that cater to specific dietary needs, such as Bridges Café, are open less frequently than other establishments, allowing less access to food that meets dietary restrictions.

Recommendation: Students living in Mary E. Keyes Residence or Bates Residence should not be required to purchase a meal plan.

Recommendation: The Reduced Meal Plan should be expanded to be offered to all students living in residence.

Recommendation: Hospitality Services should provide the option for students to make two payment installments on their meal plan, consistent with the two payment installment of OSAP.

Recommendation: Hospitality Services should ensure that food meeting cultural, religious, and other dietary restrictions are available at Centro and La Piazza. .

At the MSU's 2016 First Year Feedback Forum, first-year students expressed the importance of accessible and healthy food options⁹. Students felt as though the options for dairy-free, vegetarian, and various religious dietary needs were lacking in availability. Although Bridges Café offers food that "caters to the ideological and religious dietary needs of the McMaster

⁹ MSU First Year Feedback Forum, 2016.

University community”¹⁰ by providing vegetarian, vegan, dairy-free, gluten-free, and more options, the hours of operation are limited when compared with other on-campus establishments. For instance, the hours for Bridges Café, La Piazza, and Centro for the Winter 2017 term are compared below¹¹:

	<i>Bridges</i>	<i>La Piazza</i>	<i>Centro</i>
Monday - Thursday	11:00 am - 8:00 pm	8:00 am - 9:30 pm	7:00 am - 11:00 pm
Friday	11:00 am - 3:00 pm	8:00 am - 6:00 pm	7:00 am - 11:00 pm
Saturday & Sunday	Closed	Closed	10:00am - 11:00 pm

In order to ensure that all students who rely on their meal cards to purchase food are able to consistently purchase food that meets their dietary requirements, students believe that Hospitality Services should ensure that locations who are open later, such as Centro and La Piazza, incorporate more vegetarian and vegan foods, as well as options that meet cultural and religious needs. .

In addition, students are concerned with the requirement of students living in Mary E. Keyes Residence or Bates Residence to purchase a meal plan. While many students living in these residences may wish to purchase a meal plan, students living in the suite or apartment-style residence rooms that these buildings offer do not require a meal plan as they have access to a full kitchen. Students believe that Residence Life and Hospitality Services should end the requirement of students in these buildings purchasing a meal plan. As well, while students living in Mary E. Keyes and Bates Residence are able to purchase a Reduced Meal Plan with a lower cost, this option is not available to students in other residences. As first-year students living in other residence buildings may choose to utilize the common kitchen areas to prepare food, students believe that the Reduced Meal Plan should be an option for all students.

Finally, many students living in residence utilize the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), which provides funding in two installments: one in September, and one in January. However, unlike tuition, the mandatory meal plan currently must be paid in full in September. Students recommend that McMaster University allows students to pay their mandatory meal plan in two separate installments, similar to the Flex Plan that McMaster University offers for tuition payments.

For more information on the MSU’s stances on Food Security, please see the MSU Food Security Policy Paper.

¹⁰ <http://hospitality.mcmaster.ca/locations/bridges.html>

¹¹ <http://hospitality.mcmaster.ca/hours.html>

Off-Campus Housing Off-Campus First Years

Principle: First-years who live off-campus should have access to the same resources and supports as on-campus first-years.

Concern: First-years who live off-campus report feelings of isolation and difficulty making meaningful connections, which can contribute to stress.

Concern: The Off-Campus Community Advisor program, may create a class divide between students who can afford the program and those who can not.

Recommendation: In the short term, McMaster University should provide needs based bursaries specific to the Off-Campus Community Advisor program to give off-campus first-years higher levels of support and provide a more robust and equitable system

Recommendation: In the long term, McMaster University should move to a house system, in which all incoming first years are assigned to a residence regardless of whether or not they live on-campus.

As noted previously in this paper, there are a variety of compounding factors that may cause a student to live off-campus in first year, including affordability, making the residence cut-off, or other barriers. In fact, at the MSU's 2016 First Year Feedback Forum, students who did not live on-campus in first year expressed that the primary reason they chose to live off-campus was the financial burden of residence¹². Unfortunately, this means that a number of students living off-campus are also the students who truly need the type of support that residence life offers to on-campus students. With this in mind, students believe that off-campus first-year students should be offered the same types of support and programming that on-campus first-year students receive.

It is absolutely clear that living on Residence in your first year at University leads to higher outcomes with respect to academic, social and professional success. The convenience, community building and support structures in residence, set students up for success over the course of their degree. A 2003 study out of Syracuse University highlights this fact suggesting that there is "ample evidence that living learning communities enhance student learning, persistence and faculty professional lives"¹³. The MSU believes that all students should have the opportunity to participate in residence should they desire.

At the MSU's 2016 First Year Feedback Forum, students who lived off-campus in first year denoted difficulty building lasting relationships with peers, as well as finding space on

¹² MSU First Year Feedback Forum, 2016.

¹³ Tinto, Vincent. "Learning better together: The impact of learning communities on student success." Higher Education monograph series 1, no. 8 (2003).

campus¹⁴. Students identified that there should be a space for off-campus first year students on campus in order to rest, store food, and build community.

In 2017, Residence Life began working on a proposal known as the “Off-Campus Community Assistant program” (OCCA) to provide Community Assistants to off-campus first-year students via an opt-in process. Students believe that this type of support would not only allow off-campus students to receive mentorship and peer support, but would also solve the issue identified by first-year students of not having space on campus by allowing them to access a specific residence building throughout the day. While students fundamentally support this system in principle, we would be remiss to not note that the cost of the program may present challenges for many students and pose a significant financial barrier to success. The cost of the program to students should not be larger than the actual cost of the program. Further, McMaster University should pursue specific needs based-bursaries/financial assistance programs such that students who want to participate in the program can do so, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Moving into the future, students want to ensure that all first-year students, regardless of whether or not they choose to live in residence or opt-in to the OCCA, have access to space and community on campus. Students believe that McMaster University should consider implementing a type of house system, similar to what is offered to Arts & Science students at the University of Toronto via their College System¹⁵. In such a system, all incoming first years would be assigned to a “house” – those who reside in a residence (for example, Bates Residence) would automatically be assigned to said house, and those who reside off-campus would also be members of said community. Membership to a house would be lifelong, with upper-year students contributing and belonging to the community as well. In this way, students believe that all incoming first-year students will have a physical space on campus in which to build community and make long-lasting friendships. The value of community building in University is well documented. A study out of Northern Illinois University found that a change in a feeling of “University belonging” had significant corresponding increases to self-perceptions of self-worth as well as social and scholastic competence¹⁶. Many elite institutions in the United States and around the world have adopted the “house system”

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ <http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/prospective/colleges>

¹⁶ Pittman, Laura D., and Adeya Richmond. “University belonging, friendship quality, and psychological adjustment during the transition to college.” *The Journal of Experimental Education* 76, no. 4 (2008): 343-362.

including Caltech¹⁷, Harvard¹⁸, Yale¹⁹, Oxford²⁰ and Cambridge²¹. While we cannot cite a causal relationship between the elite nature of these institutions to the existence of their “House System”, students believe that McMaster University should adopt this model into the future to best support students.

Finding Off-Campus Housing

Principle: All first-year students becoming tenants must be able to easily access and understand the rights and responsibilities of a tenant.

Concern: First-year students becoming tenants are often vulnerable to predatory leasing practices.

Recommendation: The Off-Campus Resource Centre should run informational campaigns to address common misconceptions and questions surrounding legal documentation and leases for new tenants.

Recommendation: The provincial government should provide funding for local non-profits and Legal Aid Ontario clinics to support students and provide legal information or education surrounding tenant rights.

At the MSU’s 2016 First Year Feedback Forum, students reported that in general their transition to living off-campus was smooth, and that McMaster’s Off-Campus Resource Centre website included a lot of useful information that aided them in their transition. Students also noted, however, that there was a gap in resources specifically aimed at understanding leases and legal documents when becoming tenants. As first-year students are often becoming tenants for the first time, they are most vulnerable to predatory leasing practices.

With this in mind, students hope to see the Off-Campus Resource Centre run informational campaigns specifically directed at first-year students with an aim of helping with the understanding of leases and other legal documents that they may encounter. Students also

¹⁷ <http://ihc.caltech.edu/>

¹⁸ <http://osl.fas.harvard.edu/houses>

¹⁹ <http://yalecollege.yale.edu/campus-life/residential-colleges>

²⁰ <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/colleges/college-listing?wssl=1>

²¹ <https://www.cam.ac.uk/about-the-university/how-the-university-and-colleges-work/structure>

hope to see programming directed at mediating disputes between landlords and tenants when issues occur.

In addition, in alignment with OUSA's stance, students wish to see the government proactively invest into community organizations and Legal Aid Ontario for the specific purpose of educating students on tenant rights.

For more information on the MSU's stances regarding student housing, please see the MSU Student Housing in Near Campus Neighbourhoods policy.

Classroom Environment

Principle: All undergraduate students at McMaster University should be able to excel academically within their first year.

Concern: In their first year, students experience much larger class sizes, which can impede academic success.

Concern: Many mandatory courses in first year include blended learning, which is a new learning style for many students and may impede academic success.

Concern: First year students report difficulty adjusting to increased workload, new learning environments, and managing time, which impedes academic success.

Concern: First year students often feel intimidated by course instructors, which can hinder students from seeking support and asking critical questions.

Recommendation: All first-year students at McMaster should have the opportunity to enrol in a course with a small class size than includes development of academic skills.

Recommendation: All blended learning classes should follow best-practices and emphasize availability of instructors in-person.

Recommendation: All lecture-based first-year courses should be podcasted.

Recommendation: Each faculty should create a council consisting of the course instructors for each mandatory course for students in said faculty. These councils would work to share best-practices and create a cohesive first year experience.

Recommendation: Instructors and teaching assistants for first year courses should receive specialized training relating to teaching first year students.

The transition to first-year is not only difficult due to changing to living arrangements and increased independence, but also due to an oftentimes large change in learning environment. In Ontario, the average class size for secondary school classes cannot exceed 22 students²². In

²² <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/120132>

comparison, MDCL 1305/1307, a common lecture hall for first-year classes, seats 616²³. These larger class sizes can be intimidating for students who are used to smaller environments with more interactions with instructors. In addition, students at the MSU's 2016 First Year Feedback Forum indicated that they wished to learn more soft-skills such as time management and study habits. In response to both of these issues, many other institutions have implemented guaranteed first-year seminar courses with a component of transitioning students into the university learning environment. For instance, at the University of Guelph, First Year Seminars (FYS) are "limited enrolment learning environments (a maximum of 18 students) focusing on interdisciplinary topics and utilizing inquiry-based pedagogy. These courses emphasize critical thinking and the development of academic skills."²⁴ All students in first year have the opportunity to take a seminar. Similarly, at Carleton University, first-year seminar (FYSM) courses are small classes with about 30 students designed around a specific subject area and offered to students in most degree programs²⁵. A similar concept at McMaster University is offered via first-year inquiry courses, such as SOC SCI 1SS3 – Inquiry in the Social Sciences or HUMAN 1QU3 – Insight and Inquiry: Questions to Challenge the World. Students believe that more sections in these courses should be offered in order to ensure that all first-year students have the opportunity to enrol in a class with a small class size.

Additionally, many mandatory courses for first year programs, particularly in the Faculty of Science, such as CHEM 1A03 – Introductory Chemistry I, CHEM 1AA3 – Introductory Chemistry II, PSYCH 1X03 – Introduction to Psychology, Neuroscience & Behaviour, PSYCH 1XX3 – Foundations of Psychology, Neuroscience, and Behaviour, BIOLOGY 1A03 – Cellular and Molecular Biology, and more, include blended learning. Blended Learning is defined by the Christensen Institute as "a formal education program in which a student learns:

1. At least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace;
2. At least in part supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home;
3. And the modalities along each student's learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience"²⁶.

While students at the MSU's 2016 First Year Forum were generally positive about their blended learning experiences, however a common theme that was identified was the wide variety in quality of experiences²⁷. For instance, students spoke very favourably about PSYCH 1X03 and 1XX3, and praised this form of blended learning. However, students struggled with the inconsistency of quality of blended learning experiences between courses. Students

²³ <http://java.mcmaster.ca/file/classrooms.0607.pdf>

²⁴ <http://www.uoguelph.ca/vpacademic/fys/>

²⁵ <https://carleton.ca/first-year-seminars/>

²⁶ <http://www.christenseninstitute.org/blended-learning-definitions-and-models/>

²⁷ MSU's First Year Feedback Forum, 2016.

believe that all courses that use blended learning at McMaster University should implement best practices such as the successes in PSYCH 1X03 and 1XX3.

In addition to sharing best practices surrounded blended learning, students believe that the instructors for mandatory first-year courses in each faculty should increase communication efforts by creating a council to create a cohesive first year experience. This council could share best-practices surrounding teaching first-year students, coordinate major deadlines and midterms, and work to create interdisciplinary learning experiences. Students also believe that instructors and teaching assistants who instruct first year courses should receive specialized training in creating a positive classroom environment for first-year students.

Students in first year have also noted difficulties with adjusting to the increased pace and workload demands of university courses. Students have identified a desire to have the opportunity to review course materials more thoroughly and at their own pace. As McMaster University is investing in Echo 360 software which allows instructors to capture lectures in equipped classrooms with virtually no additional effort, students believe that McMaster University should ensure that all lecture-based first-year courses are made available via podcast.

Mentorship

Principle: All first-year students at McMaster University should be able to access meaningful mentorship opportunities.

Concern: While a myriad of mentorship programs exists on campus for first-year students, the quality of these programs is not consistent, and many students have negative experiences.

Recommendation: McMaster University should complete a review of the first-year mentorship programs offered on campus in consultation with the MSU and relevant student groups to provide recommendations to eliminate redundancies and define and promote best-practices between programs.

Recommendation: McMaster University should aim to increase awareness of mentorship opportunities and programs for underrepresented and equity seeking groups

Students at the MSU's 2016 First Year Feedback forum agreed that peer-to-peer mentorship opportunities are important and valuable for both academic and non-academic experiences²⁸. Students noted that there was a large variety of opportunities, and they were often overwhelmed with how many different programs existed. As well, students noted that not all programs provided meaningful opportunities. For instance, oftentimes mentorship opportunities lack follow-through or mentors who reach out to students outside of specified times. As well, students felt as though mentorship programs were most meaningful when there was increased face-to-face mentorship, as well as an opportunity to interact with more than one mentor/upper-year student. Where mentorship programs may provide overlap, they

²⁸ MSU's First Year Feedback Forum, 2016.

should aim to differentiate themselves with respect to focus, whether that be by population, outcomes or otherwise.

With the myriad of programs available for mentorship on campus, students believe that McMaster University should conduct a review of all first-year mentorship programs offered on campus with a focus on streamlining and differentiating programs, as well as integrating best practices to ensure that all programs are providing valuable mentorship to first-year students. The MSU firmly stand behinds the viewpoint of student group autonomy, however we believe that the University has an obligation with respect to student affairs and institutional research and analysis to ensure that student money and resources are well spent and are the most effective they can be for students.

Financial Literacy & Financial Aid

Principle: All willing and qualified students should be able to financially access McMaster University.

Principle: All undergraduate students should be made aware of Student Financial Aid Services and be able to access financial aid opportunities.

Concern: McMaster University provides entrance scholarships that are merit-based, which does not increase access for low-income students.

Concern: With the introduction of net billing requirements as mandated by the province, this may further incentivise universities to focus financial aid efforts towards entrance scholarships.

Concern: Many first-year students are unaware of Student Financial Aid Services and the processes by which they can apply for institutional financial aid.

Concern: Many first year students feel unprepared when it comes to managing living expenses after their first year of university.

Recommendation: McMaster University should eliminate merit-based entrance scholarships and instead provide needs-based bursaries for incoming students.

Recommendation: The Province of Ontario should mandate the elimination of publicly funded merit based entrance scholarships for first year students, instead mandating the creation of needs-based bursaries for incoming students.

Recommendation: Student Financial Aid Services should provide workshops specific to first-year students about navigating the financial aid options at McMaster University and increasing awareness of bursaries and financial aid options.

Recommendation: McMaster University should continue to expand the work that Mac Money Centre does to enhance student financial literacy to include workshops and tutorials for first year students on living expenses off campus

Ensuring financial access to post-secondary education at McMaster University is an essential principle for students. While the government of Ontario provides comprehensive financial aid options through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), additional financial aid options also exist at the institutional level. Of particular interest to first-year students, McMaster University (like other institutions in the province) provides merit-based entrance scholarships. The entrance awards for the 2016-17 year were as follows²⁹:

<i>Admission Average</i>	<i>Value</i>
95%+	\$2500
90 - 94.99%	\$1000
85 - 89.99%	\$750
80 - 84.99%	\$500

Merit-based awards oftentimes award students who are not in financial need, and in some cases, are awarded in increased proportions to students from high-income backgrounds. Students believe that in order to achieve equity, McMaster University should eliminate the practice of awarding merit-based entrance scholarships, and instead use funds for needs-based bursaries to increase access to education.

In addition, first-year students find the financial aid system at McMaster to be difficult to become acquainted with. At the MSU's 2016 First Year Feedback Forum, students who had accessed Student Financial Aid Services found it helpful and useful, however, many students were altogether unaware of the services available. Students suggested email reminders and workshops directed specifically at first-year students in order to raise awareness about the office and what it offers³⁰.

While students fundamentally believe in the benefits of the Provincial Government's new net billing requirements³¹ to give students clear information with respect to the real costs of University, we recognize that there may be an unintended consequence. Due to the display of real costs of education up front in offer letters to students, net billing will place pressure on institutions to make more generous entrance scholarship offers to attract high quality students. McMaster students firmly believe that the Provincial government should mandate the use of public funding to not be allowed for merit based entrance scholarships, eliminating this potential consequence. Further McMaster University must recognize that the quality of institution and the principles by which it stands for, including financial accessibility, build a University culture that is consistent with its mandate.

²⁹ <http://sfas.mcmaster.ca/scholarships/entrance-scholarships/>

³⁰ MSU First Year Feedback Forum, 2016.

³¹ http://www.ousa.ca/blog_net_billing_what_is_it_and_why_do_i_care

Students are pleased with the development of the Mac Money Centre as a project originated out of the McMaster Student Success Centre³². The program, which aids in providing financial literacy tools to McMaster students is centered around money management and budgeting. Students believe that opportunities exist to expand the programming available through this project to include tutorials for first year students focused on living expenses they may have to newly navigate after leaving the residence system.

Wellness and Well-being

Principle: McMaster University should proactively address and attempt to prevent any potential decline in well-being for all students.

Concern: Students transitioning into post-secondary are more likely to increase physical inactivity, stress levels, and negative changes to their psychological well-being.

Concern: Many students enter McMaster with existing disabilities, and face difficulty in transitioning to new supports alongside transitioning into university.

Recommendation: McMaster University should encourage first-year students to engage in physical activity through a buddy-system and record-keeping interventions.

Recommendation: McMaster University should continue to provide interventions provided by the Arrive & Thrive project after its 18-month grant from the Mental Health Innovation Fund is completed.

Recommendation: McMaster University should focus on interventions that aid students in building self-compassion.

Recommendation: McMaster University should invest into resources available on campus such as the Student Wellness Centre and Student Accessibility Services to ensure students have sufficient supports at the university level.

Many studies have marked the decline in well-being that accompanies transition into post-secondary education^{33,34}. This paper itself touches on many of the reasons that incoming students experience this phenomenon: changes in responsibility, living arrangements, financial stress, academic stress, changes to lifestyle, and more. Research has shown that health-related quality of life (HRQOL) declined upon entering university, and through time spent in the institution, the decline in HRQOL had a strong association with psychosomatic

³² money.mcmaster.ca/

³³ Gall, T. L., Evans, D. R., & Bellerose, S. (2000). Transition to first-year university: Patterns of change in adjustment across life domains and time. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 19(4), 544-567. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2000.19.4.544>.

³⁴ Terry, M. L., Leary, M. R., & Mehta, S. (2013). Self-compassion as a buffer against homesickness, depression, and dissatisfaction in the transition to college. *Self and Identity*, 12(3), 278-290. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15e298868.2012.667913>

symptoms such as depression, stress, and anxiety³⁵. Students believe it is essential to provide proactive programming for first-year students in order to promote wellness and well-being amongst the incoming population.

Specifically, physical activity has been shown to decline upon entrance to post-secondary education – one study found that physical inactivity increase almost 4-fold amongst individuals transitioning into post-secondary³⁶. However, physical activity has also been positively associated with life satisfaction and psychological well-being in a study conducted of 17,246 university students³⁷. Therefore students believe that the University should encourage students to engage in physical activity through various interventions. One project at the University of Western Ontario, Project IMPACT, saw an increase in physical activity by introducing a buddy-system and record-keeping device into interventions designed to increase physical activity among university students³⁸.

As well, McMaster University itself has been the recipient of funding from the then Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities' Mental Health Innovation Fund, out of which the Arrive & Thrive project has been created. Arrive & Thrive's mandate is to "examine patterns of stress and coping behaviours among students entering and already studying at McMaster, then to develop and evaluate a series of brief interventions targeting stress, healthy and unhealthy coping habits including substance use"³⁹. Arrive & Thrive runs a number of interventions, including:

- PAUSE: a one-on-one session with a counsellor designed for individualized assessment and discussion of a student's substance use
- COG (Cooperative Outdoor Adventure Games): weekly adventure games across campus
- WIND (Walk in Nature Days): weekly one-hour hikes in Cootes paradise
- KORU: an evidence-based four-week program surrounding mindfulness, meditation, and stress management
- Exploring Change: four-week program for forming or breaking a habit

³⁵ Vaez M, Voss M, Laflamme L. Health-related quality of life among university students. In: Preedy, VR, Watson RR, eds. Handbook of Disease Burdens and Quality of Life Measures. New York, NY: Springer; 2010:2555–2577.

³⁶ Larouche R, Laurencelle L, Shephard RJ, et al. Life transitions in the waning of physical activity from childhood to adult life in the Trois-Rivieres study. *J Phys Act Health*. 2012;9:516–524.

³⁷ Grant N, Wardle J, Steptoe A. The relationship between life satisfaction and health behavior: a cross-cultural analysis of young adults. *Int J Behav Med*. 2009;16:259–268.

³⁸ Cholewa S, Irwin JD. Project IMPACT brief report on a pilot programme promoting physical activity among university students. *J Health Psychol*. 2008;13:1207– 1212.

³⁹ <https://wellness.mcmaster.ca/counselling/arrive-and-thrive/>

While the 18-month funding period will be completed in summer of 2017, students feel that the programs offered are valuable and the McMaster University should fund Arrive & Thrive to continue the interventions currently being offered.

Finally, studies on the first year of university life have found that self-compassion is an essential component of managing the challenges that accompany the transition to university life^{40,41}. Self-compassion is composed of three components, as defined by Neff⁴²:

- 1) *self-kindness, which represents the ability to be caring and kind to ourselves rather than excessively critical,*
- 2) *common humanity, which represents an understanding that everyone makes mistakes and fails and our experience is part of a larger common experience,*
- 3) *mindfulness, which represents being present and aware while keeping thoughts in balance rather than overidentifying.*

Based on the results of the cited studies, students believe that interventions on first-year student well-being should focus on self-compassion interventions.

Additionally, students with disabilities face unique challenges when entering first-year. Among these is transitioning to new supports. More information on the MSU's stances on transition to McMaster University for students with disabilities can be found in the MSU's University Accessibility policy, in the section "University Transition". Highlighted in this paper is the need for McMaster University to invest resources into supports on campus for students with disabilities, such as the Student Wellness Centre and Student Accessibility Services.

Policy Statement

Whereas: All first-year students should have the opportunity to live in residence.

And whereas: First year students should have the same residence experience with respect to quality of maintenance and support systems put in place, regardless of the location and size of their building.

And whereas: Students in residence should have autonomy over ancillary fees that exist to enhance student life within residence.

And whereas: Students in residence should not be charged unjustifiable fees for services or products.

⁴⁰ Fong, M., & Loi, N. M. (2016). The mediating role of self-compassion in student psychological health. *Australian Psychologist*, n/a. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/ap.12185>.

⁴¹ Gunnell KE, Mosewich AD, McEwen CE, Eklund RC, Crocker PR. Don't be so hard on yourself! Changes in self-compassion during the first year of university are associated with changes in well-being. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 2017 Mar 1;107:43-8.

⁴² Neff, K. D. (2003a). Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. *Self and Identity*, 2(2), 85-101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15298860309032>.

And whereas: Students in residence should not be forced to purchase goods or services that they do not intend to use.

And whereas: All residence students should be able to dine on-campus, regardless of dietary restriction.

And whereas: The mandatory meal plan should not be a financial barrier for students to live in residence.

And whereas: The mandatory meal plan should ensure food security for all students living on residence.

And whereas: First-years who live off-campus should have access to the same resources and supports as on-campus first-years.

And whereas: All first-year students becoming tenants must be able to easily access and understand the rights and responsibilities of a tenant.

And whereas: All undergraduate students at McMaster University should be able to excel academically within their first year.

And whereas: All first-year students at McMaster University should be able to access meaningful mentorship opportunities.

And whereas: All willing and qualified students should be able to financially access McMaster University.

And whereas: All undergraduate students should be made aware of Student Financial Aid Services and be able to access financial aid opportunities.

And whereas: McMaster University should proactively address and attempt to prevent any potential decline in well-being for all students.

Be It Resolved That: McMaster University should provide a first-year residence guarantee.

Be It Further Resolved That (BIFRT): Future residence developments should ensure a variety of room types and applicable pricing models.

BIFRT: McMaster University should ensure that all off campus residence opportunities are up to the same standard of quality and support as on-campus residences.

BIFRT: In the interim, McMaster University should eliminate the Residence Admission cut-off and provide spaces that take into consideration priority applications for students with disabilities, Crown Wards, first generations students, and Indigenous students.

BIFRT: McMaster University should create financial assistance options specific for low-income first-year students wanting to access residence.

BIFRT: McMaster University should provide the option for students to make two payment installments on their residence cost, consistent with the two payment installment of OSAP.

BIFRT: Any future changes to the Residence Life Activity Fee should be put to referendum of all residence students, with clear parameters for the use of the fee.

BIFRT: Students should have considerable control over the use of the Residence Life Activity Fee.

BIFRT: Housing and Conference Services should remove the penalty fees for lock out keys.

BIFRT: Students living in Mary E. Keyes Residence or Bates Residence should not be required to purchase a meal plan.

BIFRT: The Reduced Meal Plan should be expanded to be offered to all students living in residence.

BIFRT: Hospitality Services should provide the option for students to make two payment installments on their meal plan, consistent with the two payment installment of OSAP.

BIFRT: Hospitality Services should ensure that food meeting cultural, religious, and other dietary restrictions are available at Centro and La Piazza.

BIFRT: In the short term, McMaster University should provide needs-based burasries specific to the Off-Campus Community Advisor program to give off-campus first-years higher levels of support and provide a more robust and equitable system.

BIFRT: In the long term, McMaster University should move to a house system, in which all incoming first years are assigned to a residence regardless of whether or not they live on-campus.

BIFRT: The Off-Campus Resource Centre should run informational campaigns to address common misconceptions and questions surrounding legal documentation and leases for new tenants.

BIFRT: The provincial government should provide funding for local non-profits and Legal Aid Ontario clinics to support students and provide legal information or education surrounding tenant rights.

BIFRT: All first-year students at McMaster should have the opportunity to enrol in a course with a small class size than includes development of academic skills.

BIFRT: All blended learning classes should follow best-practices and emphasize availability of instructors in-person.

BIFRT: All lecture-based first-year courses should be podcasted.

BIFRT: Each faculty should create a council consisting of the course instructors for each mandatory course for students in said faculty. These councils would work to share best-practices and create a cohesive first year experience.

BIFRT: Instructors and teaching assistants for first year courses should receive specialized training relating to teaching first year students.

BIFRT: McMaster University should complete a review of the first-year mentorship programs offered on campus in consultation with the MSU and relevant student groups to provide recommendations to eliminate redundancies and define and promote best-practices between programs.

BIFRT: McMaster University should aim to increase awareness of mentorship opportunities and programs for underrepresented and equity-seeking groups.

BIFRT: McMaster University should eliminate merit-based entrance scholarships and instead provide needs-based bursaries for incoming students.

BIFRT: The Province of Ontario should mandate the elimination of publicly funded merit based entrance scholarships for first year students, instead mandating the creation of needs-based bursaries for incoming students.

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