ADVOCACY POSITION STATEMENT
April 2024

WUSA ADVOCACY POSITION STATEMENT:
Student Mental Health

ISSUE: Ensuring undergraduate students at the University of Waterloo have access to quality and timely mental health supports when they need it, contributing to a meaningful university experience.

RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITY:

- University of Waterloo
- Government of Ontario
- Federal Government
- Students

DETAILS:

The University of Waterloo is home to a student body of over 35,000 undergraduates, including over 26,000 full-time co-op students and more than 30,000 students from over 120 countries. Based on results from the 2021 Equity Survey, Waterloo has a diverse student body with students self-identifying across multiple demographic dimensions, some of which include their racial identity, sexual identity, religion or spiritual affiliation, disability, and residency status.

Students from all over Canada and around the world opt for Waterloo due to its recognition as one of North America's top universities, ranked #1 in Canada for entrepreneurial learning, #2 in Canada for its innovation, and #3 for best overall university in the country. Despite Waterloo's reputation for being one of the best, this is not reflected in the data seen when looking at the student experience.

From qualitative data collected by the Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association (WUSA) in 2023, many students describe their experience at Waterloo as isolating, saying they struggle with their academics due to their mental health and would benefit from a university-wide focus on mental health and related services. Additionally, data from the 2021 Equity Survey showed that students who reported having a disability most frequently reported mental health disabilities (71%), compared to other disabilities such as neurodivergence (42%), cognitive or learning disability (10%), or an ongoing medical condition (8%). While there are mental health services and

resources available on campus, students are unaware of these resources or where to find information about accessing them, and therefore, not utilizing them.

Based on data and information collected from our students, it is apparent that having access to timely and quality supports that address the diverse needs of our student body is indispensable for ensuring their well-being and success.

Some of the concerns students face with regards to their mental health can be categorized into three (3) main domains:

1. The Waterloo student experience
2. Accessibility
3. Intersectionality

IMPACT / ANALYSIS:

The Waterloo student experience

Student mental health and the availability and accessibility of mental health supports are significantly shaped by broad political, economic, and social factors. The Waterloo Town and Gown Committee report found a shortfall of 5,000 beds for students in the region (Town and Gown Committee, 2023). Without adequate housing, students may experience increased financial strains and struggle to meet academic and work-related goals, all of which impact student mental health. In the KW region, 1 in 10 households struggle with food insecurity, which also impacts students and their mental health. (The Food Bank of Waterloo Region, 2023) Pressures relating to academic performance, work and hustle culture are named as key causes. Inadequate availability of mental health supports to meet these specific student experiences exacerbates student mental health issues. When student mental well-being is precarious, student experience is adversely impacted.

Federal and provincial funding for mental health targeted at post-secondary institutions and students has been limited. While public funding for mental health experienced a slight rise during and immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic, much of this funding was time-limited, tied to the pandemic, and is now rapidly winding down. This marks a greater political shift away from policies addressing the long-term impacts of COVID-19, which continue to impact the accessibility and affordability of education and student mental health. Additionally, a lack of public funding for universities and for public goods like health care and mental health care have placed financial burdens on universities to meet service gaps and provide mental health support in greater quantities themselves. This has negative impacts on the availability and quality of mental health supports for students leading to large backlogs, strained

healthcare professionals, and a disconnect between student needs and what the university is capable of providing.

Currently, UWaterloo Counselling Services' website offers individual appointments, wellness programs, same-day counselling, how to help a friend, and mental health training. The link to individual appointments clarifies that appointments are made through a phone call, are either in-person, by phone, or by video, are 50 minutes long, and are free. The link to same-day counselling clarifies that these appointments are made by filling out an online form that is only available certain days of the week, they are in-person or virtual, and are 1.5 hours long. An environmental scan of online forums on UWaterloo services suggested that while these options exist, students are recommended by their peers to use their Waterloo insurance and seek external options when asked where to find mental health resources. This suggests that the resources available on campus that students are aware of have brought negative/unhelpful experiences leading to them recommending external support. Overall, mental health help resources provided are not perceived as effective by the students.

Accessibility

An environmental scan of online forums on UWaterloo services suggests that student perception of counselling services includes long wait times and only short-term counselling. Students say that more extensive information on consistency and longevity should be provided. Counselling Services provides cognitive-behavioural therapy, mindfulness exercises, and many other approaches, although there is no professional mental health assessment with any potential to receive a diagnosis and/or medical prescription. The services provided seem limited and should be developed to better suit students' needs. Surveys have shown that 80% of students are aware of these counselling services, although only 54% are aware of wellness programs and only 24-30% of students are aware of the 24/7 mental health support resources that the University recommends. It is important to prioritize increasing students' awareness of these resources (Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association, 2024)

As of March 2024, multiple other universities in Ontario have incorporated a form of around-the-clock support on campus whether it is anonymous, online, peer-to-peer support (Western University), an urgent crisis line (Brock University), or on-campus support (Windsor University). A few schools only have appointments available 4-5 days in advance (Carleton University and University of Ottawa), resulting in shorter wait times. Different services are provided at other schools such as pharmacotherapy, psychiatric care, group sessions (University of Toronto), psychoeducation (Queens University), and mental health assessments for prescriptions on campus (Carleton

University). The University of Toronto Scarborough campus offers counselling with third-party organizations to address student demand.

Overall, other universities in Ontario are currently providing more extensive services including professional mental health assessments for prescriptions and 24/7 on-campus support. In addition, some have even developed strategies to reduce wait times including the addition of third-party options and having appointments available 4-5 days in advance. Other universities in Ontario are providing additional opportunities for students such as peer-to-peer drop-in support, email support, or a mental health and wellbeing committee are available. Lastly, alternative ways to book appointments have been developed in other schools including a wellness app for students. Students at the University of Waterloo deserve to have more extensive services for mental health available, including professional mental health assessments and 24/7 on-campus support.

Currently, around-the-clock external mental health resources recommended by the University of Waterloo include EmpowerMe, Good2Talk, and Here 24/7. Of these resources, all have been perceived as good, safe, and convenient, although, mostly helpful as a first step only. Currently, there are no around-the-clock resources on campus, peer-to-peer wellness resources, third-party therapy options, or professional mental health assessments on campus like most other schools have incorporated.

The University's current counselling model is designed to meet student needs through brief counselling sessions. While a six-session cap on brief counselling appointments has been discretionarily removed, partnering with the local community and exploring community-oriented approaches to mental health is a crucial step towards increasing the accessibility and availability of mental health supports to meet diverse student needs. Currently, there are no community-oriented approaches of counselling that consider mental health within the broad contexts of community and societal factors (political, social, and economic). This approach plays an important role in early prevention and intervention, access to resources, cultural competence, and opportunities for participation and self-advocacy.

Intersectionality

The University of Waterloo has a diverse student body with students self-identifying across a diverse range of demographic dimensions. Meeting the mental health needs of a diverse student population requires a nuanced understanding and sensitivity towards unique student needs stemming from lived experience, student experience on campus and at work, student experience in the local community, and broader social, political, and economic factors. A diverse representation in mental healthcare that reflects the student population is essential.

Wellness programs that are not currently available to students on the Waterloo campus include female support groups, support for students with disabilities, Middle Eastern, East Asian, and international student support spaces. All groups should be represented in peer support programs; therefore, more diverse options are needed. Additionally, representation of Black, East Asian, and Latin males is missing in our wellness support staff along with any non-binary, people of color, or Indigenous persons. The vast majority of wellness support staff are white females. Intersectionality seen in support staff is very important for students to see in order to increase accessibility; therefore, more diverse support staff are required.

POSITION / RECOMMENDATION(S):
WUSA supports initiatives that encourage:

1. Building relationships with community partners to enhance the quality, availability, and accessibility of mental health supports and services for students with a focus on community-oriented approaches.
    - Community approaches can look like restorative justice, self and group advocacy initiatives, community spaces and recreational groups for marginalized communities, and Indigenous approaches to mental health and wellbeing.
2. Increasing the availability of diverse mental health supports, resources, staff, and programs that represent the student body and meet the intersectional needs of the student populous.
3. Develop a way for marginalized students to identify counsellors with similar equity-deserving backgrounds when looking to book counselling appointments.
4. General increases in the availability and accessibility of mental health resources, programs, and staff.
5. An increase in support and staff training to better meet student concerns relating to broader political, social, and economic factors that impact the diverse student populous.
6. Increased and consistent funding from the government for post-secondary institutions and surrounding communities to fund wellness services and mental health resources.

ATTACHMENT(S):
WUSA Accessibility Report May 2021

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https://www.reddit.com/r/waterloo/comments/hy5thj/where_to_call_for_a_mental_health_crisis_that_is/

https://www.reddit.com/r/uwaterloo/comments/t26nw2/are_uwaterloos_mental_health_resources_good/

https://www.reddit.com/r/uwaterloo/comments/16wm303/how_do_i_find_mental_health_resources/

https://www.reddit.com/r/uwaterloo/comments/spjcop/how_to_get_an_offcampus_therapist_guide/

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