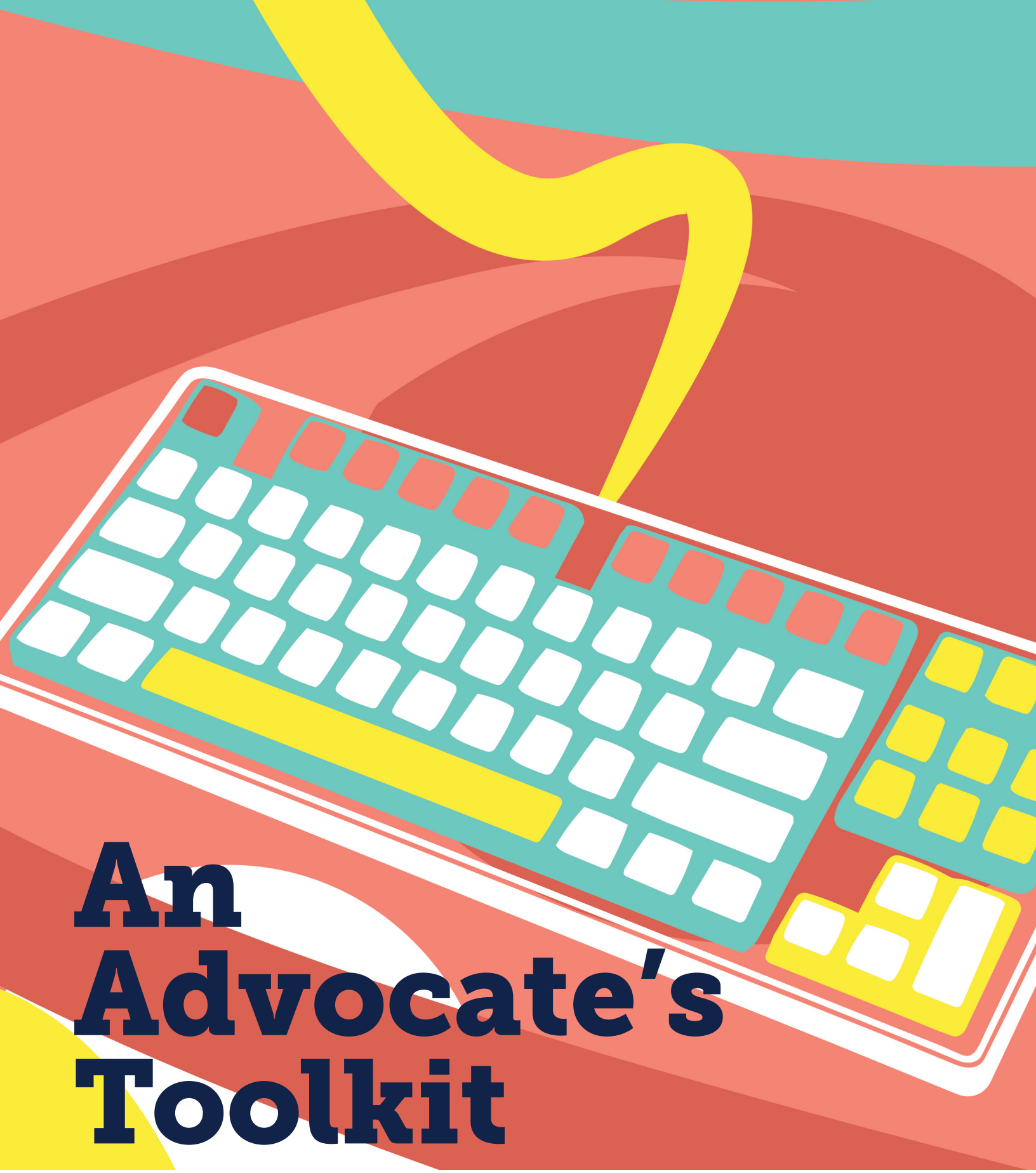




An Advocate's Toolkit

Co-op edition

Table of Contents

1. Start Here If You Can't Find a Job

2. Start Here If You Want to Quit, Rethink, or Renege

3. Start Here When You Need Clarity or Change

4. Start Here If You Feel Overwhelmed

5. Resources



Introduction

A quick triage guide for navigating co-op stress, confusion, and difficult situations at UW.

Co-op can feel overwhelming.

- Recruitment overlaps with midterms and finals.
- Policies can feel dense.
- The job market is competitive.

If you are struggling, you are not alone.

Many students feel confused, behind, or unsure at some point in their co-op journey.

This guide is here to help you slow down and take the next right step.



This guide will help you:

Figure out what to do next

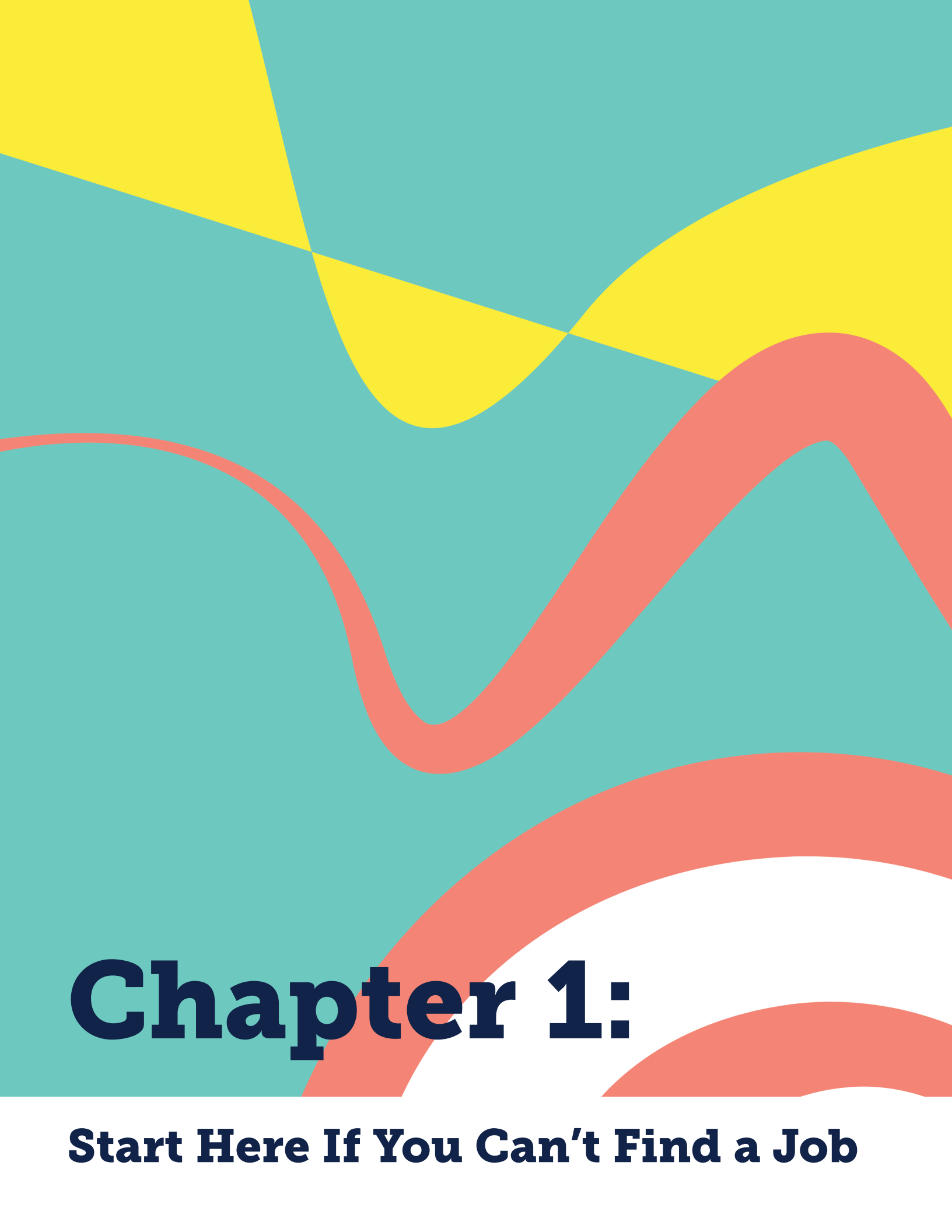
Understand your actual options

Know who to contact

Protect your academic standing and wellbeing

Check out the [Roles and Responsibility](#) page by Co-operative and Experiential Education (CEE) as a great starting point on who you can contact or reach out to.

Co-op regulations, rules, and processes are determined by Co-operative and Experiential Education (CEE) and may be updated over time.



Chapter 1:

Start Here If You Can't Find a Job

You're in your first co-op term applying on WaterlooWorks like everyone else, but the postings feel dry and insanely competitive, you send out a ton of applications, get little to nothing back, and by the end you're like:

"wait... is it just me or did I mess this up?"

First: What you're experiencing is common.

- Many first and second work term students struggle.
- Some programs have fewer postings.
- The market shifts year to year.

This is not just you.



What to do now?



Check your status on WaterlooWorks.

Confirm you are eligible to continue applying in later cycles or after the term begins.



Ask your advisor directly.

"What realistic options do I have if I do not secure a role this cycle?"



Book support through the Centre for Career Development.

If you are applying and not hearing back, it may be worth revisiting your resume and or cover letter. The purpose of these documents is to get interviews, so if you are not getting interviews, tailoring or tweaking them could make a difference.

Resume reviews, cover letter support, and mock interviews can be booked online. Do this before your next cycle. Many organizations or faculties will also often offer resume review workshops as well.



Explore self-arranged jobs.

You can find your own role and request approval through WaterlooWorks. Contact your co-op advisor early if the employer is new to UW.

Check out: Arrange Your Own Job, webpage by CEE.



Apply outside WaterlooWorks.

Use LinkedIn, company websites, nonprofit boards, and community employers. CEE has an official list of job boards and external job finding sources!



Ask about WE Accelerate (First-year students only).

Registration opens quickly and spots can fill. Check deadlines early.

WE Accelerate is open to undergraduate co-op students from all faculties who are going into their first work term and haven't yet found employment. If you missed your first scheduled work term, and are currently looking for employment for your second work term, you can still participate (unless you only have four work terms in your co-op program sequence). Keep in mind, that **WE Accelerate counts as a flexible work term credit and you need at least three standard work terms to graduate.**

Important to know

Students are typically allowed one failed work term without removal from co-op. However, always confirm your specific program rules with your academic advisor.

You may still be able to secure a job after the official start date if it falls within the approved window.

Important: Program Requirements

For many programs, completing required co-op terms is a condition of remaining in the co-op stream. Not securing a work term after multiple cycles can affect your standing in the program.

This is not meant to scare you! Instead, its meant to help you plan early.

If you're concerned about program progression

- Ask your academic advisor directly how many unsuccessful terms are permitted.
- Confirm whether there are academic progression thresholds tied to employment.
- Ask what alternative pathways exist, such as WE Accelerate, reduced load options, stream changes, or sequence adjustments.
- Speak with your academic advisor about how a missed work term affects degree requirements.
- Clarify deadlines. Many policies are time-based.

Get this information in writing, so you understand your exact situation.

Flexible Work Term Credit

A Flexible Work Term Credit is an option that may allow students to receive co-op credit for an approved alternative to a standard WaterlooWorks job (such as certain self-arranged or structured experiences). It is not automatic and must be pre-approved by CEE and meet specific program requirements before it can count toward a work term.

If you have been told your standing may be affected

- Ask whether you can petition based on documented circumstances.
Learn more about this from: [Policy 70 – Co-op Student Petitions and Grievances.](#)
- Gather documentation early if health, family, visa, or workplace factors contributed.
- Ask whether transferring to the regular stream is possible and what that changes.
- Speak to an academic advisor before making any permanent decisions.

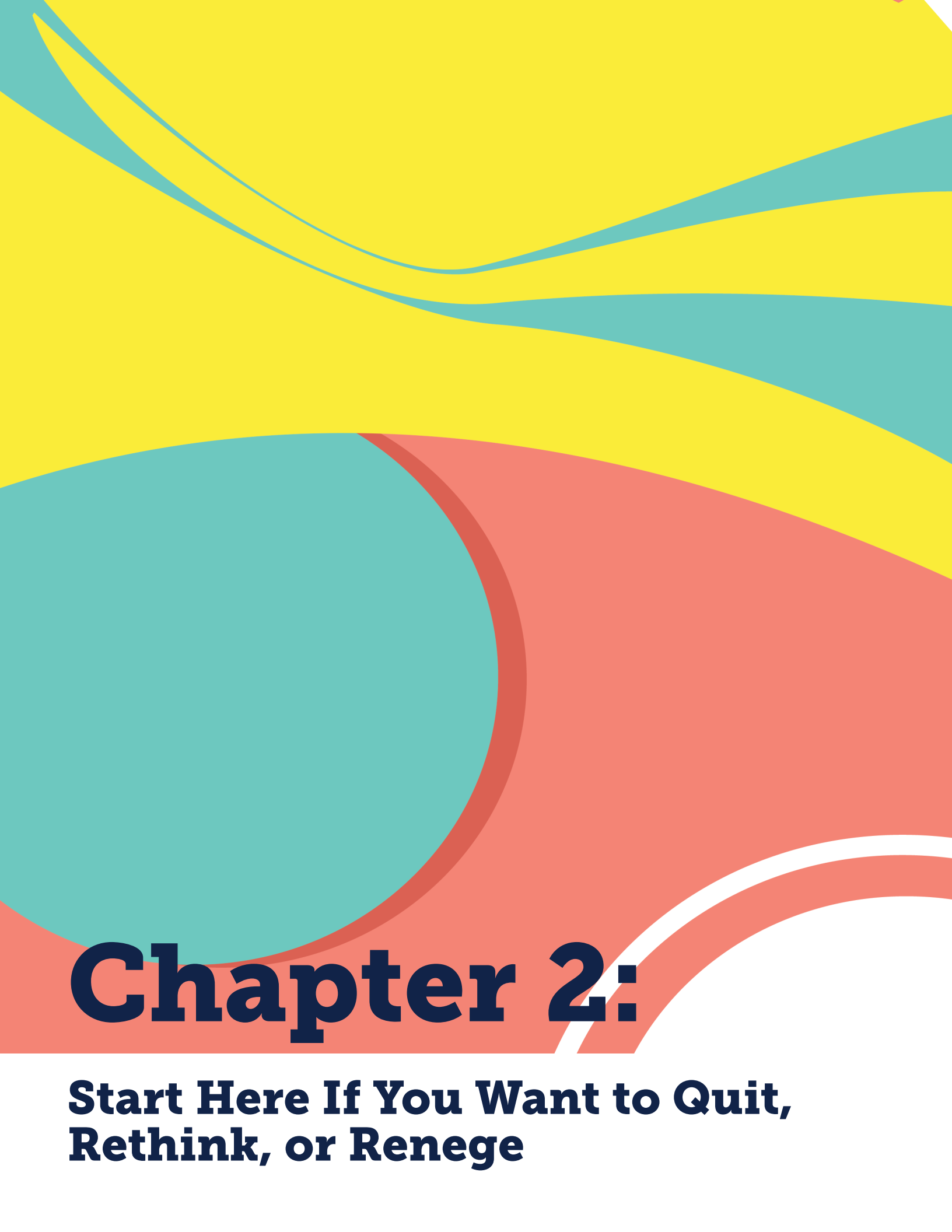
This is serious, but it is not automatic. Policies have review mechanisms.
Students sometimes assume removal is final when there may still be options.

Equity Note

These opportunities may not be the best fit for you, not because it is unavailable to you, but instead that situation may not be best suited for your situation.

Reminder

One difficult term does not define your career path.



Chapter 2:

**Start Here If You Want to Quit,
Rethink, or Renege**

What is renegeing?

This is when you say “yes” to a co-op job, and then change your mind after the match is finalized.



The co-op system treats this seriously because

- Employers rely on students to follow through
- It can damage relationships between the school and employers
- It affects fairness for other students who wanted that role

At Waterloo, renegeing can come with penalties.

- There is no longer a penalty of losing access to the co-op job board, but you will not get a co-op credit for that term or be able to return to study.
- Students can view postings on all job boards in WaterlooWorks, apart from the Full Cycle Service board. This does not impact co-op opportunities, as students are not eligible to register for any co-op roles, including Approved Off Campus Jobs (AOJ's), for co-op credit through that board.
- A second renege will result in a “No Credit Received (NCR) on your academic transcript record.
- A note is added to your co-op record for internal tracking purposes only (it is not visible to employers or others at the university)
- You are strongly encouraged to speak with a co-op advisor before making any decisions
- This may also affect US J-1 VISA Eligibility - The J-1 visa is a non-immigrant visa for foreign nationals participating in exchange visitor programs in the United States.
- It could also affect your ability to work internationally in a future work term - especially the second half of an eight-month sequence.

Do not act before getting advice.

Leaving a job, reneging, or stepping away from co-op can affect:

- Work term credit
- Future eligibility in the co-op program
- Immigration status for international students
- Post-graduate work permit timelines

Reneging is a significant decision and should generally only be considered when there are compelling circumstances that make it necessary.

While there are situations where reneging may be the right choice, it's important to understand that employers invest time and resources into the hiring process.

If students frequently renege on accepted offers, some employers may become less likely to recruit through Waterloo in the future, which can reduce opportunities available to future co-op students. If you're thinking about reneging, it's a good idea to speak with your co-op advisor first to understand your options and the potential implications.

Learn more about reneging and it's implications on the [Roles and Responsibilities section on reneging](#).

Before deciding, slow down and gather information.

Step 1: Email your co-op advisor

Clearly outline

- What is happening
- Why you are concerned
- What outcome you are hoping for

Ask

- What are the academic consequences?
- What are the co-op consequences?
- Is there a petition pathway available?

Request relevant policies in writing.



Step 2: If the issue involves safety, harassment, unpaid work, or contract concerns

- Keep copies of your contract.
- Save emails, messages, and pay stubs.
- Write down dates, hours worked, and details of incidents.

Then

- Inform your co-op advisor immediately.
- Ask about harassment advisors or specialized supports.
- If needed, contact legal or employment standards support. See the resources below for additional guidance and assistance.

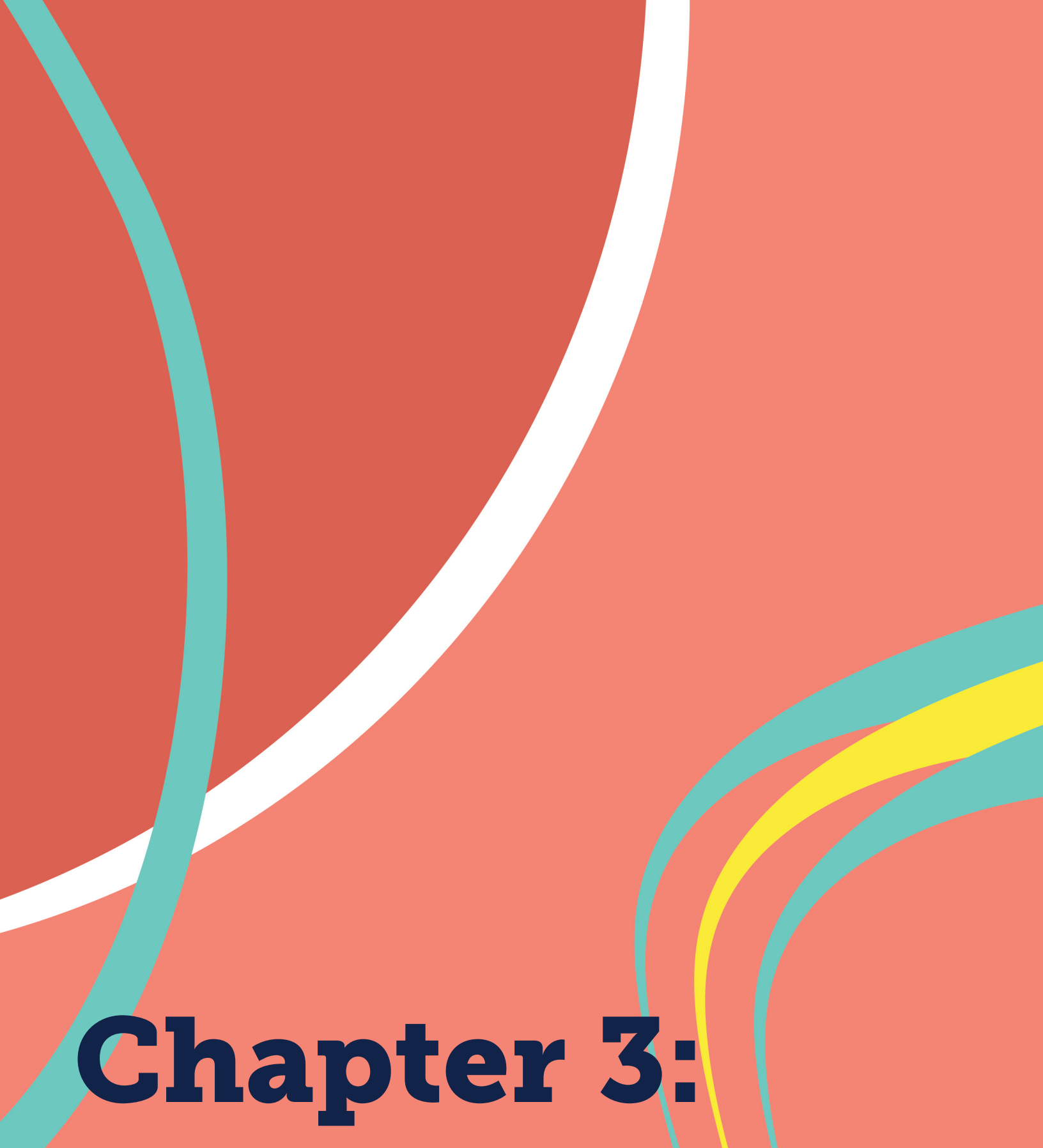
You can ask for help without filing a formal complaint. Asking for advice does not automatically trigger a disciplinary process.

International students

Before quitting or reneging, speak with:

- Your immigration consultant
- Your co-op advisor

Visa conditions and future work permit eligibility can be affected seriously by co-op standing. Do not guess. Confirm.



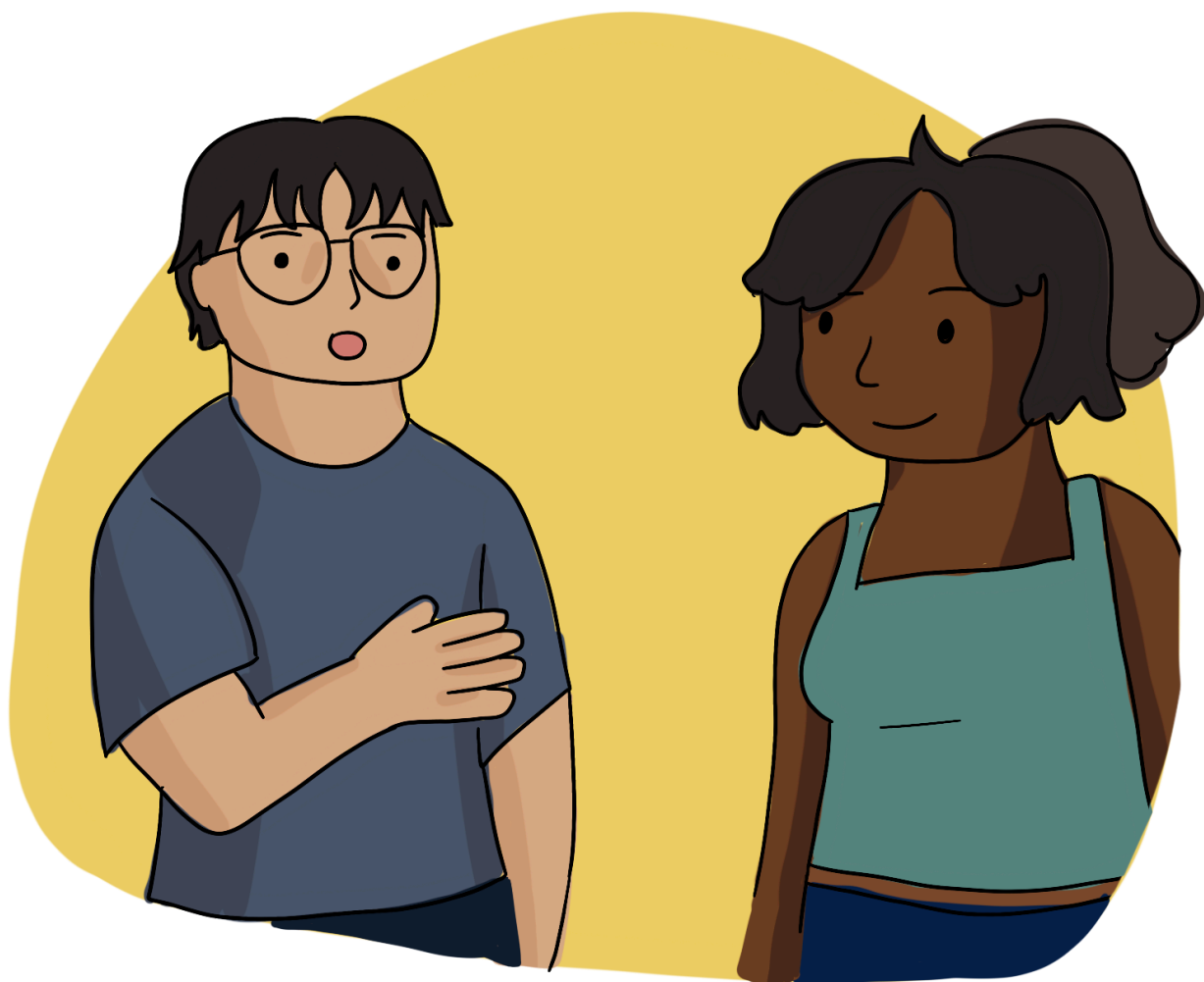
Chapter 3:

**Start Here When You Need
Clarity or Change**

If your co-op path ever feels confusing or unfair, it's okay to ask questions, get things in writing, or even go beyond your advisor for clarity, advocating for yourself isn't causing problems, it's just making sure you're being treated fairly and know your options.

Co-op works best when students understand both their responsibilities and their rights. If something feels unresolved after speaking with your advisor, there are structured steps you can take.

Advocating for yourself does not mean conflict.
It means asking for review, clarity, or fairness.



Step 1: Clarify Within the Co-op System

Start with your assigned co-op advisor.

If you feel stuck

- Ask for the specific policy that applies to your situation.
- Request consequences in writing.
- Ask whether there is a supervisor or faculty-level review option.
- Confirm whether a petition is appropriate.

Keep records of all communication.

Step 2: Petitions & Formal Review

Petitions are formal requests to make an exception to standard co-op rules.

Visit the [Policy 70 student petitions and grievances page](#), for general understanding and follow up with your co-op advisor.

They may apply in cases involving

- Health concerns
- Family emergencies
- Workplace misconduct
- Administrative errors
- Significant extenuating circumstances

Ask your advisor

- Where do I submit the petition?
- What documentation is required?
- What is the deadline?
- Is there an appeal process if it is denied?

Petitions are reviewed through faculty or co-op governance channels. Outcomes depend on documentation and policy. If denied, ask whether further review is possible.

Step 3: Independent & Confidential Support

If you want guidance outside the co-op reporting structure:

Confidential Ombuds Office

The Ombuds Office is neutral and confidential.

They can

- Help you understand university policies
- Explain your rights and responsibilities
- Explore informal resolution
- Walk you through formal complaint options

They do not report conversations unless there is a serious safety concern.

WUSA Advocacy & Board of Directors

WUSA supports students navigating systemic or policy-level concerns.

You can

- Bring forward concerns that affect multiple students
- Ask how co-op policy concerns can be raised formally

The WUSA Board of Directors oversees governance and advocacy priorities. There are on average 1-2 directors who are assigned to advocate for co-op related issues. They can further forward these concerns with CEE or redirect them to the right resources. This can also be a helpful way to provide anonymous feedback to CEE.

You can

- Email Board members
- Attend open meetings
- Raise concerns about transparency, fees, or systemic barriers

WUSA does not replace co-op advisors. It ensures student voices at large are represented in spaces where decisions are made.

Step 4: Legal & Employment Rights Support

If your issue involves unpaid wages, discrimination, unsafe work, or contract violations, you may seek external advice.

Options include

- Waterloo Region Community Legal Services
- Legal Aid Ontario
- Ontario Ministry of Labour
- Student legal insurance coverage, if applicable

These organizations can explain your rights under Ontario employment and human rights law. International students should confirm immigration implications before leaving a job or filing formal complaints.

Your WUSA legal services covers employment concerns as long as you did not opt out of the fee.

Final Reminder

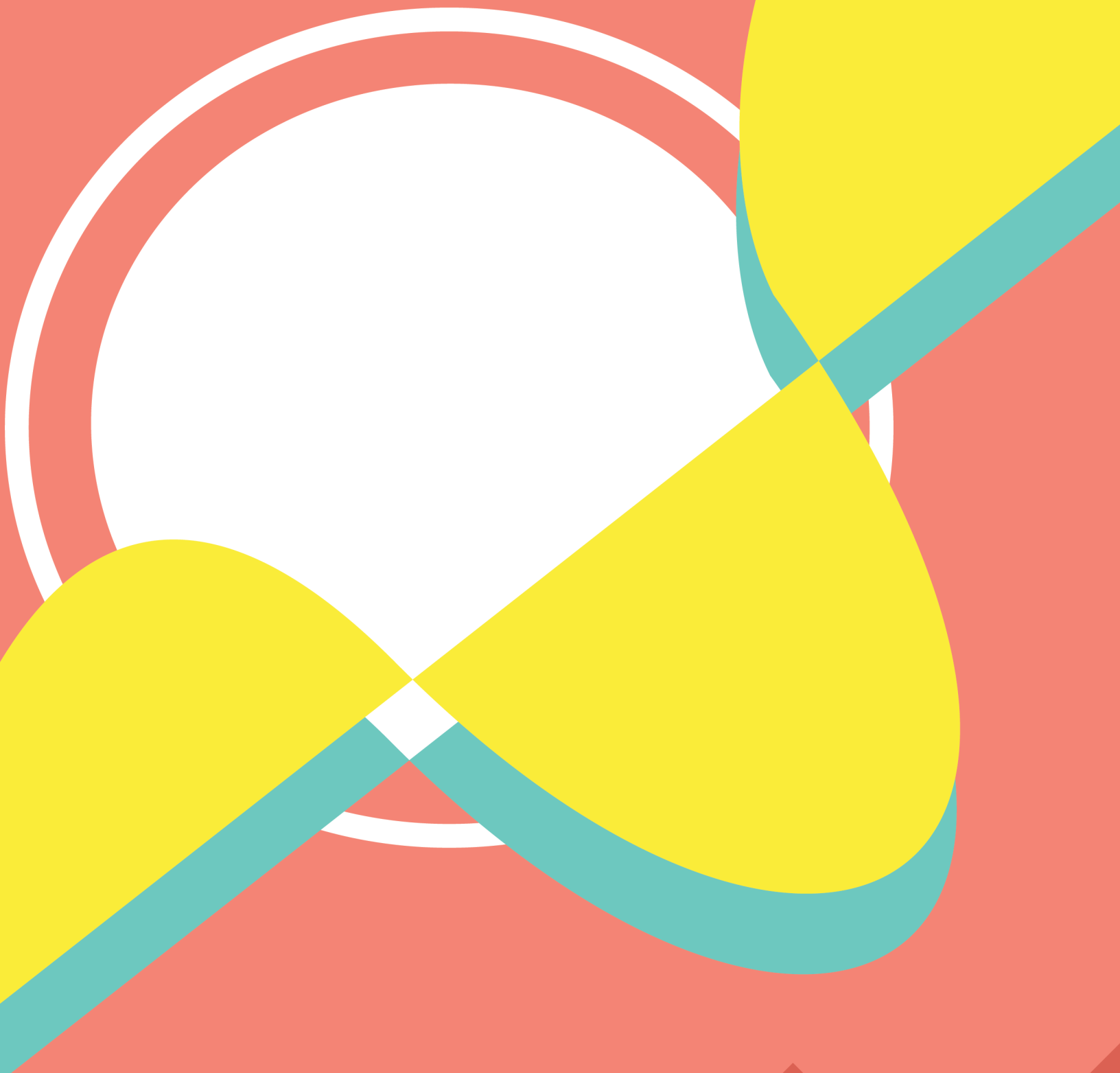
Escalation is not about being difficult.
It is about protecting your academic standing, finances, and safety.

You deserve clear information.

You deserve fair process.

You deserve safe work.

And you deserve support while navigating all of it.



Chapter 4:

**Start Here If You Feel
Overwhelmed**

Recruitment often feels like an extra course layered onto a full academic term.

Applications, interviews, rankings, networking, and uncertainty can all happen at once. Many students report impacts on sleep, grades, relationships, and mental health during ranking cycles.

If you feel anxious refreshing WaterlooWorks, comparing yourself to peers, or worrying that one mistake will derail everything, you are not alone.

It can feel like there is a lot on the line.

You might be thinking

- What if I do not match?
- What if I pick the wrong job?
- What if everyone else is ahead of me?
- What if I mess this up?

These thoughts are common. Imposter syndrome tends to show up loudly during recruitment.

Imposter syndrome is the persistent feeling of doubting your abilities and believing you are less capable than others think, despite evidence of your skills, achievements, or hard work.

So does comparison. So does fear.

It's common to feel this way, but it is part of your journey.

You are responding to pressure.



A Quick Reframe

The co-op system is competitive and structured. That pressure is real. At the same time, one ranking cycle does not define your career, your intelligence, or your worth.

Careers are long. Co-op terms are chapters.

It is also true that not everyone is navigating recruitment with the same bandwidth. Some students are managing financial stress, visa timelines, family responsibilities, health concerns, or experiences in workplaces that make things heavier. If your load feels bigger than what others see, that context matters.

You deserve support that reflects your full situation.

Immediate Steps You Can Take This Week

Set an application limit.

For example, block out 30 minutes to an hour a day to research and apply to jobs.

Create structure.

Block interview prep time in your calendar so it does not collide with assignments. Treat it like a scheduled commitment instead of a constant background stressor.

Reduce comparison triggers.

Mute group chats temporarily if they increase anxiety. You are allowed to protect your focus.

Communicate early.

Email professors as soon as you know an interview conflicts with class. Keep it brief and professional. Most faculty understand that co-op interviews are part of your program.

Use available supports.

Book counselling through [Campus Wellness](#) or access [Co-op Embedded Wellness Counsellors](#).

Take structured breaks.

Log off WaterlooWorks for a set period, even if it is just 24 hours. Constant refreshing increases stress without increasing control.

If stress is affecting academics

Do not wait until the end of term.

- Contact your academic advisor and explain what is happening.
- Ask about short-term academic flexibility if appropriate.
- If you are registered with AccessAbility Services, reach out to your advisor there early.
- If mental health is impacting performance, documenting challenges as they happen can help if you need academic consideration later.

Small grounding tools that actually help

- Breaking down the process into smaller achievable steps day to day
- Write down what is in your control this week and what is not.
- Replace "I am behind" with "I am on my path."
- Aim for consistency, not perfection.
- Stay hydrated. Eat regular meals. Sleep where you can. Move your body gently.
- Talk to one person you trust about how you are actually doing.

Rest is allowed.

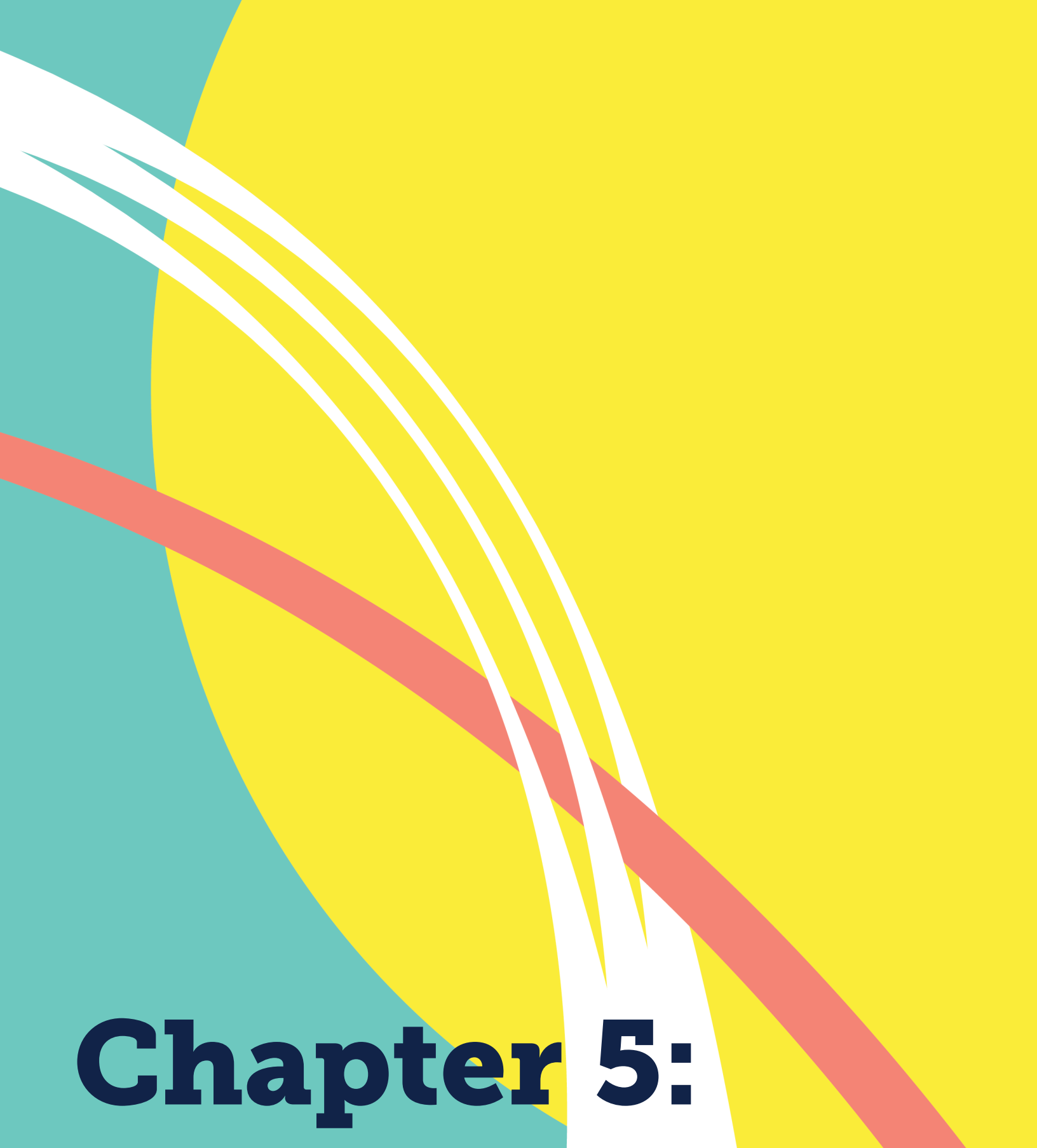
Slowing down is strategic.

Protecting your mental health supports long-term success.

You are building a career.

You are also a person and your well-being comes first.





Chapter 5:

Resources Section

Career Hub Resources

- [Exploring purposeful work](#)
- [Career myths and beliefs](#)
- [Career decision-making](#)
- [Researching careers](#)
- [Networking Tips](#)
- [Application Documents](#)
- [Interviewing](#)
- [Preparing for interviews](#)
- [Exploring workplace culture](#)
- [Strategies for workplace success](#)
- [Managing workplace conflict](#)
- [Safety and your rights at work](#)
- [Employment and human rights legislation](#)
- [Physical, emotional and psychological safety](#)
- [Harassment and discrimination](#)
- [Your rights when leaving a job](#)
- [Resources, supports and accommodations](#)



Identity and Career

- [Black identifying persons](#)
- [Indigenous persons](#)
- [Persons with disabilities](#)
- [2SLGBTQIA+ community](#)
- [International students](#)

Co-operative and Experiential Education Resources

- [Indigenous Relations, Accessibility, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Anti-Racism](#)
- [Book Drop-In Appointment with a Career Advisor at the Centre of Career Development](#)

Co-operative Education Tools

- [Job search support](#)
- [Book an appointment](#)
- Co-op Student Experience team within Co-operative and Experiential Education at the University of Waterloo. [Join them on Discord](#) or send any questions to co-op.experience@uwaterloo.ca

Confidential Ombuds Office (UW)

Offers confidential guidance on academic or non-academic disputes and helps you understand your rights and options. Learn more [here](#).

Alumo Student Insurance Legal Care

Waterloo Undergraduates have access to legal consultation through partnership with Alumo. Learn more [here](#).



External Resources

Waterloo Region Community Legal Services

A community legal clinic offering free legal information, advice, and in some cases representation, especially for low-income residents. Supports issues such as housing, employment rights, and human rights concerns.

Legal Aid Ontario

Provides legal support and connections to community legal clinics. Eligibility is based on income and case type.

Volunteer Waterloo Region

Connects individuals with volunteer opportunities that help build experience, skills, and professional networks.

Social Development Centre Waterloo Region

Offers community information, referrals, and support services across a range of social and economic needs.

Community Support Connections

A volunteer platform that connects individuals with local community support roles and opportunities.

Canadian Mental Health Association (Waterloo Wellington)

Provides mental health supports and resources to help manage stress, including challenges related to co-op, school, and employment transitions.

