HABITATS
STUDENTS IN THEIR MUNICIPALITIES
2020
About OUSA

OUSA represents the interests of approximately 150,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at eight institutions across Ontario. Our vision is for an accessible, affordable, accountable, and high quality post-secondary education in Ontario. To achieve this vision we’ve come together to develop solutions to challenges facing higher education, build broad consensus for our policy options, and lobby government to implement them.
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Every year, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) invites students from across our eight member institutions to highlight the successes and challenges they face in their municipalities through a series of case studies on municipal-level topics and issues affecting undergraduate students across the province. Every year, we publish these case studies, recognizing year after year, municipality to municipality, students face both unique and familiar challenges to their non-student neighbours – housing, transit, and engagement in local politics are particularly ubiquitous issues that illustrate how students experience their communities in many of the same, and also many different, ways. This year, despite the exceptional circumstances of a global pandemic, our contributors have once again demonstrated the dichotomy of students in their municipalities, simultaneously sharing in community-wide challenges with a unique and often overlooked perspective.

In the first case study, written by Matthew Gerrits, we see how this global crisis has revealed the gaps in a housing system that does not serve students, and offers an opportunity to correct the imbalance of power protecting large landlords and leaving tenants “holding the bag”. In their case study, Brook Snider and Skye Nip show us the importance of reliable inter-regional transit to support the benefits of a multi-campus model like that at Wilfrid Laurier University. Muriuki Njonjo also writes about inter-regional transit, focusing on the need for two-way-all-day GO service along the Toronto-Waterloo Corridor. Here we see the way that housing and transit are integral in students’ lives in the same way they are universal necessities, but that students have unique experiences and needs that are often not accounted for. Next, Christopher Yendt reflects on issues affecting students taking online courses and how we might build student-community connections in an increasingly remote learning context.

The final set of case studies offer us a framework to address persistent concerns that affect communities across the province, from environmental sustainability, to community building, gender-based violence prevention, and engagement in politics. Malek Abou-Rabia writes about the Sudbury Story, a template for how partnerships between universities, the municipal government, and active citizens can take us from some of the most damaging environmental devastation to greener, more sustainable futures. Rayna Porter explores how to build stronger student-community connections through partnerships with students in residence that will benefit both students and the local community. Pranjan Gandhi offers an example of how student associations and post-secondary institutions can support local bars to prevent gender-based violence, making these high-risk environments safer for students and others in the community. Finally, Mackenzy Metcalfe shows us how to engage students in municipal politics based on the success of the Western University Students’ Council’s Local Advocacy Week.

The case studies in this edition of Habitats: Students in their Municipalities create an important roadmap highlighting student concerns and proposing solutions to support stronger communities for all. The authors have demonstrated the importance of student voices in these conversations, and as we move forward during and after COVID-19, it is more necessary than ever that we listen.
THE UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO AND WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY ARE SITUATED ON THE HALDIMAND TRACT, TERRITORY OF THE NEUTRAL, ANISHINAABE, AND HAUDENOSAUNEE PEOPLES.
Responding to COVID-19’s Effect on the Student Housing Market

Matthew Gerrits - Waterloo University
St. Patrick’s Day in Waterloo was quiet this year. COVID-19 touches everything in the way we live, and municipal affairs is no exception. The entire world of Town and Gown is going to look very different this year and St. Patrick’s Day was only the very beginning.

The spring term, usually consisting of a bustling student populous enjoying the warm weather in parks or in Uptown Waterloo, is notably quiet this year. Housing units across Waterloo are empty, more empty than usual, and they probably will be in fall as well. Empty, but not unpaid for.

Students knew as early as March that the world would be upended, and that they might not need housing in the fall term, something that is becoming clearer as universities announce their plans for online or blended learning this upcoming academic year. But despite having a full five months of lead time, from mid-March to late August, students are already locked into housing contracts for the fall. If students signed a spring-to-spring lease, they could be seeing twelve-month contracts where they are only using the unit for four of those months. The University of Waterloo subreddit has been full of students asking if there are ways to get out of these contracts, if there is one weird trick that will let them cancel and not have to worry about paying for space they are not using, and, generally, what gives.

Unfortunately for students in this context, housing contracts are strong, largely for the protection of tenants themselves. The risk of students being evicted is a huge deal, particularly in the case of no-fault evictions – the ability to secure a higher paying tenant should not be a reason for evictions of tenants before their contract is out. In return for these protections, stability is given to landlords as well. This works out for students in most cases, and Ontario’s policies lead to a very limited range of circumstances in which no-fault evictions can take place.

The housing market is designed as just that, a market with buyers (tenants) and sellers (landlords), with regulatory guardrails that account for the unique nature of housing. In a functioning housing market, landlords keep their properties to a certain minimum standard, or a higher standard at their own expense if they wish to appeal to a specific market of tenant, and prospective tenants are able to view units, make rational decisions, and decide to sign on to rent a unit. Except in some cases, such as with the exterior stress imposed by COVID-19, it is clear that this is not a fully functioning housing market. Strip away the normalcy, and it reveals a market of fear.

1 A no-fault eviction is a legal eviction initiated by a landlord for a reason not related to a tenant’s conduct, such as to move into the unit themselves or to renovate the unit.
For many students, housing must be secured in a specific city to be able to access in person education. If not, they could face hours-long commutes (if they are lucky enough to have access to public transit or a private automobile). If those options do not exist, post-secondary education may not be within their reach. This is not unlike the pressures faced by other people looking for housing, but students have some unique characteristics. For example, student rentals are typically seasonal in nature, often with less use of housing during the summer months. This is not even considering the local Waterloo complexities of a housing market integrated with co-operative education systems that require students to uproot with more frequency than a standard twelve-month lease allows. Students also tend to have lower financial means than the average Ontarian, and many do not have personal vehicles. As a result, they face a more intense need to find housing close to universities.

Students know the housing market is tight, and they are told so by landlords and by peers. Being new to the market, they are rightfully scared of not finding a unit, finding a unit with poor living standards, renting a unit out of their price range, or (locally) renting a 40-minute commute from the community where they want to live. So instead of a search for housing on a timeline more in line with most of the residential housing market, many take action early. A university staff member said it is not unusual to see students moving into university residences in first year, only to see and hear advertising from property management companies about how urgent it is to sign a contract for the following year. Students are vulnerable, and property managers and landlords know it. So students sign, sometimes without seeing the specific unit they will be receiving and sometimes for new units that have no reasonable guarantee of being completed on time, a problem that has devilled many of my predecessors. Students will also often sign eight months or more before the lease start date (compare that to the usual two-month turnaround from a monthly tenant giving notice to a new tenant moving in soon after the old one moves out).

To compound this issue, while in Waterloo there are generally enough units to house all students, the number of units is far from the full story. As any student politician or advocate can tell you, the housing market sometimes fails students because some units are places offering bare or substandard living conditions. The effect of students signing on to substandard rental units stems from the same sense of urgency and fear that drives people to sign leases early, fear they will end up with something far worse.

Fear-based decision making is not economically advantageous and does not exist in most simplistic conceptions of economics that assume rational actors. Even economic models of insurance generally depend on the concept that people rationally measure risks and associated costs to determine whether insurance is something that fits their risk tolerance. And students are typically young, and often do not have experience viewing units or assessing the relative benefits of housing, sometimes relying on remote parents’ expertise, without the parents being able to walk through with them, and sometimes without any guidance or support at all.
Students also get hurt, because although there are increasing amounts of housing close to the University of Waterloo, custom-built student housing does not operate in the same market space as other housing. It consists both of early signing and often also has premium prices. The Waterloo vacancy rate for one-bedroom apartments has been decreasing, while costs increase for one- and two-bedroom apartments. According to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, in October 2016, a one-bedroom apartment cost an average of $872, but in 2019 that rate reached $1205. It is not unusual for student apartments, apartments that almost always get filled, to reach costs of more than $1500 per month or to have increased by 50 percent compared to the cost of a two-bedroom unit in 2016.

Units being built are now most commonly single or dual occupancy, so increasing affordability by having more roommates, a common strategy for students, is being eroded as traditional house-based rental stock is not expanding at the same rate as enrollment growth. With thousands of such units and low vacancy rates, students are left commonly occupying the upper half of the rental housing market, and with a low vacancy rate, it is clear they do not have lower cost units available to them.

And so, in a student-heavy market, where some 40,000 of the city’s 140,000-person population is students at any given time, Waterloo will be empty, but for the most part, it will not be the large landlords on the economic hook. Smaller landlords owning only a few units, however, have greater volatility in their rentals, and could see 0 percent of their revenue lost or 100 percent. There is ultimately going to be an economic cost, as there is no longer a need for students to reside close to their university and many have families they can rejoin, leaving units empty as a sunk cost without its usual benefit. Though students will likely be able to seek accommodation in family homes for free, they also will see reduced summer revenue, making this episode tragic. The balance of power means that students are the ones holding the bag, small landlords left with precarity, and large landlords in a relatively disadvantage-free situation, serving to illustrate the imbalance of power that can protect large landlords even when their product ceases to have value.

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6 Ibid.
How can this imbalance be addressed? The easiest solution is to build more housing. Giving consumers choice and removing their fear helps improve the quality of the market. If every unit will always be filled, there is little room and little incentive for landlords to fail and for more conscientious ones to buy their housing stock and offer better quality options. Even if all these units were “luxury” units, more units will drive the price point of rentals down for students, and for all residents. This can mean a combination of policy prescriptions, including measured and thoughtful easing of development restrictions, and more social and co-operative housing. Improving the density of housing is a positive development, allowing for more units overall, and more within easy reach of the university. Changes in zoning can help contribute to more dense development.

Transit connectivity, including interregional but more importantly local transit, will expand the range of housing considered “close” to the university and acceptable for students to rent. Development of high-density areas becomes more economically viable if a place that used to be 30 minutes away by bus, like downtown Kitchener (relative to the University of Waterloo main campus), becomes 15 minutes away by light rail. Improved bus connectivity has the same effect, allowing denser development to rely on transit-mobile student renters further out from campus, and letting density growth be moderate over a large area, rather than intense in a few areas. This is not only beneficial for students but would also help to address local anti-density advocates’ concerns.

Interregional transit is important too. If students could get from Brampton to the University Waterloo within an hour and fifteen minutes instead of two or three hours, for example, it might entice fewer students to enter the Waterloo housing market, having a similar effect of introducing more choice. Expanding speed does not even have to look like high speed rail: morning westbound GO Train service combined with new ion connectivity could get that travel time to about an hour and forty minutes, to say nothing of an express GO Train or increasing GO Train speeds. Improving bus service from elsewhere in the GTHA could have beneficial long-term effects on the current need for most students to live locally. This commuter campus model, while sacrificial of some romanticism of education, does not force students out, it simply invites more students in. Ultimately it improves the financial accessibility of education for those that cannot easily afford to pay rent while pursuing an education. This transit message can be extrapolated to many of Ontario’s universities, especially in the Southwest and East, and is a reason why expanded transit connectivity improves the quality of life for Ontario.
Finally, governments have a role to play in market interference, ranging from the marginal to the moderate. Consider that municipal governments could give temporary breaks on property tax or breaks on development charges to spur new growth if units are designed to be affordable or expand those programs where they currently exist. Provincial and federal governments could look to their role in giving outright subsidies in return for perpetual or temporary affordable status. The Ontario Priorities Housing Initiative is a great example of a program already acting in this arena that could be expanded. Ontario’s investment in affordable housing approaches a billion dollars a year, which pales in comparison to the capital costs involved in housing. Expanding that program or creating others and ensuring a significant portion of those investments target low-vacancy cities with large post-secondary institutions would also introduce more choice into the market.

Crisis breeds opportunity, and this crisis is a chance to strip away normalcy to see which policies and systems are more fragile than they seem. Students left paying for empty units, that they signed up for ten months in advance, is evidence of a system that isn’t serving tenants. Markets are a great and economically liberating tool when they work, let’s make sure this one does too.
Inter-Regional Transit in Southwestern Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Student Perspectives from a Multi-Campus Model

Skye Nip & Brook Snider - Wilfrid Laurier University
Inter-regional transit is defined as any conventional public transit system that travels between municipalities. Inter-regional transit systems, such as buses, rail, and trains, have many economic, social, and environmental advantages as effective means to close mobility gaps. Unfortunately, southwestern Ontario, and Canada as a whole, has lagged behind other regions in realizing these benefits.¹

Wilfrid Laurier University’s (WLU) multi-campus model offers a unique perspective to understanding the importance of inter-regional transit for town and gown communities. The multi-campus model is similar to a satellite campus model, but unique in that it “recognizes the importance of academic rigor and student experience at all campuses, and the significance of providing each student the same opportunities”.² Specifically, the multi-campus model aims to ensure that students at WLU’s Waterloo and Brantford campuses are granted comparable non-academic and academic benefits.

WLU’s multi-campus approach illustrates its pride in inclusivity and connectivity. However, with campuses located in Waterloo and Brantford, as well as the Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of Social Work in Kitchener and an administrative office in Toronto, WLU often faces additional challenges to connecting staff, students, and faculty. Undergraduate students face particular geographic concerns pertaining to academics and programming. Fortunately, many of these concerns could be addressed through the enhancement of inter-regional transit – to the benefit of students and others in these communities – specifically through the Southwestern Ontario Transportation Plan.

PROGRAMMING

WLU’s multi-campus approach is unique, particularly as a model for undergraduate student programming. The multi-campus approach strives to foster inclusivity and community amongst its students, which is reflected in extra-curricular programming. The Wilfrid Laurier University Students’ Union (WLUSU) plays an integral role in creating and implementing programming that is open and promoted to students at both its Waterloo and Brantford campuses. The goal in creating multi-campus programming is for all students to feel a sense of “Laurier Pride” and be given the same opportunities to experience the perks of being a Laurier undergraduate student.

In 2019-2020, WLUSU excelled in providing thrilling programming for both its Waterloo and Brantford students, including: beer fests; charitable dance and fashion showcases; a drag show featuring RuPaul’s Drag Race contestant Brooke Lynn Hytes; a speaking engagement featuring Queer Eye’s Antoni Porowski; as well as multiple concerts featuring artists such as Bülow and Jazz Cartier, among others. These events were intended to enhance feelings of inclusivity and pride for all Laurier students, breaking the perceived divide between Brantford and Waterloo campus students. Multi-campus programming such as this allowed students the opportunity to take breaks from the stress of academics, employment, and other responsibilities, which is important to supporting positive mental health and increasing social connections.

Although WLUSU strives to engage all Laurier students in its programming, there are challenges to creating inclusive programming for students across multiple university campuses. One of the first challenges faced when creating large-scale programming is deciding where an event should be held. Often, large-scale events are held either on, or in close proximity to, the Waterloo campus due to the larger student population as well as the greater number of potential venues in the Waterloo region. The next challenge, then, becomes securing transportation to ensure Brantford students are able to attend. The cost to reserve a private bus is a significant expense for any students’ union and can be particularly prohibitive when such transportation is needed for multiple events throughout the year.

An accessible and robust inter-regional transit system would greatly enhance programming and the student experience at WLU. In a survey conducted by WLUSU’s University Affairs Department, 84 percent of respondents cited they would be more likely to attend programming events not at their home campus if there was a public, inter-regional transit system connecting the Brantford and Waterloo campuses. The introduction of inter-regional transit linking Brantford and Waterloo would relieve cost-associated concerns when offering multi-campus programming, as well as allow for the development of increased multi-campus initiatives. Ultimately, inter-regional transit would enhance feelings of inclusivity and community amongst our students.

**ACADEMICS**

A multi-campus model also offers academic advantages for undergraduate students. A 2011 task force from WLU stated that they, “…strongly favoured a hybrid model in which Faculties would be structured based on academic discipline and departments structured in a more flexible fashion to enable local or regional character and innovation to be reflected in academic programs”. The way WLU academics are currently structured allow for overarching Faculties that may be connected across the various campuses; the departments and programs have the flexibility to adapt according to the geographical location of the campus where they are situated.

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In a survey conducted by WLUSU’s University Affairs Department, 68 percent of respondents said that they would take a class not located at their home campus if there was an inter-regional transit system connecting Brantford and Waterloo. In the same survey, when asked, “In what ways would inter-regional transit positively benefit you?”, respondents stated that inter-regional transit could help them save on the cost of gas to travel between the two campuses. Respondents also indicated that there would be increased access to course and minor options that are only offered on specific campuses. For example, respondents identified psychology, English, and Indigenous studies courses as areas they wanted to be able to more easily access.

With more geographical freedom, students would be more inclined to expand their studies to include areas of specialty not previously available to them. An expansion in inter-regional transit in southwestern Ontario would allow students to become future-ready with increased opportunities to enhance their post-secondary degrees from a more diverse selection of programs and courses. The multi-campus model at WLU, as well as those at other institutions, would greatly benefit from increased interconnectivity through inter-regional transit options.

**TRANSPORTATION**

In January 2020, the Government of Ontario released Connecting the Southwest: A draft transportation plan for southwestern Ontario. In the draft, five goals to improve transportation in the region were identified: (1) getting people moving and connecting communities; (2) supporting a competitive open for business environment; (3) improving safety; (4) providing more choice and convenience; and (5) preparing for the future. This report, while not written in the post-secondary context, has three key implications for post-secondary institutions in Ontario: (1) connecting people to services, such as doctors, skills training, and employment services; (2) improving public transit, which allows for accessible travel in the city where a person is studying; and (3) enhancing intercommunity rail, which would improve the ability for students to travel to and from their home communities.

Currently, the commute between WLU’s Waterloo and Brantford campuses using existing public inter-regional transit takes approximately four and a half hours – a commute that would otherwise take less than one hour by car. This is an exhausting commute for anyone, but for students in particular it can limit their ability to travel between campuses for programming and academics, as well as their ability to travel to their hometowns in connecting regions. The Government of Ontario must continue to promote interconnectivity by expanding inter-regional transit throughout the province, with specific attention to connecting post-secondary institutions.
In the survey conducted by WLUSU’s University Affairs Department, 92 percent of respondents said that inter-regional transit would enhance feelings of inclusivity amongst students at WLU. It is evident that an expansion to what is currently being offered for inter-regional transit would benefit post-secondary students, especially those attending an institution with a multi-campus model as exemplified by WLU.

With an expansion of inter-regional transit in southwestern Ontario, post-secondary students could have additional access to extra-curricular programming and increased opportunities to participate in diverse academic programs and courses, both areas that enrich the overall student experience. There are also benefits that come with increased accessibility between regions that extend beyond students. Broadly, inter-regional transit makes commuting for work or leisure more accessible for all residents. This increased access would also mean higher economic activity as a result of students coming in to study or participate in extra-curricular programming.

However, these benefits have not been adequately addressed in the Southwestern Ontario Transit Plan. For example, the existing Greater Golden Horseshoe Transit Plan fails to prioritize vital economic regions such as Brantford and Waterloo. To address this gap, the Government of Ontario should commit to a consultation process to uncover gaps in transit services in regions housing Ontario’s post-secondary institutions, including connectivity between campuses. At the same time, the Cities of Waterloo and Brantford should work with WLU and other post-secondary institutions in the surrounding regions to advocate for the economic and social impacts of increased inter-regional transit to these areas.

The Southwestern Ontario Transit Plan is a step in the right direction in improving interconnectivity in the province; however, there is much work to be done to ensure the plan meets the needs of all Ontarians, including students. This requires adequate consultation.

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4 Connecting the Southwest: A draft transportation plan for southwestern Ontario (Government of Ontario, January 2020).
Two-Way-All-Day GO Train Service: Including Students in the “Connect the Corridor” Project

Muriuki Njonjo - Waterloo University
For most students in Waterloo that don’t drive, getting to Toronto can often be a chaotic experience. While the GO Bus offers frequent service along the Highway 401 corridor, Toronto-bound travellers have to make an inconvenient stop at Square One in Mississauga and transfer, which if not properly timed, can be missed given that delays are not uncommon. The alternative for students unable or unwilling to endure the grueling commute is to secure a ride through a rideshare. Rideshares are often organized over Facebook, with students seeking rides from drivers for a small fee. This method has been successful in meeting student needs by proving to be relatively safe, convenient, and fast, but there are also concerns when it comes to safety and reliability. For example, the unregulated nature of ridesharing means that there is always a risk of safety being infringed on and there are no mechanisms to protect from or respond to safety concerns. Additionally, scheduling conflicts are rife, with accounts of students missing important appointments when a rideshare was cancelled last minute. Students have also been scammed when asked to pay ahead of time for rides that never showed up. Despite the risks, ridesharing thrives during the school year and is considered to be beneficial to our community as a reliable alternative has not been implemented.

Efficient and reliable transit between the Waterloo Region and Toronto – the Toronto-Waterloo Corridor (“Corridor”) – is a desperately needed service for both students and local residents, a need that has been recognized by a variety of stakeholders. Based on a recent poll commissioned by “Connect the Corridor”, 80 percent of respondents support fast, frequent two-way-all-day service across the Corridor and 52 percent of current Ontario commuters say they would use this service to get to work or school. In November 2019, the Board of Metrolinx approved a recommendation for the expansion of the Kitchener GO trainline to facilitate Two-Way-All-Day-GO train service between Toronto and Kitchener, costing $1 billion.1 The expansion would include:

- Two trains per hour running both ways during weekday peak periods, morning and afternoon, between Kitchener and Toronto;
- One train per hour running both ways during weekday off-peak periods; and
- One train every two hours running both ways on weekends.

This decision was a culmination of years of intense advocacy by top business leaders in the Corridor, as well as local municipalities and institutions of higher learning (the University of Waterloo is a research partner under “Connect the Corridor,” an advocacy group dedicated to seeing this project through). However, it is necessary for students to add their voice to this advocacy effort to support its realization and ensure our needs and concerns are addressed.

Students can add needed support for this project through our presence and strength, as the Corridor is home to 16 post-secondary institutions attended by roughly 423,000 students in total. In addition to the enormous student presence, the Corridor boasts Canada’s largest engineering school, two of Canada’s top three computer science programs, a half-dozen business schools (including three of the top five in Canada) and the world’s largest co-operative education program (co-op).2

2 “What is the Toronto-Waterloo Corridor?,” Waterloo EDC Blog, January 27, 2020, online: https://blog.waterloedc.ca/what-is-toronto-waterloo-corridor.
Students can also offer an expanded perspective on why this project is needed: For students, two-way-all-day GO means a safe, fast, and convenient way to travel within the Corridor. At the University of Waterloo, where students often get co-op placements in downtown Toronto, this service could spare students high rental costs and moving hassles, as they could work in downtown Toronto and continue living in Waterloo, a significantly more affordable city. This creates a large and exceptional talent pool whose potential can only be fully realized with fast, secure, and efficient transit within the Corridor.

The lack of two-way-all-day fast transit connections between the Waterloo Region and Toronto is the single biggest obstacle in attracting and retaining talent along the Corridor. While companies like Google, Blackberry, and OpenText run daily shuttle service for their employees between Toronto and Waterloo, this is not a feasible solution for many businesses and certainly not an effective solution for students. Further, studies suggest that corridor congestion (gridlock on the 401), costs Canadian businesses and consumers $500-$650 million per year in higher prices for goods, and up to $20 billion in passenger travel time savings, road maintenance cost avoidance, and reduced congestion.

Alternatively, the implementation of two-way-all-day GO service along the corridor has many financial benefits. Planners estimate that local ridership would increase to 3000 daily passengers by 2030 up from the present 282 daily passengers. According to a study conducted by McKinsey & Company, linking the Corridor through fast, frequent, rail service has the potential to deliver a $50 billion increase in direct equity value, $17.5 billion in direct annual GDP, and more than 170,000 high-quality jobs by 2025—jobs that can be filled by new graduates within the Corridor, creating greater opportunities for both students and businesses.

In addition, trains are a more environmentally-friendly mode of transportation compared to cars and buses—fewer cars on the 401 means lower CO2 emissions.

It is clear that two-way-all-day train service would not only benefit students but also provide tremendous economic, social, and environmental benefits for Toronto, the Waterloo Region, and the whole of Canada. Presently, all levels of government recognize the importance of this project, yet there are barriers to its realization as a result of political partisanship. Ontario Premier Doug Ford has demonstrated his enthusiasm for the project, citing delays in funding from the federal government as the reason why the project has not taken off, while federal authorities insist that the Provincial government is to blame for delays, as infrastructure funding has already been allocated.

In the midst of the usual politics, students can play a pivotal role in pushing this project forward. It will be important that students voice their support for the project during the next round of pre-budget consultations, both at the provincial and federal level. They should also work with municipalities to make a stronger case for why this project is needed, and to engage commuters to make the shift to mass transit. It is critical that student representatives at post-secondary institutions within the Corridor lend their support and contribute their experiences, needs, and perspectives to Connect the Corridor and its goal to realize two-way-all-day GO train service. After all, it sure beats taking the bus.

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NIAGARA REGION

Brock University

BROCK UNIVERSITY IS SITUATED ON THE TRADITIONAL TERRITORY OF THE ANISHINAABE AND HAUDENOSAUNEE. THIS LAND IS COVERED BY TREATY 3 OF THE UPPER CANADA TREATIES.
Building Community with Online Learners

Christopher Yendt - Brock University
According to Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, there are several definitions of the word habitat, two of which are particularly relevant in this context: (1) “the place or environment where a plant or animal natural or normally lives and grows”; or (2) “the typical place of residence of a person or group”. The notion of a habitat, for many, can conjure up specific imagery of homes and environments that reflect their own growth and development and could be considered normal or typical. However, this becomes more difficult to encapsulate in the current post-secondary context, when the students may not reside in any one location, separated from the physical and social space by distance and time.

Early Distance Education

Post-secondary institutions across the western world, including Ontario, have seen significant growth in recent decades. This growth has been driven by several factors, but it primarily stems from a desire to increase graduation rates through increased access for those who would not previously have been able to attend. For universities, increased access has coincided with the rise of alternative delivery models, and while one may not be the direct result of the other, there is an opportunity to evaluate this parallel growth to assess for impact. On-campus courses, also known as Face-to-Face (F2F) learning, remains the dominate approach at most institutions, though in recent decades there has been increased focus on ‘distance education’ and ‘online learning.’ While these terms have become synonymous in recent years, they initially denoted distinct course delivery models. The breadth and diversity of distance offerings were relatively limited when they first emerged, although options soon expanded, with online classes beginning in the mid-90s and significant advancements in technology helping to fuel rapid growth in development. Distance education and online learning opened up a new approach to support students of diverse backgrounds by offering increased flexibility and greater accessibility. This alternative entry point into the world of academia meant that many individuals who had previously been excluded from accessing higher education began to discover that a door had just been opened for them.

4 Wayne D’Orio, “Colleges rethink student services for online learners,” Education Dive, April 17, 2019, online: https://www.educationdive.com/news/its-sunday-evening-where-are-online-colleges-student-services/552911/; Bonnie Peters, Anita Crawley and Jane E Brindley, Student Support Services for Online Learning Re-Imagined and Re-Invigorated: Then, Now and What’s to Come (Contact North, September 2017).
Growth in Online Learning

A National Survey of Information Technology in Higher Education found that, by the end of the 1990s, 47 percent of colleges offered at least one distance learning course. Three years later, a survey by the Sloan Foundation found that nearly 10 percent of all students had enrolled in at least one online course. While program development has not been equal across the sector, in the decades since the turn of the century improved delivery options and increased quality has fueled growth both in enrollment and in academic acceptance. Nearly a decade later, in 2011, another survey by the Sloan Foundation found that the number of students enrolled in at least one online course had more than tripled to 32 percent. Of these students, approximately half were engaged in higher education exclusively through distance or online-based programs.

Distance education and online learning have proven incredibly popular ways to deliver higher education. Yet, despite the surge in popularity and the competitiveness of institutions to attract enrollments, corresponding investments in online services for these students continues to fall short. While it is not the only concern, it is necessary to address these gaps in service that create a disconnect between students, their institutions, and their local communities.

Online Education Challenges and Student Isolation

While distance education has sought to address barriers and issues around access to post-secondary education, learners have also been subjected to additional challenges, ones that are unique to the diverse and growing population. Dropout rates are commonly between 20 and 50 percent, significantly higher than those for F2F students. This can be attributed to a lack of engagement and support from within the campus community, combined with feelings of isolation and low motivation. Distance and online learners also have different needs, requiring unique supports. Lack of local connections for learners can prove challenging, increasing isolation and disconnect between classmates, professors, and the campus community – a phenomenon dubbed ‘eSolation’. Online learners lack the systems and on-campus connections of traditional students, placing these students at greater risk for health concerns, particularly those related to mental health and addictions issues.

6 Helsper, “Crisis Intervention and Mental Health Support Services”.
8 D’Orio, “Colleges rethink student services for online learners”.
9 Peters, et al., Student Support Services for Online Learning.
10 Barr, “Identifying and Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Online Students in Higher Education”; Radicioni, “New Study: Distance Education Up, Overall Enrollments Down,” Babson College, January 11, 2018, online: https://www.babson.edu/about/news-events/babson-announcements/babson-survey-research-group-tracking-distance-education-report/#.
12 Croft, et al., “Overcoming Isolation in Distance Learning,” 27-64.
13 D’Orio, “Colleges rethink student services for online learners”; Peters, et al., Student Support Services for Online Learning.
15 Helsper, “Crisis Intervention and Mental Health Support Services”.
16 Croft, et al., “Overcoming Isolation in Distance Learning,” 27-64.
17 Helsper, “Crisis Intervention and Mental Health Support Services”; Budhai & Skipwith, Best Practices in Engaging Online Learners.
Mental Health Needs and Supports for Online Learners

Mental illness represents nearly half of all diagnosed health concerns in young adults. A 2018 survey found that 35 percent of young adults struggled with a mental illness, particularly depression or anxiety, both of which are on the rise. Other similar surveys have found that nearly one-third of students have also experienced levels of depression so impactful it made it difficult to function. Students with a diagnosed mental illness experience significantly lower graduation rates, an effect exacerbated when students experience isolation with online studies. With the percentage of students studying online increasing and mental health concerns rising, there is a corresponding demand for increased services. These demands are complicated by issues around access, given many of the services continue to have in-person components and students often prefer support that is delivered face to face.

While research is limited, evidence has begun to emerge to support recommendations for online students to have access to campus services, including: pre-enrollment services; mental health education; crisis services; self-help services; and referrals to disability and counselling services. This can, in part, be addressed by modification of service delivery to help address the elements of isolation that students experience in online study, but this is a reactive approach, and post-secondary institutions need to look at proactive alternatives to engage distance learners in their communities.

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20 Amy L. Eva, “How Colleges Today Are Supporting Student Mental Health,” Greater Good Magazine, January 11, 2019, online: greater-good.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_colleges_today_are_supporting_student_mental_health.
22 Barr, “Identifying and Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Online Students in Higher Education”.
23 Marrero, “Increasing Mental Health Awareness and Services to Meet the Needs of Online Students”.
25 Jennifer Patterson Lorenzetti, “Supporting the Mental Health Needs of Online Students,” Faculty Focus, November 12, 2015, online: https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/supporting-the-mental-health-needs-of-online-students/; Marrero, “Increasing Mental Health Awareness and Services”.

Connections to Community for Online Learners

With the lack of connection online students may have with the local communities that are home to their institutions’ campuses, it is little wonder that mental health concerns and feelings of isolation remain concerns very much at the forefront of students’ lives. Additionally, despite being on the front lines, faculty and other support staff are not as skilled as they need to be in identifying and addressing the mental health concerns of their online students. This is one example of how online education can introduce additional barriers for students if not developed appropriately.

Learners need active engagement and often learn best through both their own experiences and those of their peers. The need to cultivate a learning community therefore requires focus beyond the virtual classroom. Students located around the globe need to have opportunities to engage in their local communities to enhance their study. The benefits associated with field experience, practicums, and community involvement in traditional programs are absent for online learners. One such suggestion is the incorporation of ‘affinity spaces’ as a mechanism to create participatory culture online, where learners create and control learning, receiving essential feedback from their peers and facilitation from the instructor. This level of learner agency has been found to create highly motivated and engaged students.

Traditionally, university student life is seen as a time of growth and exploration, but it also represents new challenges and barriers, especially as delivery methods shift online. The last two decades have shown tremendous growth in online student enrollment, a trend that requires a corresponding attentiveness to the diverse backgrounds of online learners and a recognition that they do not have the access to engagement mechanisms traditional students do. Students want to engage in their communities, both for their own learning and for the benefit of society, and post-secondary institutions can play an important role in facilitating this. Engagement beyond the virtual classroom would allow students to give back while addressing concerns of isolation, improving mental health outcomes, and increasing access to resources and support services. As students attending campuses physically, we take for granted the connections we create and the networks we develop. As we move forward with our response to COVID-19, with greater focus on distancing and isolation, it is critical we reassess the opportunities for online education to be more involved in our local communities and rethink what ‘normal’ and ‘typical’ campus community really means.

26 Meyer, “Faculty Members’ Experiences and Understanding of Online Students with Mental Health Issues”.
27 McManus, et al., “Barriers to Learning Online”.
29 Natalie B. Milman, “Teaching Online Postsecondary Students with a Disability, Chronic Health Condition, or Mental or Emotional Illness: Resources for Instructors,” Distance Learning 15, no. 3 (2018): 75-77.
30 Budhai & Skipwith, Best Practices in Engaging Online Learners.
31 Ibid.
33 Meyer, “Faculty Members’ Experiences and Understanding of Online Students with Mental Health Issues”.
Laurentian University is situated on the traditional territory of the Atikameksheng Anishinaabe and covered by the Robinson-Huron Treaty.
The Sudbury Story: An Environmental Turnaround

Malek Abou-Rabia - Laurentian University
Once compared to the moon, Sudbury was used as a training ground for astronauts prior to the infamous Apollo 11 mission. A land of acidic lakes, thick smoke, and black rock, the town was considered a wasteland with little hope. Home to the second largest crater and one of the biggest surface nickel deposits in the world, Sudbury was taken advantage of for its natural resources, burned and stripped for profit and industry.\textsuperscript{1} Decades of clear-cut logging and unregulated smelting left the city as a barren landscape, leaving so much sulfur in the air you could feel it in your throat. Some accounts from the time suggest smoke near the smelter was so thick, string was needed to guide residents from building to building. Even by today’s standard, Sudbury is considered to be home to the worst environmental devastation in the history of the world.\textsuperscript{2} A big change was needed if the environmental destruction of Sudbury, which is three times the size of Hong Kong, were to be reversed. The first step of this incredible task was to deter the toxic smoke away from the nearby community. This was achieved through the creation of the iconic Inco Superstack, a 380-meter-tall chimney that produced smaller amounts of sulfur dioxide and spread it across a larger area. The Superstack, which is the tallest structure in Canada after the CN Tower, helped create the space needed to start repairing the loss of vegetation and acidity in the soil and lakes.\textsuperscript{3} In the 1970’s, Laurentian University and the City of Greater Sudbury made a plan to start regreening and repairing the approximate seven thousand lakes and eighteen thousand square kilometers of affected land that was acidic, barren, or had no vegetation as a result of the sulfur dioxide levels caused by the environmental damage done since 1750.\textsuperscript{4} Researchers from the University found limestone to have a productive effect on reversing toxicity levels in soil, so, in 1978, before any tree planting could be done, over three thousand hectares of land were covered with limestone. As the reforestation began, thousands of volunteers, students, and local workers came together to plant over nine million trees.\textsuperscript{5} The change was hard to see at first, however over the years it became exponential. Ecosystems began to thrive, lakes became fishable and used for sources of drinking water, and forests were growing throughout the Sudbury Basin which was now thriving with wildlife. Today, the once barren “moon” used as an astronaut training ground is unrecognizable to those who were reluctant visitors prior to the reparation and reforestation initiatives. As these initiatives found success, Sudbury became proof to the world that cutting emissions was the key to a green and sustainable future.

\textsuperscript{1} “Sudbury: The Journey from moonscape to Sustainably Green,” Active History, June 10, 2013, online: http://activehistory.ca/2013/06/11360/.

\textsuperscript{2} Wendel (Bill) Keller, Jocelyne Heneberry, Joh M. Gunn, Ed Snucins, George Morgan, & Julie Leduc, Recovery of Acid and Metal – Damaged Lakes Near Sudbury Ontario: Trends and Status (Cooperative Freshwater Ecology Unit).


\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
The Sudbury Story, as it is now known, has been so impactful and dramatic that it is now being taught as a course in the Vale Living with Lakes Centre at Laurentian University, which has inspired an entire department dedicated to environmental sciences at the institution. The students enrolled in the environmental studies program play a key role in continuing and enhancing the initiatives from the past, from monitoring ecosystems and wildlife, to researching on human activity and its effect on the environment and our planet. Their work proves to the world that if Sudbury could thrive after such devastation, the same can happen anywhere else today if universities and their local communities work together towards a shared goal.

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The Sudbury Story reimagined what the city represents through the transition from rock to grass, with environmental sustainability now a part of its culture. From kindergarteners, to mine workers and university students, faculty, and staff, it took the entire community coming together to fix the damage done by the city’s industrial culture of the past. Today, there are over 300 healthy lakes, rivers, and streams, as well as valleys with forests of young trees teeming with wildlife within the city limits alone; and the city’s air quality is among the best in Ontario.⁷ Sudbury is considered a miracle story and a beacon for environmental reparation and sustainability. But this story is not a miracle; rather, it is a partnership between universities, the municipal government, and active citizens wanting to take back the right to a healthy community for future generations, and it offers a template for how universities and communities can work towards a more sustainable future.⁸

⁸ “Sudbury: The Journey from moonscape to Sustainably Green,” Active History, June 10, 2013, online: http://activehistory.ca/2013/06/11360/.

Photo Credit: https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images/af/faf/af.png
Trent University Durham GTA is located on the treaty and traditional territory of the Mississauga (Michi Saagig), Anishnaabeg, made up of the Curve Lake First Nation, Alderville First Nation, Hiawatha First Nation, and the Mississaugas of Scugog Island.
Building Residence, Strengthening Community: Navigating Student-Community Connection during COVID-19
Trent Durham-GTA has been a commuter campus since its inception in 1974, with students only able to enjoy a residence (res) experience by staying at neighbouring campuses like that of Durham College or Ontario Tech (formerly the University of Ontario Institute of Technology) in the upper part of the city. Routinely, these students would talk about how they were invited to enjoy the activities and events that came with residence life but felt disconnected from the community on a campus not their own. This really speaks to the value of residence beyond simply being a place to live and raises the question of what role our local communities can play to foster stronger student-community engagement.

At Trent University’s Symons campus, located in Peterborough, residence is an essential part of the student experience. Shaped by a “College System”, students begin their undergraduate experience by selecting a college affiliation that is both physically represented by residence buildings on campus (and one located in downtown Peterborough) and socially represented by a community with its own events, spaces, and services unique to the population they serve. By aligning students with a community of shared values, this system offers a more intimate connection within a large university community that can be overwhelming for many students when first adapting to university life.

We know students need that level of support. A 2016 survey of Canadian university students found 66.6 percent experienced loneliness and 89.5 percent felt overwhelmed with everything they had to do.1 Comprehensive and accessible student service support, from counselling to academic skills development, are essential to a student’s success when navigating the post-secondary world for the first time, and access to these services is made easier for students living on-campus. Likewise, as we navigate an uncertain new world during and after the current global pandemic, opportunities to safely connect with other students will be limited and residence living will offer a chance for face-to-face interaction and social connection when such occasions will likely be limited.

This is why it is so important that Trent’s Durham-GTA campus will be opening a 200-bed residence this Fall. By having students living on the campus 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, making residence more than just a place to live will be possible. Doing so, however, will also require strong partnerships with the City of Oshawa and Durham Region. Such partnerships are essential to the true community-integrated experience students and their communities need and will be especially important as we navigate new health protocols and precautions.

1 American College Health Association, American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Canadian Reference Group Executive Summary Spring 2016 (Hanover, MD: American College Health Association, 2016).
Announcements for how classes will be handled in the Fall are coming out from universities across the province with a resounding commitment to a mostly remote delivery model to protect students, staff, and community members. I am grateful to our universities for working collaboratively with public health officials while maintaining a commitment to delivering high-quality education, but it is important to know that residences will still be running on most campuses as for many students, residence remains a necessity to access post-secondary. Students living in rural communities without access to adequate internet services rely on a residence experience for remote delivery access. For students living in homes without sufficient study spaces or quiet rooms, residence may be their best tool for academic success. These students deserve the same high-quality, student-centric services those before them have benefitted from, and while the university looks at how they can deliver on their end, I turn to community members for how they can support these students.

First, students newly joining the region may not have the opportunity to enjoy a lot of the same amenities typically offered prior to the implementation of physical distancing measures. Encouraging residence students to utilize the safe spaces being developed by communities, such as parks and walking trails, is a great first step to making a new city feel like home.

Second, look for ways to develop res student-specific opportunities that are both paid and volunteer; students living in residence are less likely to have family and friends in the city to help them network, so community partners offering them prospects is an important tool to build relationships between students and their communities. This not only provides students with meaningful experiences and enhances their ability to learn and grow, it also opens up new opportunities for community partners to benefit from the unique perspective and knowledge held by students.
Finally, offer community resource programming that is specially marketed to students living in residence. There are a lot of resources on university campuses, but where there are gaps, students should know where they can turn in their new community. By ensuring students know about these resources and are connected to them, and that these resources are aware of the needs these students may have, a successful connection is more likely.

Students leaving high school may feel like they have fewer options for their next steps than ever. Backpacking through another country is not viable with borders still closed and getting a full-time job to start on some savings is going to be a challenge with a declining employment rate. Pursuing a post-secondary degree may be a worthwhile pathway for those whose options have shrunk, and I encourage those who are looking for a safe way to develop connections and join a new community to consider residence. I further encourage our local community partners to seek out opportunities to engage with these students for the benefit of all.

WESTERN UNIVERSITY IS SITUATED ON THE TRADITIONAL TERRITORIES OF THE ANISHINAABEG, HAUDENOSAUNEE LUNAAPEEWAK AND ATTAWANDARON PEOPLES ON LANDS CONNECTED WITH THE LONDON TOWNSHIP AND SOMBRA TREATIES OF THE 1796 AND THE DISH WITH ONE SPOON COVENANT WAMPUM
Gender-based Violence Prevention in London Bars

Pranjan Gandhi - Western University
While often overlooked, gender-based violence (GBV) in public spaces is a major societal issue that occurs at a much greater frequency than we might think. GBV can happen anywhere, from a classroom, to a workplace, and even on public transportation. As a 21-year-old undergraduate student at Western University, the examples that are most prominent in my mind are those that occurred downtown, in some of London’s busiest pubs and bars.

Data shows that one in four women aged 18-24 will experience sexual assault, and about 75% of incidents of sexual assault involve alcohol.¹ A study conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) found that 50 percent of female bargoers in a Canadian city experienced persistent and unwanted sexual touching in a single night.² While bars and clubs do not inherently create unsafe spaces, the combination of alcohol and existing social pressures make them higher risk environments.

In 2018, as part of the UN Women Safe Cities initiative, an interactive mapping tool was launched in the city of London where women could ‘pin’ areas where they felt unsafe. This effort was launched in conjunction with ANOVA, London’s sexual assault centre and women’s community house, and London City Council.

¹ David Cantor, Bonnie Fisher, Susan Chibnall, Reanna Townsend, Hyunshik Lee, Carol Bruce, & Gail Thomas, Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct (Westat, prepared for the Association of American Universities, September 21, 2015).
It aimed to establish a more complete picture of where and how often women experienced GBV, including experiences of sexual assault and interactions that sparked fear but did not result in a police call. This tool identified several bars in London where women have felt unsafe or where they have experienced violence or harassment.

Western’s University Students’ Council (USC) believes that GBV should never occur and finds these statistics alarming. As students, student representatives, and active participants in the London community, the USC has taken a leadership role in GBV-prevention efforts by developing programming for London bars. The USC wants to keep not only students safe, but also the broader community. By identifying evidence-based best and promising practices, the USC has been able to develop a community GBV prevention program that can be implemented free of cost to any willing establishment.

As mentioned, it is not that bars in London create unsafe spaces in themselves, but rather that bars are nightlife hotspots where young adults consume alcohol often after “pre-drinking” before heading out, which makes them high-risk environments for GBV. They are also often frequented by students and host student-centered events, making post-secondary institutions perfectly positioned to implement strategies that create a safer experience for bargoers and help reduce the rates of GBV within the community. To this end, the USC investigated existing intervention programming and identified multiple ad-hoc intervention programs that implement proactive strategies to create a safer environment for bar patrons. Notable examples include: BarWatch (British Columbia and Alberta); Good Night Out (UK, Ireland, Chicago, and Vancouver); Raise the Bar (Michigan and Carolina); Safer Bars (Washington DC and Portland, Oregon); and It’s Our Business (New Zealand).

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Informed by existing promising and best practices, the USC developed their GBV prevention program, taking a four-pronged approach:

1. **Policy:** Establishing written GBV prevention policies holds the organizational staff accountable for implementing strategies that can prevent GBV in their bar settings while not creating any liability external to the organization. For example, bars should have a protocol regarding unattended drinks that includes observation and possible intervention using the “Four Ds” (Direct, Distract, Delegate, Delay) of bystander intervention for intoxicated patrons exiting the establishment with another stranger. However, it is important to recognize that while there is a possibility to create general policies for GBV prevention, respectful workplaces, and incident reporting, GBV is a nuanced issue and therefore it is necessary to work with each establishment individually to determine their specific needs and develop a tailored, comprehensive policy structure.

2. **Bystander/Upstander Intervention Training:** While we may instinctively understand that intervening to stop harassment can make a significant difference in someone else’s life and send a message about acceptable social norms, bystander apathy in large groups settings is an issue that we need to address if this prevention technique is to be effective. Large groups tend to minimize the feeling of individual responsibility and reduce the chance that a bystander, including a staff member, will intervene. Bystander Intervention Training reduces large group apathy and as such is an important component of GBV prevention in bars. Upstander Intervention Training, a program developed at Western University, incorporates bystander training and seeks to change social norms that support GBV by explaining the bystander effect, differentiating between ‘bystanders’ and ‘upstanders’, and discussing behaviours and attitudes that contribute to rape culture.

3. **Programming:** Programming ensures that there is a method for bar staff and patrons to communicate with each other and receive help if they are feeling unsafe. For example, a popular programming option is ‘Ask for Angela/Polly’ or an ‘Angel Shot’. These code words act as an intervention method to alert staff that a patron is feeling unsafe and staff can then take the appropriate action to intervene. A variety of “shots” can be implemented to signal different types of help. For example, a “neat shot” can be indicative of asking the bartender to escort you to your vehicle, while a “shot with lime” may signal that you want the bartender to call the police.

4. **Signage:** Signage is necessary to create awareness about both the programming strategies put into place and to ensure that patrons are aware that GBV will not be tolerated. Signage that includes language encouraging patrons to report inappropriate behaviour to staff can help create safe entertainment spaces where patron safety is prioritized. Bars can also use beverage coasters to convey these messages. Students at Western University will support London bars with signage by setting up booths on campus where bars can bring their coasters to be decorated by students with positive messages on the importance of consent to work against victim-blaming attitudes.

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Student organizations such as the USC will include those establishments willing to introduce at least one intervention from each of the four prongs in an accreditation program and assign them a preferred ‘safe bar’ tag on their clubs list; they will also promote these establishments in their clubs handbook. Aside from creating a safer environment for all bargoers, this benefits these bars by both increasing their patronage through student club promotion as well as improving the public image of these establishments in the eyes of the London community. A study of similar accreditation programs found that 83 percent of patrons said they would prefer to attend a bar where they knew there were strategies in place to create a safer space. Creating positive customer experiences increases the chances that they will tell their friends about the establishment and return, ultimately increasing the bar’s bottom line. (By contrast, literature shows that even one patron who has a bad experience and leaves with their friends can cost $1,000 in lost tabs over a year.)

Implementing the prudent and adaptive strategies outlined above is an important first step for post-secondary institutions, students, and bars to ensure that we are using different methods to prevent GBV in the bar sphere. At the end of the day, we all want the same thing: a safe, welcoming, and fun environment for all patrons, and to do the right thing.

Local Advocacy Week: Engaging Students in Local Politics to Create a Stronger Community

Mackenzy Metcalfe - Western University
Student engagement in politics is hard. Student engagement in local politics is even harder. This is not only an issue among students but extends to broader concerns around civic engagement as municipal elections around the country generate lower voter turnout than provincial and federal elections. However, municipal advocacy is a priority for many student unions, including the University Students’ Council (USC) at Western University, as municipal politics heavily impact students. Public services like transit, policing, safety in student neighborhoods, bylaw enforcement, and housing are all issues that students interact with daily and that greatly influence their quality of life while at university. By working with other organizations and engaging communities, university students and their student unions can act as partners in the local community. This article outlines how the USC has collaborated with not-for-profit organizations in the City of London to advocate for shared priorities, engage students in local politics, and foster a sense of community, offering an example for other student unions, community organizations, and municipalities.

Understanding the importance of municipal engagement, the USC created Local Advocacy Week to engage Western students in the London community and to foster interest in local politics among student leaders. By bringing students to advocacy meetings with local politicians and directly engaging them in the formal advocacy process, we highlighted the work the USC does in the community while connecting students to local not-for-profit organizations. This week is dedicated to elevating student priorities to their elected officials and immersing students’ in the local political community. It also has the added benefit of providing students with experiential learning opportunities by helping them understand advocacy and stakeholder relationship processes. Local Advocacy Week is run by the USC's Vice-President, who schedules meetings with local municipal, provincial, and federal politicians over the course of a week. During these meetings, students accompany the Vice-President and their associates to learn about the advocacy process.

This year our Local Advocacy Week took place during the City of London’s municipal budgeting process. This meant that students got an inside look into how the City decides their budget priorities and provided an opportunity for students to see local advocacy in action. Before Local Advocacy Week, participating students attended a training course about politics and stakeholder relations.

3 Note that the title of this position has since been changed to Vice-President External Affairs at the USC.
This training included discussing the USC’s priorities and how students could approach different topics in the planned meetings.

Throughout the week, each participating student attended a meeting with a local elected official alongside the USC’s Vice-President. Meeting with elected officials and maintaining external relationships with community partners is an important aspect of the Vice-President’s portfolio. This form of executive shadowing provided students with an opportunity to experience the high-level activities that the Vice-President conducts on behalf of Western students. By giving students the opportunity to sit in on these meetings, they received an immersive experience to better understand the role the USC plays in the London community. Local Advocacy Week also showcased the value of the work that student unions do behind the scenes, as many students are unaware of the advocacy that many student unions participate in. Highlighting the USC’s commitment to change on behalf of students, to students, gives us an opportunity to show students the work we do in our communities.

Having students participate in meetings with city councilors, local MPPs, and MPs also helped with the advocacy process, bringing students’ lived experiences and perspectives directly into the conversation to reiterate our priorities. Students were encouraged to share their experiences on the topics we were discussing, including their position and experiences within the USC, how government programs directly influenced their lives, and other personal anecdotes. This helped councillors put a face to the student population they represent while allowing students to gain experience in politics, networking, and understanding how advocacy works.

Engaging with our students’ council also added another level of legitimacy to our advocacy efforts. The USC is elected by 30,000 Western undergraduate and professional students. Our council debated and ultimately unanimously endorsed the priorities we brought to Local Advocacy Week. This was important to ensure these student councillors and faculty presidents gave their input from the beginning of the
advocacy process, helping to amplify the USC’s stances on these local issues. This was yet another way we were able to include students in the advocacy process, further integrating students into municipal advocacy and enhancing their knowledge and interest in local issues.

During Local Advocacy Week, the USC coordinated with other community organizations that had similar objectives to those of Western students. Many priorities of students, including sustainability, transit, and safety are also being advocated on by many other not-for-profit organizations in London. In communities with students coming from outside of the city, it is sometimes easy to forget the shared priorities of students and other Londoners. The USC was able to work with the London Environmental Network, who was also fiercely advocating to save transportation and improve sustainability, as well as with London Cycle Link to advocate for increased active transportation in London. By working with these groups, coordinating our efforts, and sharing our resources, we were able to create a stronger voice and amplify the needs of many Londoners in order to create positive change in the city. This also helped the USC create stronger connections with other organizations in the London community and opened the potential for other community partnerships in the future. Working with other organizations also had the added benefit of giving our students insight into what other organizations in London were doing and opened them up to the network of not-for-profit organizations that the USC works with. This makes it easier for students to get involved and support their communities. Our collaborative efforts helped to prove to both students and the broader London community that students are truly Londoners.

Local Advocacy Week also strengthened our relationship with the City of London. By creating this working relationship, we can now advocate alongside one another for provincial and federal support for our constituents. Furthermore, the experiential learning opportunities students received through meeting with local officials, learning about student advocacy, working with other not-for-profit organizations, and becoming more connected to municipal politics is invaluable.