

Forward with Integrity
**STUDENT EXPERIENCE
TASK FORCE**
POSITION PAPER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The student experience task force has discussed ways to make student life at McMaster more desirable and distinctive and to provide an atmosphere and environment in which all students can benefit from a diverse range of excellent learning opportunities. Flexibility should be the hallmark of the University in order to support the diverse needs of current students while anticipating the requirements of the students of tomorrow. Students should be encouraged to develop and refine learning goals and to focus on the entire educational journey, including curricular and co-curricular activities, rather than the final destination.

The task force recommendations focus on enhancing flexibility in University structures, including how courses are provided and how success is evaluated, as well as enabling pedagogical innovation. Increasing opportunities for interdisciplinary studies and facilitating connections to primary research are critical, and can be accomplished in a variety of ways both in the classroom and beyond. The task force also asserts that McMaster support student learning through mentorship and opportunities for personal development and growth.

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BACKGROUND

The Student Experience Task Force was created in December 2011 and met regularly between late January and mid April 2012. Membership on the Task Force was by invitation and included representation from across the University community. The group held weekly 90 minute meetings that were often facilitated by Prof. Sue Baptiste. In addition the group held one half-day retreat on February 11th facilitated by Prof. Baptiste. The first meeting of the Task Force was attended by both Dr. Patrick Deane who discussed his letter, *Forward with Integrity*, and Dr. Susan Denburg who introduced the mandate of the Task Force. This work was also supported by Dr. Laura Harrington, Project Director, *Forward with Integrity*. The group was asked to 'blue-sky' dream about ways that the student experience at McMaster could be enhanced and transformed into something exceptional.

INTRODUCTION: THE 'IDEAL' STUDENT EXPERIENCE

McMaster University has an international reputation for innovation and excellence in teaching and learning. Some of the best educational opportunities and resources, however, are not accessible to everyone. In order to create an exceptional learning experience for all McMaster students, the University needs to share successful strategies that currently operate on campus, remove barriers to implementation of these strategies in other areas, and develop new strategies to fill gaps or weaknesses in our educational programs. This process must begin by considering the question: *How can McMaster make the student experience more distinctive and desirable?*

At the outset the task force recognized and acknowledged that there is not only one 'kind' of student. To suggest an ideal student experience, McMaster must consider the wide variety of identities, worldviews, experiences, backgrounds, and goals that form the context in which any student will engage with McMaster. Any initiative to enhance the student experience at McMaster should consider the enormous diversity of our students.

Given the anticipated needs and requirements of the student of tomorrow, the McMaster student experience must be more flexible and focus on the educational journey as much as on the final destination. It must include more than classroom and on-campus activities and should involve factors that affect a student's life and experiences in the broader community.

The objectives of the task force for enhancing the student experience include:

- providing a range of opportunities and structures that stimulate and support students to learn effectively

- removing educational boundaries and allowing students to define and map their own educational journey
- providing opportunities for interdisciplinary and community-based learning and research experience
- recognizing the value of co-curricular learning and experiences
- encouraging, supporting, and rewarding pedagogical creativity
- expanding opportunities for faculty and staff to collaborate in teaching

THEMES/GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The task force has identified four main themes or guiding principles on which to focus future initiatives, as well as some strategies for consideration. The themes relate to increasing flexibility in course offerings, enhancing opportunities for interdisciplinarity, improving support for student development and connecting education with primary research.

1. Enhance FLEXIBILITY in structure, delivery and availability

a. In learning structures

The task force urges the University to allow greater flexibility in the definition of what constitutes a course, including the number of hours or weeks it should last, when it starts and ends and how many units it can be worth. In addition, the task force values the clear definition and continual review of program learning goals and outcomes. Greater flexibility will positively impact student success and mental health and well-being. It will give the students greater control over their learning experience, and allow faculty and staff to respond to student need.

b. In pedagogical approaches and content delivery

The task force urges greater flexibility in pedagogical approaches and content delivery, including expanding opportunities for experiential, interdisciplinary and self-directed learning. We believe that it is important that the University emphasize the teaching-research learning nexus and enhance opportunities for inquiry and research-focused learning.

2. Enhance INTERDISCIPLINARITY

The task force asserts that the entire community is involved in student learning. Present and future students will benefit from the breadth of knowledge and experience that can be provided by interacting with the local and global communities, as well as by experiencing cross-disciplinary perspectives.

3. Enhance SUPPORT for student development and growth

Supporting student learning requires that students be rewarded for their investment of time, effort and funds. The task force asserts that it is essential to support student learning through mentorship and opportunities for personal development and growth.

4. Enhance opportunities to connect learning experiences with primary RESEARCH

The task force asserts that the student experience in a research-intensive university is inextricably linked with the research program at the institution. Students must be provided with opportunities to participate in the research enterprise from early in their tenure at McMaster, and should be exposed to all aspects of scholarship. Integration of cutting-edge research into the curriculum is essential to the student experience. Moreover, exposure to community-based activities is critical to student development and can be accomplished in a variety of formats including research-based learning opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to transform the student experience at McMaster according to the principles introduced above, the task force has compiled the following list of goals and recommendations:

Goal 1: Create a strategy for enhancing flexibility in learning structures and identifying ways to ‘slow the pace’ for students.

Strategies:

- a. Reflection
 - Implement a “class-free” period during the fall term
 - o 2-5 days in duration
 - o No classes or labs
 - o Provide a series of activities on campus in which the students can participate, if desired
 - o Allow the Faculties some flexibility in implementing the period to suit student need and accreditation requirements
 - o Provide an opportunity to connect with advisors and mentors to reflect on the student’s learning journey
- b. Flexible Structures
 - Consider introducing flexibility into
 - o Course length
 - o The use of pass/fail courses
 - o The potential use of block programming, online and blended courses

- Due dates, course completion dates, grade submission dates
- The relevance and need for pre-requisites
- Calculation of cumulative averages
- Undergraduate participation in graduate courses
- Recognize the value of
 - Partnerships (e.g. Library, Mohawk College)
 - International educational experiences
 - Faculty-specific timetables
 - Community engaged learning
- Facilitate the development and sustainability of
 - Co-op, internships, experiential and problem-based learning, inquiry, in-class experiences and participatory learning
 - Field/studio/lab-based learning
 - Time for reflection

Goal 2: Recognize and facilitate student learning in both curricular and co-curricular environments.

Strategies:

- a. Establish a McMaster Learning Portfolio or Passport
 - Provide guidance through mentorship by staff, faculty, alumni, emeriti, graduate students and senior undergraduate students
 - Students should identify, define and continually assess their learning goals and outcomes
- b. Focus on student development
 - Teach students effective learning techniques and strategies
 - Enhance the awareness, support, respect and profile of the student affairs areas that support students and their learning and development
 - Help students establish and continually review/evaluate personal learning goals
 - Provide opportunities for students to practice and test their learning both inside and outside the classroom
- c. Develop an effective mentorship system
 - Include all members of the McMaster community
 - Provide mentorship skills training to senior undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty and appropriate staff

Goal 3: Improve institutional structures that support learning.

Strategies:

- a. Improve financial support for teaching. Rationale: the current budget model works against interdisciplinary teaching and underfunds ancillary teaching (e.g., languages, writing skills, learning skills, etc.). Since the budget model is currently

under review, we urge that the realistic cost of teaching be reflected in budgetary envelopes

- Recognize, reward, and enable pedagogical innovation
- b. Support quality and innovative teaching
 - Review faculty hiring, T&P model, faculty development and performance appraisal processes to focus more on quality and innovative teaching
 - Encourage and reward the development of collaborative teaching teams, including those with non-traditional partners and of an interdisciplinary nature
 - Ensure that course learning goals and outcomes are clearly defined and continually re-evaluated and aligned with program objectives and assessment strategies
 - Enhance support for the development of blended learning opportunities and their availability centrally on campus
 - Provide additional resources to allow formalized training opportunities for all faculty and graduate students in teaching and learning
- c. Increase support for essential teaching technology/infrastructure
 - Provide campus-wide wi-fi, including classrooms
 - Establish small grants for innovative practices using technology that are pedagogically sound
 - Prioritize allocation of classroom space based on technological needs
 - Revitalize physical facilities – classrooms, audio-visual, network infrastructure, e-mail

Goal 4: Develop a strategy to effectively integrate teaching and research within the curriculum.

Strategies:

- a. Expose students to current research in the discipline
 - Reinforce the use of research processes/topics and discussions in the curriculum
 - Provide enhanced learning of research procedures and hands-on research experiences
 - Provide recognition to faculty and students who participate in research-based learning
 - Encourage interdisciplinary team-teaching and enhanced links between graduate and undergraduate students
 - Provide numerous potential entry points into the research enterprise during the student's time at McMaster
- b. Provide students with access to leading researchers on campus
 - Recognize seminars/lectures given for students as part of teaching load
 - Enable participation in research through more flexible curriculum design
 - Give students credit for research experience/participation
 - Provide small grants to support students engaged in research activities

Goal 5: Foster interdisciplinarity and community engagement.

Strategies:

- a. Enhance and encourage instructor availability to participate in interdisciplinary or community-based activities
 - Enable interdisciplinarity by financially supporting service and inter-Faculty teaching
 - Recognize and reward interdisciplinary contributions
 - Explore new program combinations within and across Faculty boundaries
 - Enhance awareness of the potential gains of interdisciplinary learning amongst faculty, staff & students
 - Facilitate ‘engaging the world’ in a variety of forms; incorporate global and local community perspectives into the curriculum
 - Use learning spaces outside of the classroom – field, community (coffee bars, libraries etc.)
 - Establish a centralized ‘hub’ for community integration or a network of experts on community engagement

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER:

Details about the Learning Portfolio or Passport

The goal of the themes and recommendations introduced by the task force is to place the focus on learning, and provide an atmosphere and environment in which all students can benefit from a diverse range of excellent learning opportunities. The entire learning journey at McMaster, including curricular and co-curricular activities, must be enhanced and supported to provide the scaffolding necessary to meet the needs of current and future students.

A unique McMaster student experience could be created through introduction of a learning portfolio or passport. The purpose of this recommendation is to inspire students to direct their own learning and development with appropriate guidance and support. Students can be both adventurous and resilient and should be encouraged to define and refine their learning goals as they progress through their education at McMaster. The task force recognizes that the use of the word “passport” may be problematic for some students, and therefore recommends that serious consideration be given to the term used during implementation.

The passport is intended to offer students increased flexibility throughout the learning journey and the mentorship and support required to achieve their learning goals. Students will be encouraged to participate in a range of activities, including personal development, research, community initiatives, interdisciplinary events, student government or athletics along with the curricular activities necessary to support

mastery in their area of study. Regular checkpoints with a mentor will assist students in reflecting on these experiences and refining their learning goals.

There are many ways in which the passport can be implemented, and the task force recommends the following:

- a mandatory course with credit given in the final year of study, but which lasts for the duration of the student's time at McMaster
- an extensive network of mentors is essential to support student identification and refinement of learning goals
- a committee involving faculty and students should determine which activities would be credited on the passport, and the required accumulation of experiences that would be sufficient for course credit
- the emphasis should be on student learning and development, so reflection on these experiences and how they support the student's learning goals is essential

The student experience task force asserts that providing increased **flexibility** and structures to **support** student learning as outlined above will transform the student experience at McMaster.