

AN OVERVIEW OF STUDENT PERCEPTIONS AND CONCERNS

A University that does not always make students feel welcome

While our students recognise the overall quality of the education they receive at McGill, it is clear that many do not feel that they are full-fledged members of the McGill community. These perceptions are based on their day-to-day experiences with other members of the community, and on messages communicated to them, explicitly and implicitly, about the place of students in this community. In a nutshell, our students, who are one of our two central *raison d'être* as a University, often do not feel welcome at McGill.

Several aspects of the student experience contribute to this feeling. Many undergraduate students do not make meaningful personal contact with a professor or a member of the administrative or support staff over the entire course of their program. Students generally do not feel that they have ready access to the information they need in order to make decisions on course and program choice in a timely fashion, or to participate in University activities, both academic and extra-curricular, that are of interest to them. As one contributor offered, there is a sense that collegiality at McGill extends only to professors: many students do not have any relationship that they would characterise as collegial with a member of the faculty or of the administrative and support staff of the University.

While a number of excellent advisers - both professors and members of the administrative staff - were identified, students report that, on the whole, academic advising is far from adequate, and constitutes a great weakness in the achievement of McGill's academic mission. As one upper-year undergraduate student summed it up, "I don't feel that there is anyone in the University who cares whether I am here or not".

During consultations, many students stated that they did not "know where to go" with many problems. The administrative cleavage between Student Affairs Offices, including Academic Advisors, on the one hand, and Student Services units, on the other, was cited as one source of difficulty in dealing effectively with programmatic and life problems.

Financial Support

Concerns specific to the financial support of graduate students include the fact that funding is not adequate or competitive with that offered at peer institutions, and that information about total funding available may not be communicated to candidates sufficiently early to influence decisions on offers of admission.

Students stressed the need to be free of serious financial concerns in order to succeed in their programs and take full advantage of student life at McGill. The lack of adequate financial support for students with significant financial need was thought to adversely impact the goal of a diverse student body, and to result in qualified students refusing offers of admission to McGill. The University's inability, until very recently, to make financial assistance available to entering undergraduate students during the first term of studies was similarly seen as a serious obstacle for students with financial need who might wish to enrol at McGill.

FOCUS ON STUDENTS: Final Report, Appendix D

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Overview of Student Perceptions and Concerns reported to the Task Force

It was suggested that high interest rates for late payment of tuition fees may constitute a financial disadvantage for international students in particular, since funding from outside of Canada does not always become available as quickly as expected, or in time to pay fee invoices. While there is funding available from the Student Aid Office to assist students in these cases, it is not clear that they are always made aware of this support when they need it.

Accessibility of Information, Academic and Extra-Curricular

Students repeatedly expressed frustration at their inability to find the information they need, and might reasonably expect to have, on everything from program and course options, to administrative supports, to activities going on in the University that might interest them. Disparate sources of information and a lack of transparency, as well as a search engine on the McGill web site seen by some as inadequate, were identified as obstacles to student attempts to inform themselves. The fact that students don't know where to go for help when solutions are not available through the 'usual channels' is one element of the problems of bureaucracy and red tape identified by many.

Students often experience difficulty obtaining accurate information about programs that cross faculties or other academic units. One presenter stated that the moment a student looks for information on programs outside of their core area or in relation to interdisciplinary programs, "confusion settles in"; it was also suggested that the extensive flexibility of programs, and plethora of options for students, contribute to the difficulty of providing each student with accurate and helpful advice. Another example concerns the fact that, in some large faculties at least, students going on exchange do not know until the last moment whether they have been accepted. This can cause both administrative and financial problems, including the subtlety of their accommodation in a very short period of time, timely registration for classes at McGill, and discovering too late that the courses they are taking elsewhere, or in some cases, have already taken, are not accepted for credit toward their degrees.

Space

Space constraints were cited by many as an impediment to a fulfilling experience for students generally, and for members of student organizations, clubs and activities in particular. A main concern for graduate students is the need for normal daily working space at the University. To the extent that the University is not in a position to provide adequate working space, graduate students compensate by working off campus; time spent off campus then becomes an additional barrier to their integration into the McGill community and to their ability to interact with professors. For undergraduate students, concerns identified included a lack of informal social space, and the cost of using University space for student activities, especially during evenings and weekends.

The Diversity of the Student Body

There was general agreement that opportunities arising from the diversity of the McGill student body for students to broaden their horizons, potentially a great asset for students at McGill, could be better fostered. Presenters noted there is often a ‘disconnect’ between international, Canadian French-speaking and Canadian English-speaking students, noting that many of their peers tended to socialise within networks established prior to their arrival at McGill, or shortly thereafter. As a consequence, many did not bridge ‘divides’ between students from Québec and those from outside the province, or between English-speaking and French-speaking students. Obstacles may be exacerbated by the fact that Canadians from outside Québec, as well as many international students, start their studies in the Freshman program (U0), while Québec Cégep graduates start in the first year of a departmental program (U1).

It was suggested that the opportunity to improve English or French as a second language should be integrated into students’ programs in order to make it feasible for them to do so. At present, there are not enough courses offered to accommodate all McGill students who may be interested in exposure to French in particular. Courses offered by the English and French Language Centre are six-credit courses, and may bridge the fall and winter semesters. For some students, the structure of their program is such that fitting in a six-credit option is not possible. Others might be more attracted to a three-credit course, rather than six, even where it is possible to fit it into their program, because of the desire to balance other course options.