

FOCUS ON STUDENTS: Principal's Task Force on Student Life and Learning at McGill Final Report December 2006

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Mission of McGill University is the advancement of learning through teaching, scholarship and service to society; by offering to outstanding undergraduate and graduate students the best education available; by carrying out scholarly activities judged to be excellent when measured against the highest international standards; and by providing service to society in those ways for which we are well-suited by virtue of our academic strengths.

In the spring of 2005, the Principal's Task Force on Student Life and Learning at McGill was struck by Principal Heather Munroe-Blum, with a mandate to investigate whether the university was as engaged in its mission with respect to students as it was with respect to research, and to examine the strong synergies between the two.

The Task Force was given a broad mandate to review issues affecting student life and learning at McGill, and has aimed to make a small number of substantial recommendations that will be given priority for implementation, and that will have an impact across the University.

Briefly stated, the Principal's Task Force has focused on:

- ❖ The place of students in the McGill community: where and how can McGill be more supportive of the academic life of our students, including transitions into and out of the University?
- ❖ A review of the supports to personal well-being and of special supports and counselling in times of personal crisis. A review of financial assistance currently offered, the level of student need, and how we can best bridge the gap.
- ❖ Diversity among our students and the internationalization of education: how can the University administration best foster sensitivity to cultural and personal differences in the delivery of academic and other administrative supports to our students, while respecting our primary academic purposes? How can we best provide an internationally informed experience for McGill students, both in terms of experience abroad and in the content of programs based on our campuses.
- ❖ McGill University and the Québec experience: how can we enhance relations between students from Québec and students from outside Québec, and enrich the Québec experience for students coming to McGill from outside the province?
- ❖ The e-experience: what is the optimal role of e-interaction between students and the University? How effective are the various ways in which students deal with the administration electronically? What additional services and information could most effectively be provided via the web? What is the impact of electronic aids to teaching on student life and learning?

Initially, the Task Force was composed of twenty-four individuals from the McGill community, who had broad experience of, and/or a demonstrated interest in, issues affecting student life and learning. Half of the appointed participants were students, and half faculty members or members of the administrative and support staff of the University. Each member also served on one of five working groups, two of which are chaired by students, two by faculty members, and one by a member of the administrative staff. Over the course of the Task Force's work, the membership has changed, although the composition of the group continued to include a mixture of students, faculty and administrative staff.

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THE STUDENT-CENTRED, RESEARCH-INTENSIVE UNIVERSITY

At the core of McGill's mission, along with the conduct of outstanding research, is the provision of an education of excellent quality to our students in our undergraduate, graduate and professional programs. As a research-intensive university, McGill aims to provide students with an academic experience that benefits directly from the research programs and agendas of Faculty members. A supportive campus environment is also essential for students to thrive. We wish to set the stage for a stimulating, enjoyable and fulfilling learning experience for our students, with services and administrative processes that are effective, efficient and, most importantly, student-oriented.

The Principal's Task Force on Student Life and Learning at McGill encourages the University to ensure that decision-making at all levels is informed by principles and goals appropriate to a student-centred, research-intensive University. The following is a statement of McGill's aspirations in this regard:

McGill is an outstanding research-intensive University that strives to offer its students the best education possible, in a vibrant environment for learning and campus life that supports students' academic progress and personal development. All members of the McGill community are committed to ensuring that students' concerns and interests pervade all aspects of University life.

Students are valued members of a cooperative academic community, and a primary concern of the University. They are treated as individuals, whose diverse backgrounds, goals, aspirations, needs, talents, and successes are welcomed and celebrated. Students are given the means and opportunities to freely probe, examine, debate issues and ideas, and actively pursue their educational goals. As members of a research-intensive university, students learn about, and are encouraged to participate in, research and scholarship in their field.

From the first contact of prospective students with the University, interactions among students, faculty, and administrative and support staff are based on mutual trust and respect. McGill strives to make the information needed by students easily accessible to them. The rights and responsibilities of students are clearly articulated and supported.

University decisions are made with due consideration given to their impact on students. Students participate in University governance and influence goals set by academic units, faculties, and the administration. Moreover, students are encouraged to participate in ongoing dialogue, where their voices are heard and where their concerns are addressed.

The University provides students with a wide variety of academic and support services, striving to make them easy to access, and it fosters students' interest in organizing their own activities. Students' best interests are a principal focus of academic, administrative, and support staff.

The University helps students obtain the financial support they need to pursue their education, by providing internal programs that are as generous as possible, and by supporting students in their efforts to find employment and external support.

The University helps students develop the means to succeed, to inquire after truth, and to contribute to society over their lifetimes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Members of the Principal's Task Force propose three recommendations, in the areas of academic advising and mentoring, resources for students, and the building of a learning community.

1. ACADEMIC ADVISING AND MENTORING AT MCGILL

McGill should ensure that quality academic advising is available and accessible for all students, geared to the stage of the student's academic career. Particular attention should be paid to advising students on interdisciplinary and inter-Faculty programs. Members of the academic staff should be encouraged to take advantage of opportunities to assume mentoring roles vis-à-vis students, usually on the basis of shared academic interests.

The University is accountable for minimising unnecessary obstacles to students in academic and administrative matters, for making relevant information available in a timely fashion, and for providing the guidance students need through the academic cycle. Students are accountable for taking reasonable steps to inform themselves, to seek advice where they need it, and to follow the advice they are given, as appropriate.

Whether or not they hold academic appointments, Advisers should be integrated into the academic functions of the department (or Faculty). The priority attached to providing quality advising to students should be reflected in the allocation of resources.

2. RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS: FUNDING AND SPACE

McGill University should develop a base level of funding for graduate research students in all departments that is competitive with that offered by our peers, both Canadian and international. The University should provide adequate and safe laboratory and office work space on campus for all graduate students. The attraction of funds for graduate student support should be made a priority, and awards should be made available to students in an efficient and expeditious manner. This recommendation is consistent with goals set out in the University White Paper, of improving completion rates and time to completion for graduate students.

The University should take measures to secure the resources necessary to offer sufficient assistance to undergraduate and professional students over the course of their program so that no candidate offered admission to McGill need turn down that offer for lack of financial assistance. Financial assistance for which students are eligible should be made available to students in an efficient and expeditious manner. The University should consider how resource requirements for much-improved need-based financial assistance can be met, while enhancing our ability to offer an appropriate number of merit-based scholarships to exceptional applicants.

Informal meeting space available for students' use should be distributed across the campus, including some quiet space, and space within easy access of snacks and beverages. The University should take into account the special role the University Libraries can play in supporting individual and group working space, as well as informal social space. It should take measures to ensure that access to virtual space across the campus is made easier for all students. The processes required for, and the costs associated with booking University space for extracurricular activities should be reviewed.

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3. BUILDING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

In creating a learning community, McGill should enhance the opportunities for the McGill experience to provide students with a window on the world. In doing so, the University should take advantage of its unique assets as a leading academic institution with a diverse student body, whose primary language of instruction is English, located in a cosmopolitan and multicultural city, in a French-speaking province.

The achievement of this learning community requires both an institutional commitment, and a commitment from members, to creating an inclusive and welcoming community, one that supports the development of strong collegial bonds and mutual respect and accountability among its members. This learning community is one that is welcoming and easy to manoeuvre, and that is the enemy of bureaucracy and red tape. It is one that celebrates diversity and is welcoming to its students.

CONCLUSION

The work of the Principal's Task Force on Student Life and Learning, and its report, will be completed by the end of 2006. The University Administration has undertaken to prepare a response that will be delivered in two stages: a preliminary response will be submitted to the community in the winter term of 2007, with a final, more detailed response delivered early in the fall term of 2007.

The final administrative response will address, among other things, processes and timelines for implementation of the recommendations of the Principal's Task Force, the costs of implementation, and mechanisms for evaluating the University's progress in implementing these recommendations. In preparing this response, there will be consultation, as necessary and appropriate, with students, Deans, and members of the University staff. The recommendations of each of the individual working groups that made up the Task Force will be conveyed to the relevant University administrators, so that they may be considered in developing administrative responses to the recommendations contained in this report.

The goal is clear: to provide students with the support and opportunities they need to achieve their full potential while at McGill and to ensure that all members of the community share in this goal. McGill is only as great as what it can offer to students, to society and to the advancement of knowledge; and in that respect, the life and learning that each of our students experiences while at the University is a measure of its success.