



McGill

Memorandum

Office of the Deputy Provost (Student Life and Learning)

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TO: Senate, February 10, 2010

FROM: Morton J. Mendelson, Deputy Provost (Student Life and Learning)

SUBJECT: Student Life and Learning at McGill University

DATE: January 22, 2010

DOCUMENT #: D09-47

FOR: **DECISION** **APPROVAL** **DISCUSSION**

ISSUE: Informing Senate about advances in Student Life and Learning at McGill.

BACKGROUND: The *Final Report of the Principal's Task Force on Student Life and Learning*¹, which was completed in December 2006, summoned the University to action with important, far-reaching recommendations:

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. (p. 22)

The *Final Administrative Response to the Recommendations of the Principal's Task Force on Student Life and Learning*², which was presented to Senate for discussion on December 5, 2007, and to the Board of Governors for information on April 7, 2008, described approaches that would be taken to address the broad areas. It also included an appendix outlining the specific recommendations in the *Report*, with a summary of the proposed steps to address each, as well as, where possible, an indication of the anticipated time lines and resources required. Thus, the appendix was to serve as a *Report Card* against which we, as a University, could judge our own progress in fulfilling our specific goals and in reaching our aspirations as expressed in the definition of a student-centred, research-intensive university³.

¹ www.mcgill.ca/principal/focus/final/

² www.mcgill.ca/files/provost/PTF_SLL_Final_Administrative_Response_27NOV07.pdf

³ www.mcgill.ca/files/principal/Student-Centred-Research-Intensive.pdf

In the spirit of public accountability, an on-line *Report Card*⁴, based on the appendix, was created and is regularly updated to inform the University community of the progress being made in achieving the high goals that we set for ourselves to enhance student life at McGill. Similarly, the administration committed to making annual presentations to Senate to highlight areas of particular interest and or concern to the academic community.

**MOTION OR
RESOLUTION FOR
APPROVAL:**

N/A

RATIONALE:

The second annual *Progress Report on Student Life and Learning* (attached) highlights improvements made in the area of advising.

The on-line Report Card comprises a complete list of initiatives made by members of the McGill community in all three broad objectives identified by the Principal's Task Force: Strengthen advising and mentoring, improve resources, and build a learning community.

**PRIOR
CONSULTATION:**

N/A

NEXT STEPS:

N/A

APPENDICES:

2010 Progress Report on Student Life and Learning

⁴ www.mcgill.ca/studentlife/

2010 PROGRESS REPORT ON STUDENT LIFE AND LEARNING AT MCGILL

Professor Morton J. Mendelson
Deputy Provost (Student Life and Learning)

February 10, 2010

The *Final Report of the Principal's Task Force on Student Life and Learning*¹ proposed an aspirational definition of a student-centred, research-intensive university² and made recommendations in three broad areas: academic advising and mentoring, resources for students, and the building of a learning community. The objectives outlined in the *Final Administrative Response to the Recommendations of the Principal's Task Force on Student Life and Learning*³ motivated a wide range of initiatives that were aimed at improving student life and learning at McGill and that are helping us actualize the aspirational definition.

This progress report highlights selected initiatives from the *Report Card*⁴, which is an account of actions stemming from the *Final Administrative Response*. Improvements in the area of student life and learning depend on the hard work of many members of the McGill community across our campuses – faculty, administrative and support staff, and students – and on the support of alumni and friends, in particular the very generous gift from Senator and Mrs. Michael Meighen. After providing a brief update from the 2009 progress report, this report focuses on one of our overall priorities – academic advising and mentoring.

However, community members are invited to visit the on-line *Report Card* to learn more about progress being made toward our goals for enhancing student life and learning at McGill. Please also use the on-line form at the *Report Card* website to inform us about local projects or initiatives, so that we can publicize them and share best practices across the University.

2009 Progress Report Update

The 2009 Progress Report on Student Life and Learning at McGill highlighted four projects:

Service excellence.⁵ An initiative that defined service excellence in the context of McGill resulted in new staff-development programs for frontline staff and for their managers, which were offered, through Organizational Development and Learning, to almost 400 individuals in 21 sessions in 2009. The program is helping staff members develop the competencies they need while building on their experience and skills, with a goal of promulgating a Service Excellence approach at all front-line services.

Integrated services.⁶ The Integrated Services Project – Service Point – is well underway; in fact, our service counters in James have already begun to offer a more comprehensive suite of services. The final product will bring together administrative services for students currently offered at six different service counters in four buildings in a collaborative initiative designed to improve McGill students' experience. A cohesive suite of newly organized services will be provided by newly trained staff on the street level of the McLennan Library Building, which is currently being renovated. If construction stays on schedule, the Service Point will open in May 2010.

Improving the online experience. A joint project involving Student Life and Learning units, the Public Affairs Office, and the Web Communications group in the Office of the CIO, to improve the online experience of McGill students. The "Student" tab on the McGill home page was revamped, and the material on the underlying pages is being structured in terms of topics (e.g., courses, transfer credits, important dates, etc.), rather than McGill's organizational plan, so that students can intuitively find the information they need without knowing which unit on campus is responsible for it.

Cut the Red Tape Contest.⁷ After the first Cut the Red Tape Contest successfully identified a number of ways to improve administrative processes on campus, Red Tape 2009 focused on what we can do to help McGill students navigate our campus. The contest gave everyone on campus an opportunity to contribute to blogs on four topics: 1. Where do you get advice?; 2. Did you find that on-line, or not; 3. I wish I knew then...; and 4. Run around. The entries provided

¹ www.mcgill.ca/principal/focus/final/

² www.mcgill.ca/files/principal/Student-Centred-Research-Intensive.pdf

³ www.mcgill.ca/files/provost/PTF_SLL_Final_Administrative_Response_27NOV07.pdf

⁴ www.mcgill.ca/studentlife/

⁵ www.mcgill.ca/hr/staffdevelopment/courses/?ModuleName=SE&Order=CourseDesc&CourseID=180

⁶ www.mcgill.ca/integratedservices/

⁷ blogs.mcgill.ca/redtape/

information that has guided our review and restructuring of online services and web pages and has contributed to our ongoing development of the Service Point. Other suggestions received were passed along to units on campus and have led to a wide range of improvements.

Academic Advising

The Principal's Task Force made the following central recommendations on advising and mentoring:

- *McGill should ensure that quality academic advising is available and accessible for all students, geared to the stage of the student's academic career.*
- *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.*

Here, we highlight some of the initiatives taken to address the first recommendation. However, with respect to the recommendation on mentoring, it is important to note that some progress has been made: In 2008-2009, a small workgroup researched mentoring programs and best practices at other North American universities, with a view to creating a McGill program based on a suggestion from a McGill faculty member. A proposal has been distributed to the Deans for consultation, with a target launch for spring 2010. The last recommendation has been, and continues to be, addressed through a number of initiatives, some of which were described in last year's progress report and in the update above.

An important step in improving advising at McGill was the redefinition of the position of the Dean of Students, who now has, among other responsibilities, the mandate to facilitate the exchange, development and dissemination of best practices in a number of priority areas, including academic advising and mentoring. Indeed, much of the progress for University-level initiatives outlined here is due to the very capable leadership of Dean Jane Everett.

Measuring progress. McGill regularly surveys undergraduate and graduate students using a variety of questionnaires.⁸ While much of the available information predates the Principal's Task Force on Student Life and Learning, some data bear directly on its 39 recommendations. Most indicators drawn from available questionnaires identify areas for improvement and confirm the need for actions that are already underway. Over time, we expect these same indicators to track the success of the new initiatives described in the *Report Card*.

McGill lags well behind comparison universities in our students' assessments of advising. For example, McGill students completing the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement⁹ (NSSE) evaluated "*the quality of academic advising you have received at your institution*" on a 4-point scale (1: Poor; 2: Fair; 3: Good; 4: Excellent). The mean response for McGill first-year students was significantly lower than for their counterparts at G-13 and AAU-public institutions (2.68 vs. 2.82 and 3.01 respectively). The mean response for McGill seniors was also significantly lower than for their G-13 and AAU-public counterparts (2.36 vs. 2.63 and 2.72 respectively).

University-wide initiatives. Progress was made on a number of projects related to advising in 2009, which provided a foundation for continued improvements in 2010.

- In fulfilment of one of the recommendations of the Principal's Task Force on Student Life and Learning, an Academic Advising Mission statement¹⁰ was drafted, discussed widely, and approved by Senate, on January 21, 2009. The statement explains the purpose of advising in facilitating student life and learning and outlines expectations regarding the University, advisors, and students. Its adoption by Senate reflects the value of academic advising to the community.
- A pan-University advising website¹¹ was launched in May 2009, on which can be found a number of valuable resources, such as a University Advisor Directory and Advising FAQs. The site will be enhanced considerably in the coming months, through the following:

⁸ www.mcgill.ca/studentlife/measure/

⁹ www.mcgill.ca/files/pia/McGillUniversityNSSE08InstitutionalReport.pdf

¹⁰ www.mcgill.ca/students/advising/mission/

¹¹ www.mcgill.ca/students/advising/

- Development of resources for advisees and advisors (e.g., self-assessment questionnaires for students and for advisors; literature on academic advising, in all its aspects; training modules)
 - Development of a mechanism for updating the Advisor Directory and enriching its content (e.g., advisor profiles)
 - Updating and enriching FAQs
- A web-based Ask-an-Advisor pilot project¹² was launched in May 2009. Questions submitted from prospective, incoming, current, and recent students have been answered directly and have been used to update and enrich Advising FAQs; to identify gaps in, or barriers to, readily available information; to better understand students' advising needs and expectations; and to determine if and how the project might be maintained.
 - A survey for Academic Advisors¹³, which was prepared by Organizational and Staff Development (Human Resources) in collaboration with a group of advisors and the Dean of Students, was conducted in June 2009. The goal was to identify issues that should be addressed in a staff development program for Academic Advisors. The emphasis will be on training trainers and on developing modules with both common core and supplementary elements that can be adapted to all types of advisors – e.g., front-line personnel providing generic administrative advising and advisors working with particular subgroups of students in specific programs or students with specific needs.

The first meeting of the newly created Advisors Forum, a pan-University network for advisors, was held in the fall of 2009. The immediate goal is to collect feedback on current strengths, needs, and best practices. The work of the network will be guided by a steering committee, with representatives from each Faculty. The Forum will be charged with liaison between faculties and will determine the content and scope of professional development initiatives for advisors (e.g., webinars, study days, etc). Work has begun, with representatives from HR, on the first training modules.

- Work is well under way to develop a prototype to standardize faculty-specific advising websites. Broad consultation has been undertaken with the faculties to examine how common content can be adapted to the needs of specific units. New websites will come on line as they are developed.
- Initial discussions are underway regarding an advisor recognition program. The immediate goal is to draft a consultation document that outlines various forms of recognition and the relative costs and benefits of each.

Faculty-specific initiatives. Considerable progress has been made in the area of academic advising in specific units since the completion of the Principal's Task Force on Student Life and Learning. The number of academic advisors has increased by nearly 20% in the past 5 years, and allocations to faculties in support of these improvements have increased by over \$700,000 in the past 2 years. Here we highlight, as examples, improvements in the Faculties of Arts, Science, and Engineering:

- Arts
 - An Advising Exit Survey and an Advising Assessment Survey, which were recently conducted, are helping the Faculty better understand how well students understand Faculty and degree policies as well as the role and function of department and Faculty academic advisors. The surveys are also helping to frame group discussions about issues such as interview and communication techniques.
 - The Faculty has committed resources to advisor training and professional development and has invested in departmental advising in a number of ways: course release for the Chief Advisor, hiring of graduate students to assist with advising, contributions towards the creation of professional advisor positions, development of career advising sessions, etc.
 - The Faculty advisors act as resource liaison advisors to a cluster of departments in the Faculty; regular meetings are held to discuss advising issues, policies, advising techniques, hypothetical and specific cases.

¹² www.mcgill.ca/students/advising/ask/

¹³ www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=Y6rYFQce9nVSrQ7hkyZCUg_3d_3d

- The new Faculty Academic Advisor's website¹⁴ provides advisors with useful information about advising theory and practice, the advising structure at McGill, Faculty and degree policies, as well as links to various forms that advisors may require, and links to other useful sites, such as NACADA.
 - Closer links with CAPS and Counselling Services has helped the Faculty develop Faculty- and department-specific information sessions.
- Science
 - The Science advising office (SOUSA) is now under the leadership the Director of Advising Services and the Chief Academic Advisor, two full-time academic positions.
 - Advisors names for all newly admitted students appear on their transcript in mid-August, so new students can contact their academic advisors before classes begin; all communication from the Faculty comes from the student's own advisor.
 - Specialist advisors are assigned to specific groups of students (e.g., those in interdisciplinary programs, on exchange, and at risk); indeed, the Faculty is actively reaching out to at-risk students, with the goal of preventing academic problems before they arise.
 - All U1 and U0 students are contacted mid-semester, to ask how their exams went, and to invite them to make an appointment with their academic advisor. Information regarding study skills and time management workshops is also distributed.
 - The number and variety of information sessions has increased, with some offered on location in Residences or co-located at the fall-semester ID card centre in Trottier, which has significantly increased attendance.
 - Engineering
 - A series of workshops/presentations were created for the new cohort of CEGEP students who registered with an "undeclared major" to help students to make informed choices of majors
 - One-on-one early advising, registration, and group tours are now available for newly admitted CEGEP students. More than 150 students attended were advised and registered by mid June 2009, effectively expanding advising capacity in August.
 - Program profiles were developed to reflect the critical path to degree completion by term.
 - The Four Year Plan provides a tool for students to systematically plan activities around their course work (when to meet with an Advisor, when to start thinking about an Internship, when to start working on a Resume, when to begin thinking about an Exchange program etc.) to help them get the best out of their McGill experience

This progress report is meant not only to outline the steps that have been taken to address one of the key recommendations of the Principles Task Force on Student Life and Learning, but also to contribute to what we hope will become an ongoing conversation on campus about these very important issues. As stated in the Final Report of the Task Force, "*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.*" (p. 22) Senators can help achieve this by ensuring that members of their own units are aware of the initiatives described here and by informing us about local projects, so that we can, in turn, publicize them and share best practices to improve student life and learning across the University.

¹⁴ www.mcgill.ca/oasis/artsadv