



# **University Students' Council 2015 Budget Submission**

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## Introduction

This report was created in accordance with the University Students' Council's (USC) mission statement "To enhance the educational experience and quality of life for all undergraduates at Western University." As the organization that represents the interests and voices of all undergraduate students on Western's campus we have identified three key priorities of our students.

The USC recognizes that the University is currently in their four year budget cycle planning process and would like to submit our priorities for consideration in the annual budget on behalf of all undergraduates at Western. As stakeholders in the University, it is the University Students' Council's desire to partner with Western to work towards enhancing the educational experience and quality of life for all students on this campus.

The USC will be looking to submit key priorities as identified by students on an annual basis to the President's Office for consideration in the budget process. The top priorities identified by the University Students' Council on behalf of students in accordance with Western's strategic plan have been enclosed in this report in order of importance to the student body.

This budget submission has been crafted after consultation with students, and the Students' Council to reflect the needs of all students. At our most recent council meeting Students' Council ratified this as its official budget submission to Western University Administration.

The identified priorities include:

1. Maintaining the best student experience by focusing on mental health supports, creating an operating budget for the Associate VP (Student Experience) portfolio, and develop a business plan for a "No Wrong Door Approach" model for student support delivery.
2. Continuing to provide a world class academic experience by improving academic counseling, expanding experiential learning offerings, and creating learning outcomes.
3. Reinvesting in the bones of Western's campus by allocating funds for maintenance and retrofits of physical infrastructure, and the construction of new buildings on our campus.



## **Maintaining the Student Experience**

Western University prides itself as having the best student experience in Canada, but with the Mcleans rankings no longer around this title is no longer confirmed. As a University community we must always be striving to maintain and protect the title of “The Best Student Experience” in Canada. Outlined in the following section is the USC’s recommendation to help protect this distinction.

### **Mental Health Support**

As is well documented across our culture mental health is a trending topic and for all the wrong reasons, as rates of reported mental illness are increasing. Unfortunately, University students are not immune to this and some studies show that one in four post-secondary students will suffer from a mental illness or addiction at some point during their academic career . Specific to Western University the Student Development Centre has seen a 115% increase in Psychological Services since 2009 and Student Health Services has seen approximately 3000 more visitors for mental health services in 3 years. It is clear that both of these numbers are staggeringly large .

Another set of unfortunate stats is the timing of when these mental illness first show themselves, and the University Environment.

- On average most people have their first encounter with mental illness between the ages of 18 24; is also the average age of undergraduate students at Western University .
- University is both a high stress environment and costs a great deal of money, meaning the compound pressure of both these burdens force students to work more than then usual .
- Finally, for most students, being away from home for the first time is stressful, and their typical support systems are gone, making the process to deal with mental illness even harder.

Further compounding this problem is the fact that funding for mental health services on campus has not increased proportionally to the increase in service demands. In the August 2014 reports for the Student Services Committee (SSC) the Student Development Centre notes that an increase in front line staff and contract workers put that unit into a \$43,000 deficit. This chronic lack of funding is preventing students from receiving the support they require in a timely manner.

**The USC recommends that the University commit to match funding increases for mental health services that the SSC committee approves.**

### **Operating Budget for the Associate VP (Student Experience)**

The USC appreciates the University’s commitment to students in the form of an Associate VP (Student Experience) being created at the end of the last academic year. We are also happy to see that the



Associate VP (Student Experience) portfolio continues to grow as its role is being defined. The USC will continue to work collaboratively to help shepherd this growth.

**The USC is concerned with the relatively small budget for this position, and recommends its expansion to be included in the four year budget planning.**

## **The No Wrong Door Approach**

For years the USC has been advocating for a “No Wrong Door Approach” to student services on campus. At Western University, the various support services are spread out across campus, and if a student seeks service at the incorrect unit for what they require they are told to seek help elsewhere. The fact that that a student has identified they need support and is being told to leave is a problem. This thinking must switch to a No Wrong Door Approach, whereby if a student shows up at, for instance, International Student Services for mental health support, that student would receive those supports before leaving the attention of a staff member or administrator.

**The USC’s final recommendation within the Student Experience Portfolio is that the University commission a business plan for the implementation of a “No Wrong Door Approach” at Western University.**

## **The Academic Experience**

It must be recognized that at our very core the USC is an organization that was founded on the principals of improving the academic experience for all undergraduate students. In recent decades, the focus has slowly expanded to address on other parts of the post-secondary experience, but academic quality at Western remains a top priority for the USC. Below are 3 recommendations to continue improving that academic experience.

### **Academic Counselling**

In a recent survey of students the second priority for investment after financial assistance was student services. Students who left their programs early significantly underused student services, particularly counselling services. Academic counselling is part of the student service experience that needs to be improved, particularly so in Social Science. The first hand stories that the USC receives from our students highlight an uneven service level, and a particular challenge to receive timely service. Both of these issues must be addressed. We realize that counselors have huge caseloads and we commend the effort each counsellor does put in, however it is time to provide improved support to both students and counsellors.



The USC recommends that the University make a significant strategic investment into academic counselling to reduce wait times and the caseload for each counselor so they can better support their students.

## **Experiential Learning**

Traditional forms of learning will always have a place in the classrooms of tomorrow, but long gone are the days where learning can only take place in the classroom. In the modern classroom learning occurs in the community and through hands on learning opportunities otherwise known as Work-Integrated Learning . This learning is crucial for the students of today who expect a high quality and diverse educational experience. Furthermore, experiential learning allows students to start the job development process much earlier, which will help them navigate a competitive job market. Western has started to embrace the idea of experiential learning and this is a great first step.

Western's efforts to expand experiential learning opportunities are commendable and there are a few pieces of the puzzle missing that can greatly enhance the student experience. While the number of potential experiential learning opportunities available to students is limited, the USC recognizes that in the last few years the number of opportunities has increased greatly. The area of concern for the USC is the fact that a vast majority of the current opportunities available to students are in the form of unpaid internships. As stated earlier, students are under a great deal of pressure to finance their education and paid co-operative and internship opportunities are seen as a great way to lessen this burden. According to a 2014 study 63% of students felt that internships should be paid, meaning there is a great deal of student appetite for compensation for their work.

The USC recommends that Western include increased financial resources to help develop increased internship and co-operative education opportunities for students in their four year budget cycle and that these opportunities must be paid where ever possible.

## **Learning Outcomes**

Learning Outcomes provide students with a better understanding of what they will learn from each class, which would be an integral part of any student class selection process.

Western has been particularly slow at the creation of Learning Outcomes, and the USC is pleased to see Learning Outcomes included in the Strategic Plan that was just passed by the University Senate and Board of Governors. The USC hopes that this focus, as directed by the Senate and the Board, will be used to create Learning Outcomes that not only hold students accountable, but also empower the faculty to provide high quality learning experiences. These Learning Outcomes should not just be a placeholder in the syllabus, but a valuable resource that students can rely on when enrolling in classes. The USC recommends that the University allocate in their budget funding to provide the human resources and create the infrastructure needed to develop Learning Outcomes for all of their classes at Western.

## Capital and Infrastructure

Western should take pride in the beautiful ivy covered buildings built as long as 100 years ago. It's our understanding that over half of the building on campus were built before 1980. Whether they are 100 or 20 years old the need for a focus on maintaining our infrastructure is paramount. The USC is aware of the infrastructure crunch and would like to provide our suggestions and requests.

Differed maintenance payments from the government are limited, with only \$500 million over the next 5 years to give out to all the schools in Ontario. This may not be enough to pay for the needs of just Western let alone the whole province. Given this reality the USC will continue to advocate to the provincial government to pick up a larger portion of this problem through the upcoming budgets, but given the realities of the province's financial situation it is highly unlikely anything will change.

The USC recommends that Western continues to increase its yearly investment into the Maintenance, Modernization and Infrastructure Fund to \$1 Million from the current \$750,000 establishing Western as a Canadian Leader in addressing deferred maintenance.

- <sup>i</sup> Pin, Laura and Martin, Chris. 2012. Student Health: Bringing Healthy Change to Ontario's Universities. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance.
- <sup>ii</sup> Student Services Committee, Reports August 2014.
- <sup>iii</sup> Pin and Martin, 2012.
- <sup>iv</sup> Berger, J., Motte, A., and Parkin, A. (2009). The Price of Knowledge: Access and Student Finance in Canada, Fourth Edition. Millennium Scholarship Foundation: Montreal, QC
- <sup>v</sup> Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, What Students Want Toronto: 2010.
- <sup>vi</sup> Educational Policy Institute. Access, Persistence, and Barriers in Postsecondary Education: A Literature Review and Outline of Future Research. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2008.
- <sup>vii</sup> Martin, C, Saeed, H & Pin, L. (2013). Youth Employment: Re-imagining the link between learning and labour. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance.
- <sup>viii</sup> Sattler, P., and Peters, J. (2013). Work-Integrated Learning in Ontario's Postsecondary Sector: The Experience of Ontario Graduates. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
- <sup>ix</sup> Madden, S. (2014). Beyond the Traditional Classroom: Teaching and Learning in Contemporary Higher Education. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance.
- <sup>x</sup> Gonzalez, J & Wagenaar, R. Introduction to Tuning 2. The Tuning Project. 2007
- <sup>xi</sup> Woolcott, Donna. Quality Assurance Framework. The Council of Ontario Universities. 2012



