



EXECUTIVE REPORT TO THE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' COUNCIL

Subject: USC Response to COVID-19

Date: 1 April 2020 | Council Meeting 1 of the 2020/21 Academic Year

BACKGROUND

COVID-19 is a public health crisis in Canada and around the world, officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11th, 2020. The USC executive has been working collaboratively on the issue with Western's administration since it was announced that Ontario's third case of COVID-19 was a Western student on January 31st.

On the morning of March 12th, President Bardia Jalayer joined Western's Emergency Operations Control Group (EOGC) for a briefing on COVID-19. Within hours, the university announced the cancellation of all campus events with over 50 attendees, which impacted a number of the USC's planned programs and events and many club and faculty council events.

At 4:30pm on March 12th, we launched a [new webpage](#) dedicated to providing updates about COVID-19. At 5:00pm, the executive cancelled all core USC programs and events. By 6:30pm, all future bookings and reservations were also cancelled. At 8:00pm on the same evening, Western announced that classes would be cancelled until March 18th, at which point they would move online for the remainder of the term.

On the evening of March 15th, the USC's Senior Leadership Team (executives and senior managers) made the decision to close the USC office and operations (Spoke, Wave, Purple Store, Western Film) until the end of the academic year. At that time, the USC's tenants in the basement of the UCC were permitted to remain open.

Finally, on March 24th, Western announced the closure of all campus buildings, with the exception of residence buildings, and a full move to remote work for Western employees. This announcement closed the USC's tenants in the UCC basement with the exception of the University Pharmacy, which is permitted to operate remotely (including home deliveries for prescription medication) and open for in-person hours when Western's Student Health Services clinic is open on Tuesday and Thursday mornings from 9:00am to 1:00pm.

Through all of these changes, the USC has been committed to providing students with regular updates on the new USC COVID-19 website, as soon as those updates are available. Major updates have been supplemented with social media posts that provide relevant information to the student community, and direct students to appropriate resources such as Western's COVID-19 website and local public health officials.

CURRENT SITUATION

As of Monday, March 16th, the USC moved to a fully remote work environment. The USC's physical office and operations are fully closed until at least April 30th. USC staff and student executives continue to work full-time in a remote setting to support physical distancing requirements as mandated by public health authorities.

The following core USC services and supports are currently being offered virtually:

- Executive Office Hours
- Peer Support
- Digital Food Bank
- Income Tax Clinic
- Health and Dental Plan (Student Benefits) support
- Finance and Clubs support

The USC's Vice President portfolio has continued with advocacy to the university and all levels of government related to COVID-19 on behalf of students. The USC's initial advocacy focused on financial security and academic flexibility. To date, the USC's advocacy has contributed to a moratorium on federal and provincial student loan repayments (including interest accrual) until September 30th, 2020 and the recent addition of a retroactive pass/fail and credit withdraw option for students, which will be available after numerical grades are released in May. The USC is now shifting advocacy to income and career support for students who have lost their summer job or cannot recruit for summer employment, and special consideration of need in 2020/21 student financial aid assessments.

The USC's Student Programs portfolio has made a rapid move to digitize programming and student support since Western moved to an online learning model. Programming is now focused on social media, specifically Instagram, and the portfolio frequently uses the Instagram Live feature. The following digital programs are occurring regularly:

- Question of the Day
- Morning Fitness Classes
- Cooking Classes
- Trivia
- Bingo
- Rick's Wednesdays
- We Got Game Video Game Tournaments

Additionally, the USC has released a number of campaigns to support students' transition to online learning and social distancing measures across society. These campaigns include:

- 19 Tips for Online Learning during COVID-19 (tips for success in online classes)
- Wellness During COVID-19 (wellness tips for all seven dimensions of wellness during physical distancing)
- #StayHome (educational campaign encouraging students to practice physical distancing)
- Did You Know? (quick tidbits of relevant information for students about new policies and procedures at Western given COVID-19)

FINANCIAL SUPPORT PACKAGE

The USC is aware that the changes caused by COVID-19 are causing immense and unprecedented stress on students' holistic wellness, including their financial security. The USC has committed to the following measures to support students and student groups:

- Financial support for clubs forced to cancel events and were not refunded fees previously paid to external firms (i.e., venue rentals, catering orders, etc.) - to date, the USC has covered approximately \$10,000 in non-refundable club expenses for 3 clubs that demonstrated lost money due to the event cancellations.
- Full payment for part-time student employees for all shifts scheduled through March 31st and expedited issuing of Record of Employment forms to allow student employees to apply for Employment Insurance and government financial supports
- Automatic refunding of all previously purchased tickets for now-cancelled USC events
- Automatic refunding of all pre-paid deposits and fees for now-cancelled USC space reservations and catering orders

The Executive is currently in conversations with the university about introducing a general student aid/relief fund to benefit Western students in immediate financial need (i.e., students who require financial assistance for imminent expenses such as rent payments, medical bills, and groceries).

The Executive is seeking authorization from Council to contribute up to \$150,000 beyond the measures listed above in general aid to support students during COVID-19.

The USC has a large number of events and services that were cancelled between March 12th and April 30th, creating budgetary space for such a contribution. The Senior Leadership Team believes that the savings from closing physical operations and in-person events will be sufficient to fund this contribution. In any event, the reserve fund has sufficient cash to meet this need if the finances required exceed unused budgeted funds.

As this contribution represents a material change to the executive budget which was passed by Council in March 2019, the Executive is seeking Council's endorsement of the aforementioned plan in a New Business motion, *Supporting Western Students During the COVID-19 Crisis*, to be tabled at the April 1 meeting of council.