An Update on the Student Mental Health and Well-being Strategy

Supporting student mental health has been a focus of universities across North America for the past several years. At many institutions, there are a growing number of students who are being treated for anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse. The tragedy of suicide remains a complex issue that both post-secondary institutions and society at large continue to wrestle with. I reported to the Board in March 2015 on the launch of McMaster’s Student Mental Health and Well-being Strategy, and given the ongoing importance of this issue, and the evolution of the conversation about mental health, I thought it appropriate to provide an update at the beginning of this new academic year.

The development of the Student Mental Health and Well-being Strategy was led by Dr. Catharine Munn (Faculty of Health Sciences & Student Wellness Centre) and Allison Drew-Hassling (Student Affairs), and involved dozens of members from the campus community, including student groups, faculty, staff, and mental health experts. The Strategy includes a commitment that the University “will strive to nurture and support all students to be as healthy as they can be and to reach their potential”. It established five key recommendations focused on the provision of robust mental health education, training and campus resources, the implementation of a proactive and coordinated response to students in distress, the review and adaptation of policies and processes to ensure that mental health needs are accommodated, the provision of increased capacity within the Student Wellness Centre, and the establishment of a program of research focused on young adults in post-secondary settings.

I am pleased to report that in the period since the launch of the Strategy significant progress has been made on all fronts, although we recognize, of course, that there is still much more to be done. Sean Van Koughnett, Associate Vice-President (Students & Learning) and Dean of Students, who is leading this initiative, has provided the following summary of our priorities and our progress:

1. **Provide robust mental health and well-being education, training and resources for campus navigators.**

   **Status:** Over 280 students completed safeTalk training last year, and in 2015-16 over 100 frontline staff were trained in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA). Human Resources Services is now equipped to deliver MHFA to groups across campus. In addition, Mental Health was integrated into Welcome Week programming in 2016 and 2017 as one of three “strategic themes”.

2. **Implement a pro-active, co-ordinated, consistent and unified approach to students in difficulty across campus.**

   **Status:** The Student Support and Case Management Office was created in 2016 to co-ordinate a consistent and unified approach to supporting and managing highly complex cases involving
mental health. The work of this office often involves multiple university partners, including the Student Wellness Centre, Student Accessibility Services, Housing, Security, and the academic units, along with external health care providers.

In the 2016/2017 academic year, the office handled 82 highly complex cases involving mental health issues, most of which require thoughtful yet timely action. In addition, the Office oversees the Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities and is an Intake Office for the Sexual Violence Policy and the Policy on Discrimination and Harassment: Prevention & Response.

3. **Adapt accommodation policies, processes, organizational structures and pedagogies to changing and growing student mental health needs.**

**Status:** Under the leadership of a Committee chaired by Dr. Sue Baptiste, Professor, School of Rehabilitation Science, a re-developed academic accommodations policy was approved by Senate in April 2017. The new policy addresses accommodations for students with mental health disabilities, temporary disabilities, retroactive accommodations, and accommodations for experiential learning environments, and meets all the requirements for accommodations of mental health disabilities put forth by the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

4. **Increase capacity within the Student Wellness Centre building on the existing collaborative care model.**

**Status:** Last year, the University’s team of highly dedicated physicians, nurses, counsellors and administrative staff in the Student Wellness Centre handled over 45,000 visits from students. Under the leadership of director Rosanne Kent, lead physician Dr. Finola Foley, and associate director (Counselling) Debbie Nifakis, the SWC is further increasing its capacity by hiring four additional front line mental health professionals (two full-time, two part-time). These additional staff were made possible by graduate students, who voted to increase their ancillary fees, and by our own government advocacy efforts, which resulted in increased government funding for frontline mental health support.

5. **Establish a program of research and health policy focused on emerging adults in post-secondary settings and building on existing McMaster strengths and resources.**

**Status:** In 2015, Dr. Munn was awarded an $800,000, two-year Mental Health Innovation Fund grant to develop the “Arrive and Thrive” program, which assessed and addressed the needs of students struggling with substance abuse.

**What’s next?**

Strengthening our support for student mental health and well-being will be an ongoing effort involving partners across campus and within the community. Of note:

- McMaster has secured an e-Campus Ontario grant that will enable us to develop and assess the efficacy of digital tools designed to educate instructors on supporting student mental health.
- A review of Student Accessibility Services will occur this year, in part to respond to the escalating need for support of students with mental health disabilities.
• A “stepped care” model is being implemented in the Student Wellness Centre in order to maximize our efficiency and the effectiveness of student care.
• A new Student Wellness Centre will be part of the Peter George Centre for Living and Learning, scheduled to open in Fall 2019. This new space will be larger and more prominent, reflecting the importance and value we place on this service.
• Through the Council of Ontario Universities and in partnership with the Ontario Undergraduate Students Alliance and the College sector, we are advocating for an integrated province-wide strategy for supporting student mental health and well-being.

As recent discussions in the media are highlighting, beyond the work that universities can do to eliminate the stigma of mental illness and provide additional counsellors and supports, there is a critical role for community partners and the health care system in providing care in partnership with post secondary institutions, especially in cases of severe illness. Questions are being asked about when a student is healthy enough to study, and how to support them when they’re not, and there is increased focus on strengthening students’ ability to manage the challenges of university life.

Although this update is focused on support for student mental health, I would be remiss if I didn’t make the point that the University also recognizes the critical importance of raising awareness of mental health issues in the workplace, and supporting the mental health and well-being of our faculty and staff. McMaster’s Workplace Wellness unit plays a crucial role in providing access to support and advice, and also runs a variety of wellness programs for faculty and staff. Our partnership with Homewood Health enables us to provide McMaster employees with an extensive Employee and Family Assistance Program, which includes support for mental health and well-being, and as a member of the Hamilton Anchor Institutions Leadership (HAIL) group, McMaster is also part of an initiative to promote the importance of providing adequate supports for employee mental health to all employers within the Hamilton area.

CAMPUS UPDATE

Rankings Update
Fuelled by a growing reputation for our rare combination of research excellence and high-quality teaching, McMaster dramatically improved its standing in all three of this year’s most respected university reports. McMaster was ranked 78th in the world by the Times Higher Education’s influential World University Rankings, jumping 35 spots from its previous ranking (the biggest improvement of any institution listed among the top 100 in the world.) McMaster was also ranked 66th in the world by the Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Ranking of World Universities, improving its standing by 13 places, and jumped to 140 in the world in the QS World University Rankings from 149.

McMaster hosts Engineering Deans from around the world
More than 150 delegates from 25 countries shared inspiring ideas on how to improve higher education and prepare the next generation of engaged engineers at a high-profile event held in Niagara Falls, Ontario. Hosted by McMaster University's Faculty of Engineering, the Global Engineering Deans Council Conference (GEDC) explored a range of issues from bio-innovation
for social impact, to teaching students about the Internet of Things, to addressing climate change, to inclusive engineering schools and workplaces in the future. This is the first time the event has been held in Canada.

**McMaster Professor elected as Chair of the International Nuclear Energy Academy**

McMaster’s John Luxat, a highly regarded Professor of Engineering Physics, has been selected to lead an international academy that fosters the safe and economic use of nuclear energy around the world. Luxat, an accomplished researcher and educator in nuclear risk assessment and safety, was recently elected chair of the International Nuclear Energy Academy at its annual general meeting in Austria, part of the general conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

**Research**

**McMaster faculty named Fellows of the Royal Society of Canada**

Lorraine York, a Professor of English and Cultural Studies, has been elected to the Academy of Arts and Humanities. Mark Crowther, who holds a joint appointment in the Departments of Medicine, and Pathology and Molecular Medicine, and is also an associate of the Department of Health Research Methods, Evidence and Impact, has been elected to the Academy of Science. The Royal Society promotes Canadian research and scholarly excellence and induction into the Society is an honour reserved for Canada’s best and brightest scholars.

**Two faculty named to the Royal Society’s College of New Scholars, Artists and Scientists**

Sheila Singh and Paul McNicholas have forged new paths in their respective areas of research: Dr. Singh, as an accomplished clinician scientist and internationally recognized scholar in the area of stem cell biology and cancer research; and Dr. McNicholas as a global leader in computational statistics research, at the forefront of the field because of his trail-blazing work in classification and clustering using mixture models.

**Health Geographer named new Fellow of the UK's Royal Society of Arts**

Gavin J. Andrews, a Professor in McMaster’s Department of Health, Aging and Society, has been named a Fellow of the UK’s Royal Society of Arts. Andrews, the Graduate Chair of the Department of Health, Aging & Society, is a leading health geographer. His wide-ranging research explores the dynamics between space, place and aging, holistic medicine, health care work, phobias, sports and fitness, health histories and popular music.

**Recognition by the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences**

Eileen Hutton, Assistant Dean of Midwifery at McMaster, and Professor of Kinesiology, Stuart Phillips, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Skeletal Muscle Health, have been inducted as Fellows of the Academy of Health Sciences, considered a high honour in the field. They were among 52 new fellows honoured at a recent ceremony in Ottawa.

**$16.3M from NSERC awarded to more than 100 McMaster Scientists and Engineers**

More than one hundred McMaster researchers, graduate students and postdoctoral fellows have received a combined $16.3M from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC). The awards were announced on September 8 by the Honourable Kirsty Duncan, Minister of Science. Recognizing creativity and innovation, NSERC’s Discovery Grants program
supports on-going, long-term research plans. These grants, fellowships, and scholarships have been awarded to researchers in three of McMaster’s six Faculties – Science, Engineering and Health Sciences – and will help mobilize the University’s research efforts by supporting and encouraging promising researchers at various stages of their careers.

**Engineering Researchers receive $1.9 million in Federal Funding**
Six McMaster researchers have been awarded more than $1.9 million combined for infrastructure funding from the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI). The projects are funded through CFI’s John Evans Leaders Fund (JELF), designated for exceptional researchers to conduct leading-edge research by giving them the requisite tools and equipment to become leaders in their fields. McMaster’s JELF recipients are:

- **Gianluigi Botton**, materials science and engineering, received $800,000 for his project: Advanced Electron Microscopy Tools
- **Kathryn Grandfield** and **Nabil Bassim**, materials science and engineering, received $799,980 for their project: Plasma Focused Ion Beam for Mesoscale Tomography of Materials
- **Zeinab Hosseini-Doust**, chemical engineering, was awarded $135,361 for her project: Building a Bacteriophage Biotechnology Platform
- **Thia Kirubarajan**, electrical and computer engineering, was awarded $100,000 for his project: Computational Suite for Emerging Concepts in Target Tracking and Information Fusion
- **Jennifer Bauman**, electrical and computer engineering, received $80,000 for her project: Electrified Powertrain Modeling Laboratory: The Optimization of Efficiency, Cost, and Lifetime of Electrified Vehicles

**Potential new Leukemia Treatment**
Researchers with the McMaster Stem Cell and Cancer Research Institute have found that boosting adipocytes, or fat cells, located in the bone marrow suppressed cancerous leukemia cells but – in a surprise to the research team – induced the regeneration of healthy blood cells at the same time. Nearly one in two Canadians will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime.

**Breaking down Alzheimer’s: Impact of Green Tea Extract**
Preclinical evidence suggests that the green tea compound known as EGCG interferes with the formation of toxic assemblies (oligomers), one of the prime suspects in the early steps of the molecular cascade that leads to cognitive decline in Alzheimer’s patients. The findings, which are the results of a decade of advancements in nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) methodology and are featured in the cover page of the *Journal of the American Chemical Society*, could lead to new therapies and further drug discovery, say researchers.

**Impact of Being Active**
Physical activity of any kind can prevent heart disease and death, says a large international study involving more than 130,000 people from 17 countries published in The Lancet. The Prospective Urban Rural Epidemiology (PURE) study, led by the Population Health Research Institute of McMaster and Hamilton Health Sciences, shows any activity is good for people to meet the current guideline of 30 minutes of activity a day, or 150 minutes a week to raise the heart rate.

**McMaster Researchers receive $14 million to establish Fracture Study**
McMaster researchers Mohit Bhandari and Sheila Sprague, together with Gerard Slobogean of the University of Maryland, have received funding of more than $14 million to launch a new
research program in fracture management. The Program of Randomized trials to Evaluate Pre-operative antiseptic skin solutions In orthopaedic Trauma (PREP-IT) will be a joint initiative co-ordinated by the Centre for Evidence-Based Orthopedics at McMaster University and the R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center at the University of Maryland.

Global and Community Engagement

Political Scientist recognized with Canada Sesquicentennial Award
Henry Jacek of the Department of Political Science was recently honoured with a Canada Sesquicentennial award in recognition of his efforts to engage the community and McMaster students in the civic life of Canada. Filomena Tassi, Member of Parliament and Deputy Government Whip (Hamilton West-Ancaster-Dundas), was on campus to present Dr. Jacek with the award.

The Walrus Talks Mobility Event in downtown Hamilton
Community members, researchers, policymakers and students gathered in downtown Hamilton on October 5 to discuss one of the most pressing issues facing the country: its aging population. The McMaster Institute for Research on Aging (MIRA) and The Walrus Foundation partnered on The Walrus Talks Mobility, which took place at the David Braley Health Sciences Centre. The event featured eight speakers as well as a showcase of age-related research.

Teaching and Learning

Five faculty recognized as Outstanding Teachers
Anna Danielova, Chad Harvey, Felicia Vulcu, Konstantinos Apostolou and Sandeep Raha were honoured earlier this year with President’s Awards for Outstanding Contributions to Teaching and Learning. These awards recognize their contributions to education through innovation, continued excellence in teaching, and enhanced student learning as demonstrated by evidence of the intellectual growth of students, the mentorship of students through involvement in research or practical experience, the development of novel and effective educational materials, or leadership that promotes teaching and learning at McMaster.

Indigenous Studies Program celebrates 25 years at McMaster
The Indigenous Studies Program incorporates a unique teaching structure of Indigenous knowledge which involves many Native peoples and Elders. This perspective assists students from various cultures and backgrounds in learning about the history and lives of Aboriginal people. McMaster’s is the longest-running such program in Canada.

Integrated Business and Humanities Project highlighted in The Atlantic
A unique partnership between the DeGroote School of Business and the Faculty of Humanities was the subject of a lengthy feature in The Atlantic magazine. "How the Humanities Can Train Entrepreneurs" takes an up-close look at McMaster's Integrated Business and Humanities program. The program adds training in critical thinking, communication, cultural perspective and more to an already world-class business degree. The program was also the subject of a story – "The Arts degree of the future" - in the Toronto Star.