

To: Western University Community
From: Jennifer Massey, Associate Vice President (Student Experience)
Date: March 1, 2021
Subject: Academic Support & Engagement Review and Recommendations

Over the past year, Student Experience engaged in a comprehensive review of three units in the Academic Support & Engagement department: Learning Development & Success, the Writing Support Centre, and Accessible Education. This review is part of a recurring 6-year cycle instituted by Student Experience in 2019 to help us achieve our strategic vision: [An Equitable Thriving Campus](#). The purpose of the review is to promote continuous improvement and excellence in program delivery.

Our review processes follow the [Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education \(CAS\)](#) practices:



1. Compiled relevant documents for internal reference including strategic plans, budgets, organizational structures, & reports.

2. Interviewed students who have accessed support and programs from Accessible Education, Learning Development & Success, and the Writing Support Centre.

3. Completed CAS self-study guides to assess operations.

4. Shared relevant documents for external reviewers including strategic plans, budgets, organizational structures, & reports.

5. Hosted external reviewers to meet with stakeholders virtually including staff teams, campus partners, student governments, and students who have accessed support from these units.

External Reviewers: Heather Doyle, Director of Assessment and Special Projects, Dalhousie University; Corinna Fitzgerald, Assistant Dean Student Life and Learning, Queen's University; Heather Kelly, Executive Director, Student Life Programs and Services, University of Toronto

Review Findings

While the intent of this review was to assess academic supports provided by Student Experience, the feedback received from students and partners can inform student-focused supports and enrichment initiatives across Western.

The report urges Western to build upon the strengths of our current student services model, which focuses on individual counselling, coaching, and advising supports, to adopt a wholistic student affairs approach that enhances existing services with proactive programming. Core to this philosophical shift must be a commitment to adopt equity lenses in the design, implementation and assessment of co-curricular learning experiences. With regard to units like the Writing Support Centre, Learning Development & Success, and Accessible Education, the reviewers suggested that this could include enhancements such as dedicated writing supports and programming for English as Additional Language users; creation of group programming for students with ADHD to assist with adjustment to university demands; and broadening the existing [Learn2Thrive program](#) to serve an expanded audience (e.g. graduate students, international students).

The findings of the review underscore the need for a more comprehensive approach to accessibility and new programming for students with disabilities.

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) is a priority for Western. The inclusion of students with disabilities as an equity-deserving group is important to the University’s EDI strategy. As the report makes clear, there is much work to be done to move Western beyond purely accommodating students with disabilities. As a university community, we need to invest in cultivating living and learning environments that are fully accessible and intentionally designed to ensure students with disabilities thrive.

Student Experience accepts the findings of this review and is committed to act on the recommendations. There is a need for campus-wide advancements regarding accessibility to ensure the full engagement and success of students with disabilities. Achieving this important outcome will require shared commitment and collaborative work.

Review Recommendations

The final report provides [48 compelling recommendations](#) that span Western’s entire campus. These recommendations will help guide the Academic Support & Engagement department and are grouped into four thematic categories: Intersectional Programming, Intentional Communication, Campus-wide Partnerships, and Hiring and Staff Development.

<p style="text-align: center;">Intersectional Programming</p> <p>Deeper assessment, evaluation and review of supports and services to ensure that the stated needs of our student body are met.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Intentional Communication</p> <p>Better communicate supports and services to students through diverse and accessible channels.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Campus-Wide Partnerships</p> <p>Enhanced and expanded partnerships with groups across the campus community.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Hiring and Staff Development</p> <p>Comprehensive training and professional development for staff that promotes alignment with the principles of EDI and keeps them on the cutting edge of advances in their respective fields.</p>

Immediate Actions

Implementation of all the recommendations will take time and will require collaboration with campus-wide stakeholders. I am working with the Provost to establish an implementation committee, to be led by Dr. Kim Miller, which will be tasked with development of a comprehensive implementation plan that broadly engages the campus community. This work will begin immediately. The committee will include academic and administrative representatives, as well as graduate and undergraduate students. More information on the implementation committee will be shared in the coming weeks.

In addition to the creation of an implementation committee, three initiatives are currently underway:

1. Dr. Kim Miller, Director of Academic Support & Engagement will lead the establishment of a Students with Disabilities Advisory Committee to help inform the implementation of the recommendations. The Committee will be co-led by graduate student Ashton Forrest. My thanks to Kim and Ashton for leading this important work.
2. AVP-SE Office will work with the Director, Academic Support & Engagement to introduce comprehensive training and professional development for all staff in Student Experience. This training will ensure our team works from a place that aligns with principles of EDI, while also keeping them on the cutting edge of advances in their respective field to inform how they support students.
3. Discussion is underway to ensure Western's EDI framework recognizes students with disabilities as an equity-deserving group.

Building an Equitable Thriving Campus Together

Accessibility is not defined by accommodations and access ramps. An equitable thriving campus builds a culture where students with disabilities know that they *matter*, that they *belong*, and that Western is a place they can *thrive*. This goal cannot be achieved through the work of one area alone. It will require a coordinated campus-wide effort that engages partners in systemic change as we examine all areas of our institution from academic policies and practices to the built environment.

This is important work. Student Experience looks forward to collaborating with academic, administrative and student leaders as we continue to move forward.

Full List of Recommendations

Theme 1: Intersectional Programming

3. Offer evening hours and drop-ins to provide students with more flexible delivery options.
5. Create a shared measure for students to share feedback of their experiences related to the ASE units.
6. Create a shared curriculum that addresses the uniqueness of students as well as what they need developmentally and when.
12. Develop programs and supports that are culturally responsive to diverse student population(s).
24. Diversify methods and modes of programming including additional platforms and spaces at times considerate of student schedules.
25. Add dedicated resources with expertise in English as Additional Language practices.
34. Establish support groups for students with ADHD and ASD, peer mentorship programs and group advising to build additional service capacity and support SWDs in community building.
35. Reconsider the staffing model with the goal of enhancing capacity for AE staff to take on non-advising tasks and responsibilities, including more opportunities for programming that will enhance student learning and belonging.
36. Develop targeted co-curricular programming in AE for SWDs, with a focus on career transition and self-determination.
39. Establish clear programmatic goals and use SLOs, including outcome data, to assess and evaluate programs & services offered by Accessible Education and the overall learning environment for SWDs at Western.
43. Expand collaborations and partnerships with all WSE units to build additional capacity and social support for SWDs in community building and to ensure accessible co-curricular activities.

Theme 2: Intentional Communication

1. Develop a communication strategy to inform the Western community and stakeholders of ASE supports and services.
2. Provide intentional follow up to students to inform them of outcomes of the review process and next steps. Involve as many diverse student perspectives in the process as possible.
15. Develop a plan to share assessment data with key university partners, including students and affiliated colleges.
18. Training and planning exercise with Communications where sharing expertise and strategies used to increase student engagement and outreach to diverse learners.
19. Create a communications strategy to increase findability, review web resources, rebrand services to students, with consideration given to the diversity of students across campus.
40. Survey SWDs on an annual basis to determine their satisfaction with the service.
48. Establish a culture of communication between AE and affiliated university colleges including an annual report on their SWDs.

Theme 3: Campus-wide Partnerships

5. Consideration of on-location roles, once additional staffing is in place.
7. Explore possibility of implementing shared peer programming across ASE.
8. Engage equity-deserving students in reviewing practices, presentations and programming in the ASE portfolio. Specifically, look at the concepts of thriving and strengths with an anti-racism lens.
16. Change the position title of counsellors to more accurately reflect roles as advisors.
17. Revisit the connection of “academic counsellors” to the ASE unit and review the job descriptions to more accurately reflect advising competencies.

- 20. Develop a clear outreach plan for students, staff and faculty including regular meetings, focus groups, information sessions and training of key campus stakeholders.
- 21. Create a clear delineation of referrals processes.
- 22. Formalize service and partnership agreements as well as informal networks so that there is scope and role clarity focusing on the provision of student services.
- 23. Create clearer knowledge networks and/or internal communities of practice to help engage like-minded colleagues and increase collaborations.
- 26. Each unit within ASE undergoes an operational planning exercise to articulate a response to the Thriving Campus vision. This should align the various areas.
- 27. Move away from a purely counselling model of support in LDS and the WSC and discontinue the use of the title counsellor unless it is specifically required for the role.
- 37. Ensure that co-and extra-curricular programming at Western is made accessible to SWDs by ensuring that all staff and peers who work with students are trained in working with SWDs.
- 38. Develop information resources and regularized training to assist faculty and staff in better understanding the academic accommodation process and how to liaise with the service to support their students.
- 41. Establish a Student Accessible Education Advisory Committee to provide leadership opportunities for SWDs and to ensure that their voice and lived experience is reflected in program and service design.
- 42. Consideration of on-location roles to facilitate an understanding of local needs and to assist with communication, outreach & training once additional staffing is in place.
- 44. Collaboration between AE, CTL and AODA Office to provide training and resources for teaching assistants & instructors on best practices in teaching that would support the creation of inclusive and accessible learning opportunities.
- 45. Continued partnership between AE and SGPS to enhance understanding of the specific needs of graduate and professional SWDs and to deepen an understanding of graduate academic program requirements and the research process in AE.
- 46. Provide on-location accessibility programs & services at affiliated university colleges.
- 47. Include SWDs from the affiliated university colleges on the AE Student Advisory Committee.

Theme 4: Hiring and Staff Development

- 9. Develop a training and professional development plan for the ASE staff to engage in anti-racism, anti-oppression, critical race theory and Indigenous ways of knowing with internal and external experts.
- 10. Develop an HR plan to diversify staff within ASE to reflect the diversity of the student body. Hire BIPOC staff to ensure culturally-responsive services and support and so BIPOC students see themselves and their experiences represented in ASE.
- 11. Engage in an HR audit to review barriers within the hiring process (including requirements, postings, interview process and questions, etc.).
- 13. Develop a training program for practitioners in understanding assessment, developing learning outcomes and assessing student learning.
- 14. Develop Division-wide Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and metrics measuring student access points. Develop benchmarks for types of students accessing services.
- 28. In Accessible Education, hire more diverse staff with different skill sets and approaches to academic skill development, and culturally responsive teaching and learning.
- 29. In Accessible Education, move towards a specialist staffing model, as more resources become available, especially in the areas of mental health and neurological disabilities.
- 30. In Accessible Education, adopt and integrate AHEAD professional standards into service delivery.
- 31. In Accessible Education, train staff in the implementation of academic accommodations in practicums, placements, fieldwork, laboratories and graduate education.

32. Broaden training opportunities for staff in AE to include group advising as well as program development & evaluation.

33. Ensure that AE staff are trained in UDL standards for the provision of their own supports and services and also train others.