

## Supporting student success beyond the classroom

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### ABSTRACT

The McMaster Student Success Centre celebrated its 10-year anniversary in 2020. Drawing upon student development theory (Chickering, 1969; Strayhorn, 2018), this chapter reflects upon the centre's years of supporting student success and belonging at McMaster University, as well as the ways in which learning beyond the classroom helps facilitate student exploration of identity, values, skills, confidence, resilience, and potential. Discussed from the lens of student affairs professionals, topics within this chapter include the following: orientation and transition support, academic skills development, international student support and global opportunities, leadership development, and career planning and experiential learning.

### KEYWORDS

student success, belonging, beyond the classroom

The McMaster Student Success Centre launched in 2010 as a new student affairs department to support student success beyond the classroom (Hemsworth, 2010). Drawing upon student development theory, specifically the understanding that students enter university and often experience independence for the first time (Chickering, 1969), the Centre helps students explore their identity, opinions, beliefs, skills, confidence, resilience, and potential. By engaging in learning beyond the classroom, students access a holistic network of care and individualized support. As one McMaster student who used the Centre's Career Access Professional Services shared, "it's very easy to feel like just another number in a sea of students at university, so what meant the most to me was having someone in my corner who genuinely cared about me and my success" (Christian, 2021).

Ten years later, the Centre's approach still aligns with McMaster's priorities, as outlined in the university's 2021–2024 strategic plan. Namely, it speaks to Priority 2: Teaching and Learning, which records the university's intention to "further advance and support innovation in teaching and learning, within and beyond the classroom . . . to equip our students with the knowledge and skills needed to make a transformative impact on our world" (Office of the President, 2021, p. 8). Achieving this transformative impact, however, starts with creating a sense of belonging.

Belonging is critical to a student's success inside and outside the classroom, impacting their academic success, goals, and desire to stay in university (Strayhorn, 2018). The Student Success Centre addresses this crucial aspect of student success by engaging students in holistic services, programs, and activities that “promote personal growth, support health and well-being, and enhance a sense of belonging and connectedness in our community” (Office of the President, 2021, p. 9). With students entering McMaster from more than 120 countries (McMaster University, 2020), the Centre fosters diverse student engagement and learning through orientation and transition support, academic skills development, international student support and global opportunities, leadership development, and career planning and experiential learning.

#### ORIENTATION AND TRANSITION SUPPORT (SEAN)

First-year undergraduate students face significant challenges with transition and orientation when entering post-secondary education (Conley et al., 2014; Hurst et al., 2013), and the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified these challenges (Son et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). The Archway Program began in 2020 as a response to the pandemic. It is a digital learning, support, and navigation program for first-year students with a mandate of ensuring that students feel like they belong at McMaster while connecting them with the academic, wellness, and social supports they need to be successful. Students no longer need to be in the right place at the right time to discover a much-needed resource or make a much-needed friend.

The Archway Program supports McMaster University's (2021) Teaching and Learning Strategy (2021–2026) by formalizing extra-curricular engagement and social connection within the first-year experience. Archway matches incoming first-year students with Archway mentors (paid upper-year students) and an Archway coach (Student Affairs professional). Archway mentors provide monthly one-on-one conversations with their assigned students. Aligned with Archway's first-year curriculum, scripts and prompts are provided to Archway mentors to ensure conversation topics align with the student life cycle (Zimmerman et al., 2017). All students assigned to a mentor are part of a channel within Microsoft Teams. Archway mentors use this digital space to showcase opportunities, host events, build connections, and create community among first-year students.

Archway's personalized approach includes peer-to-peer connections and referrals to other Student Affairs departments, faculty-based academic advisors, and the Equity and Inclusion Office. In the program's first year, mentors provided more than 11,000 individual interactions with first-year students, contributing to an overall sense of connectedness to the McMaster community.

#### ACADEMIC SKILLS DEVELOPMENT (MARY)

The academic skills team educates for capability. Capability refers to “the extent to which individuals can adapt to change, generate new knowledge, and continue to improve their performance” (Fraser & Greenhalgh, 2001, p. 799). Students are encouraged to engage critically

with course content through our writing and study supports and to seek personal growth by adopting time-management and team-working strategies.

This work also enables fuller participation in the academic community by helping students understand the institutional and cultural context of the university. There is a documented mismatch between high-school teachers' and university professors' perceptions of students' readiness (Sanoff, 2006). Most first-year students are facing a significant (and often implicit) shift in expectations as they enter first-year learning. Those known as high achievers in high school find themselves struggling in post-secondary (Balduf, 2009), and those whose life experiences originate outside of mainstream academic culture, such as first-generation students, international students, and students from differing socio-economic classes, are apt to struggle in an educational context that is codified along unfamiliar cultural lines (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). By focusing on academic skills development, the Centre aims to demystify taken-for-granted expectations embedded in course materials and in points of interaction where students may be advertently or inadvertently assessed. In this way, the Centre hopes to engender feelings of agency, self-efficacy, and belonging for students who take advantage of the services.

#### INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SUPPORT AND GLOBAL OPPORTUNITIES (ANDREW AND JENNA)

Over the last 10 years, McMaster's international student population has more than tripled in size to more than 6,500 students in 2021. International Student Services (ISS) within the Student Success Centre collaborates with faculties and departments within the McMaster community to continually improve the international student experience. Using a holistic approach to appreciate the unique needs of international students, ISS provides meaningful programming, workshops, community-building events, one-on-one success coaching, immigration advising, health insurance administration, and peer-to-peer support for students to have a safe, positive, and rewarding experience at McMaster University and in Canada.

The global opportunities team connects students with global learning experiences both in Canada and abroad. Each year, more than 600 students participate in global mobility programs, and hundreds more participate in globally engaged virtual and domestic opportunities. The Centre works closely with campus partners to connect students with the foundational tools, knowledge, and financial means to organize safe and meaningful international learning experiences. Re-entry workshops and guided reflection activities help students translate their unique global experiences into valuable transferable skills. Through student socials, peer mentorship programs, and storytelling, students further contribute to McMaster's global community-building and discourse.

Students who participate in global programming develop intercultural competencies that can support their academic, personal, and career development. According to the Report of the Study Group on Global Education (2017), "the diversity of Canada's population does not automatically translate into worldliness, or into the skills that Canadians—and Canada—will require to succeed. These competencies and values are not given by nature; they have to be cultivated" (p. 4). As a result of participating, students gain invaluable skills.

## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT (LIZ)

In 2021, the Student Success Centre expanded its leadership programming to include the Wilson Leadership Scholar Award (WLSA). Founded by Chancellor Emeritus L. R. Wilson, the WLSA helps develop the next generation of leaders in Canada. It selects students based on leadership potential and immerses them in an intensive development program. In the program, students design and deliver a community project, co-lead problem-based learning sessions on issues of national importance, and engage with prominent figures and mentors.

Students take an interdisciplinary approach to solving problems, with learning and collaboration often happening between science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and the liberal arts. They emerge from the program with a greater ability to seek different viewpoints, a better understanding of national systems and challenges, and more ambitious, impact-based career goals.

Each year, WLSA outcomes are consistent. From 2017 to 2019, 100% of Wilson Leaders indicated that they improved or significantly improved in the two to three skills they self-identified for development over the course of the program, as captured by pre- and post-program feedback.

The Centre is expanding the reach of the WLSA itself, increasing the number of awards and creating leadership development programming that is open to more McMaster students. As national and global challenges increase in complexity, the department continues to build students' leadership toolkits, providing opportunities for students to seek multiple perspectives, understand context, take accountability for moving solutions forward, and collaborate to attain better outcomes. As with other Student Success Centre's leadership development programs, the WLSA builds a sense of community, connects students from across campus to allow them to learn from one another, and contributes to McMaster's priority of equipping students with the skills needed to make a positive impact on the world.

## CAREER PLANNING AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (KERRI AND ANNA)

The Student Success Centre supports and guides students to engage in proactive career management behaviours, such as reflecting on their values and skills, exploring career options, connecting to paid and unpaid opportunities, and seeking opportunities to develop their professional and employability skills. Recognizing that some students face unique barriers to employment, the Centre makes individualized professional services available for equity-deserving students and alumni.

The Centre engages students in real-world, interactive experiences outside of the classroom through a range of experiential learning and career development opportunities, such as job search and volunteer supports, job shadowing and mentoring opportunities, and career and further education exploration. When students are provided with the opportunity to participate in active experimentation and apply what they learned in the classroom, learning is extended through participation in concrete experiences and reflective observation (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). These experiences and observations, in combination with the Centre's guided group and individual sessions, foster discussion and community building among experiential learning participants.

Skills developed in the classroom and beyond help students develop what the National Association of Colleges and Educators (NACE) defines as career-ready skills (Dodd et al., 2021), which include critical thinking, communication, cultural awareness, professionalism, leadership, teamwork, and career management. The Centre provides students with the support network, career development opportunities, and experiential learning activities to develop these skills and work toward the goals that guide their decision-making processes during university and beyond. These tangible experiences and supports foster students' identity as individuals in the community and society.

#### CONCLUSION (ELIZABETH, JACQUELINE, AND JEFFREY)

Long (2012) aptly asks in "Theories and Models of Student Development," "Why do some students succeed in college [or university] while others do not?" (p. 41). While the answer to this question may vary by student, the Student Success Centre's 10 years of impact shows that creating a sense of belonging can make all the difference in student success. The Centre, alongside its many partners across Student Affairs, faculties, and the community, is no exception when it comes to contributing to this impact.

By creating a holistic space for students to discover, explore, develop, and grow, the Centre relies on students to guide their own journey to success. In line with student development theory, beyond-the-classroom learning is about the "time and energy the student devotes to the learning process" (Astin, 1999, p. 522). The Centre's focus on working with the student allows this potential for learning to flourish well after their time in university. Ten years later, students still reflect on their time and learning at the Centre, as evidenced by the following comments from three McMaster alumni:

In the SSC, I learned to live another way. I learned how young people and adults could share, learn from each other and build together. I learned we all had a piece of something bigger than our parts. (Ibe, 2020)

Transitioning from university has been one of my biggest challenges. I absolutely could not have done it without you all at the Student Success Centre. You all have helped me to develop valuable job search strategies by reflecting on my strengths, values and interests. . . . As a proud McMaster grad, once again thank you for encouragement and support. (Asare, 2020)

My involvement with the Student Success Centre has given me a deep sense of belonging to my alma mater, and it is part of my best memories of McMaster University. (Dhanraj, 2020)

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**Kerri Latham** works at the Student Success Centre as a career counsellor, where she has supported undergraduate students and alumni with their career decisions and planning for over 15 years. She has an M.Ed. in counselling psychology from McGill University and an adult learning with e-learning specialization certificate from the University of Calgary.

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