

Final Report of the Dean's Advisory Committee on Mental Health and Wellness

March 23, 2022

Chairs: Emily Orchard (Acting), Angela Fernandez (Acting)
Members: A. Drassinower, S. Faherty, T. Gardiner, M. Dubber, J. Macintosh, J. Morrison, S. Nilausen, S. Sangha, B. Twiss, C. White
Students: J. Campbell (1L), N. Rapaport (2L), V. Dhawan (3L), V. Deswal (Graduate Student)

Introduction

The Dean's Advisory Committee on Mental Health and Wellness was given the following mandate this year:

This year, I ask that the Committee monitor the implementation of the law school's Student Mental Health Action Plan, and continue to seek feedback from students, key staff members, faculty, and other members of our community. If student mental health issues arise that require immediate attention by the law school, I ask that you make recommendations to me so that we can be responsive to student needs.

The Committee convened six times during the academic year in fulfillment of its mandate.

The Committee wants to acknowledge that the law school has been a very different place during the last two years. We also think it important to note that while we know that our community is optimistically planning for a return to normal as soon as possible, the transition back to campus will be difficult to negotiate for some of our community members. Compassion, understanding and patience will be necessary in the coming weeks and months to ensure that this transition accommodates the different experiences of our many constituents. We also want to acknowledge that the pandemic has compelled rapid change and innovation, some of which has been extremely positive. We want to encourage the faculty to reflect on which of these changes have benefitted our community and thus should remain.

1. Seek Feedback from Community Members

Consistent with our mandate, on November 11th the Committee invited J.D. and graduate students to attend a feedback session to share information about their mental health experiences during COVID. The Committee provided three mechanisms for students to engage with the Committee and share this information: during a listening session held over Zoom; by sharing information directly with the student representatives on the Committee; and by connecting with the committee co-chairs.

Participation in the listening session was notably lower than during last year's sessions. The Committee is extremely grateful to those students who participated and shared information with us both on their own behalf and on behalf of the classmates and friends whom they had canvassed in advance of the listening session. The information that we received during that listening session informed many of our subsequent conversations and several of the recommendations that we offer

in this report. In the table below we have summarized the feedback that we received during the listening session.

| Issue | Detail |
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| Additional sessions with in-house counselor | Students told us about the enormous benefit they derive from working with the faculty’s in-house counselor and how much they would appreciate an increase in the number of sessions of which they can avail themselves. Students would also like there to be better communication regarding the supports and services available at Health and Wellness, including the ability to transition students to longer term care when needed. |
| Volume of Readings | The volume of readings in certain classes is, we heard, unmanageably high. Students shared that they often feel as though they are being set-up to fail. They described feeling as though they were treading water because of not being able to manage their readings. Students would like to see the faculty do more to communicate best practices regarding weekly readings and to encourage faculty to reflect on the impact that unreasonable reading expectations have on student mental health. |
| Conscious reflection on language used to describe law school expectations | Participants told the committee that they have heard both faculty members and staff make explicit comments about the fact that students shouldn’t plan on sleeping for the three years during which they are in law school. This, we heard, is a deeply troubling message both because it perpetuates student concerns about their inability to meet the law school’s expectations and because it fails to acknowledge the incredibly important role we know sleep plays in mental health. |
| Need for compassion | Students spoke of the efforts of some faculty to be compassionate of their students’ needs during COVID. Examples of this compassion include providing PowerPoint slides to accompany lectures, offering clear instructions regarding what would be assessed on exams, managing reading volumes, being thoughtful about the number and nature of assessments assigned during the term, and more. |

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| <p>Importance of a feedback loop</p> | <p>While students took great pains to let us know that they are appreciative of the opportunity to participate in, and inform discussions about, student mental health and other initiatives, they noted that it can be very difficult to be continuously vulnerable and share one’s thoughts and feelings without knowing what, if anything, comes of the feedback. Specifically, they expressed a desire to know what the faculty does with the information it receives through its feedback sessions and surveys, including any supports, programs, initiatives, or changes that are implemented.</p> |
| <p>Awareness of Faculty of Law policies</p> | <p>Students shared that they find some of the faculty’s policies inaccessible or unfamiliar. For example, students expressed concern about their perception that policies are only articulated when students ask specific questions (rather than being overtly shared). This results in some students having the impression that their colleagues are all “doing fine” and that the faculty is making an exception because they are unable to manage the demands of the program. The accommodations policy was mentioned as a specific example of this concern.</p> |
| <p>Access to Zoom Links and Recordings</p> | <p>Students shared that it is very stressful to have to figure out how to access a Zoom link when one is experiencing symptoms. The process can exacerbate the stress that students are experiencing, particularly when experiencing COVID symptoms or mental health concerns.</p> |

2. Zoom Links and Recordings

As noted above, one of the topics that was raised by students during our listening session and by the student members of our committee during our meetings was the importance of having access to Zoom links and class recordings, both for as long as COVID continues to disrupt in-person learning and when in-person studies return to being something on which we can consistently rely.

Although it had been our plan to discuss this matter more thoroughly during our committee meetings, the Faculty’s implementation of an interim policy regarding lecture recordings and access to Zoom links rendered this issue less urgent. The Committee applauds the faculty for acting so quickly to implement changes to its policy on access to class recordings and zoom links and

encourages it to use this interim period to inform a thoughtful discussion about what, if any, changes need to be made to the temporary policy to make it workable in the longer term.

3. Recommendations

The Committee discussed the feedback that we received during the listening session in November and through our committee members during the remainder of the year. We offer the following recommendations to the Dean based on our discussions.

| Issue | Recommendation |
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| <p>Implementation of law school’s Student Mental Health Action Plan</p> | <p>The Committee is keen to see some of the initiatives and supports that were in place before COVID resume (e.g., yoga, suicide prevention and awareness training). We also acknowledge that this is an important opportunity for the law school to think about new and different ways to think about and support mental health awareness. We note that the important role that this committee will continue to play in providing a useful space to gather feedback on this topic, as well as to continue monitoring the implementation of the Student Mental Health Action Plan.</p> |
| <p>Reading Volumes</p> | <p>The Committee encourages the Associate Dean of the JD program to remind faculty of the reading guidelines that are in place before the start of each semester. The Committee also recommends that the faculty consider engaging its casebook RAs to identify any reading volumes that are significantly inconsistent with the reading guidelines and recommendations.</p> |
| <p>Faculty of Law Master Calendar</p> | <p>The Committee heard from students that having required trainings or workshops scheduled at the same time or on the same day as other “key moments” in the JD experience (e.g., interview week, moot try-outs, etc.) contributes unnecessarily to the stress and anxiety they experience. Other Committee members noted that it is difficult to schedule committee meetings and workshops without knowing what else is happening at the law school. This Committee encourages the faculty to consider building a master calendar on which key dates can be tracked. The proposed calendar would not be public facing but could be used by key staff (who are responsible for scheduling meetings and training), faculty (to</p> |

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| | <p>whose benefit it would be to better understand what their students are facing at particular points in time during the year), and the SLS and GLSA to facilitate event scheduling and ensure that each group understands the demands students are facing at particular moments in time.</p> |
| <p>Mental Health Training</p> | <p>The Committee acknowledges that it has benefited from participating in conversations that have allowed us to better understand the experiences of our students and the impact that certain factors have on their mental health and wellness, and on the culture at the law school in general. These are conversations, however, that we believe should not take place in this Committee alone. With that in mind, the Committee encourages the faculty to consider opportunities for all members of our community to engage in conversations that will allow us to: better understand each other’s experiences and perspectives and embed compassion as a culture at the law school. Some suggestions include: increasing the availability of the bundle teachings to upper years students, staff and faculty; deliberately infusing self-compassion messaging in our classrooms and other spaces; providing mental health and wellness training for faculty and staff; facilitating space for members of our community to participate in guided conversations about how to engage compassionately with others; and providing space for students to speak openly about their experience outside of the “typical” listening sessions and surveys (for example during dedicated class time).</p> |
| <p>Access to Zoom Links and Recordings</p> | <p>The Committee wants to underscore the incredibly important role that access to recordings and Zoom links plays in student mental health. We encourage the faculty to use the summer to identify the metrics that it will use to measure the success of the interim policy and to capture important data about observable trends during February and March. It also encourages the faculty to think about the important role that these tools will play at the law school even when COVID is no longer an ongoing concern (for example, by ensuring that</p> |

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| | <p>sick students don't have to come to campus to engage in their studies and that we are supporting the mental health of students with accommodations, etc.).</p> <p>Finally, the Committee wants to understand the need for both Zoom links and recordings, noting that students who are sick should be able to access recordings when they are well enough to resume their studies and students who are well, but unable to come to campus, should attend classes remotely.</p> |
| <p>Regular Committee Updates</p> | <p>The Committee heard from students that they were largely unaware of how the Committee uses the feedback that it receives from students to inform its work and other developments and decisions at the law school. In response to this feedback, we undertook to provide students with feedback on the Committee's work via email midway through the academic year. This Committee recommends that this practice continue in subsequent years.</p> |

4. A Culture of Compassion

It was an honour to work with this year's committee members, each of whom came to our meetings ready to engage, share, listen, collaborate, and think thoughtfully about how to ensure that our community is doing everything it can to protect and support the wellness of its members.

This report sets out the work undertaken by this committee, including the development of a fulsome list of recommendations for the Dean's consideration (above). However, we would be remiss if this report didn't also acknowledge one of the most noteworthy outcomes of our time together as a committee; namely, our discussion about our shared desire to prioritize creating and modeling a culture of compassion at the law school. On the heels of several meetings and months of working together as a committee, in its second last meeting our committee engaged in a lively and passionate discussion focused on the possibility not only of making very specific, practical changes to inform a healthier student experience, but about aspiring to catalyze the work done by this committee (and perhaps others) around the theme of compassion, both for oneself and others. Consistent with discussions of which I have had the privilege of being a part in other committees, our committee noted that our faculty has an important role to play in modeling what we believe should be emblematic of legal education, including in thinking about the values we model inside and outside of the classroom. In particular, we noted the importance of the following:

- Establishing compassion as a value that we prioritize at the law school and consciously embed in our practices and processes.
- Incorporating opportunities for guided conversations about how we might improve our student mental health experience.

- Building a shared awareness among faculty and staff of the many demands faced by our students during the academic year is vital to building and sustaining the culture of compassion to which we aspire. Our Committee wants to underscore that a little humanity goes a long way to achieving this goal and means a great deal to students. For example, we heard that providing space for brief discussions in the classroom and an acknowledgement of what students are up against is enormously valuable.
- Facilitating a discussion about the role that grades play in our students' wellness, including the role faculty and staff play in normalizing how students feel about the value of certain grades (e.g., faculty and the administration play a huge role in determining whether students regard "Ps" as good grades or something to be avoided).