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| -. | ReportFrom the office of the…Associate Vice-President (Services) |
| To: | Members of the Executive Board |
| From: | Martino Salciccioli, Associate Vice-President (Services)  Graeme Noble, Vice-President (Administration |
| Subject: | MSU Women & Gender Equity Network (WGEN) Review |
| Date: | March 25, 2021 |

#### Introduction

Dear Members of the Executive Board,

The following report is a review of the McMaster Students Union (MSU) Women and Gender Equity Network (WGEN) Service conducted by the Associate Vice-President (Services). This report will critically examine WGEN by looking at the Service’s mission, history, structure, and engagement. The report also takes a look at similar initiatives at other post-secondary institutions to compare and contrast WGEN to provide context for its evaluation. After displaying all the aforementioned information, the report is concluded with recommendations made by myself, the committee, and the Vice-President (Administration).

**Service Overview**

##### Mandate and History

MSU WGEN is one of several Peer-Support Services offered by the student union. As stated in **Operating Policy – MSU Women and Gender Equity Network (WGEN)** (prior to changes approved at SRA 20Q), the purpose of this Service is:

*“To educate the McMaster community and continually work toward the goal of a campus free from rape culture, sexual violence, and prejudice and discrimination on the basis of gender expression and/or gender identity;* ***(1.1)***

*To serve as a participant in supporting survivors of gender-based oppression, sexual violence, and/or related forms of violence and oppression;* ***(1.2)***

*To provide a physical safe space and contact point for anyone who identifies as a women, under the trans umbrella, outside the gender binary or as gender non-conforming, and survivors of gender-based and sexual violence of all genders;* ***(1.3)***

*To continue to develop and strengthen relationships between McMaster students, staff, and the members of the surrounding communities by providing information, resources, programming, and on-campus advocacy around the aforementioned societal issues (rape culture, sexual violence, gender-based harassment) and/or related issues;* ***(1.4)”***

To achieve its purpose, WGEN is responsible for upholding and maintaining the following Operating Parameters:

*“The WGEN shall offer a safe(r) space in its associated spaces for women, trans folks, those who identify outside the gender binary and as gender non-conforming, all survivors of gender-based and sexual violence, and their supporters to come and feel welcome and secure;* ***(2.3)***

*The WGEN shall provide structured events to create a sense of inclusion and community among women, trans folks, those who identify outside the gender binary and as gender-nonconforming, and all survivors of gender-based and sexual violence;* ***(2.4)***

*The WGEN shall provide a variety of support Services regarding experiences such as harassment, sexual violence, domestic and intimate partner violence, and gender-based discrimination and/or violence. The support shall include, but not be limited to: community/discussion groups; referrals; one-on-one peer support bookings; and drop-in peer support;* ***(2.5)***

*The WGEN shall be involved in and advocate for the elimination of rape culture, sexual violence, social injustices, and instances of institutionalized oppression and discrimination at McMaster University and ensure the safety and equal treatment of all people on campus and in the community;* ***(2.6)***

*The WGEN and its personnel shall operate within an Anti-Racist, Anti-Oppressive, Trans-Inclusive, Survivor-Centric, and Decolonial Intersectional Feminist Framework;* ***(2.8)***

*Be bound by law and ethics to safeguard Service users’ privacy and the confidentiality of their personal information and disclosure of an experience of gender-based or sexual violence;* ***(2.9.1)***

*Be able to identify students in crisis in order to provide them with support and be able to protect the University community. If there is reason to believe that a student is a danger to themselves or others, that information may be communicated to the appropriate Health Care and Emergency Services. This Service is also bound by privacy legislation;* ***(2.9.2)****”*

MSU WGEN does fantastic work catering to the needs of McMaster students and creating safe(r) and inclusive spaces for all folks through their events, educational campaigns, and drop-in peer-support hours.

##### Service Structure

MSU WGEN is a student-led Peer-Support Service. The Service is overseen by one Part-Time Manager who is the WGEN Coordinator. Along with the Coordinator, volunteer executives are hired to make up the WGEN Executive Team. The Executive team then hires numerous volunteers to help the Service achieve its mission and fulfill its operating parameters. Along with the Coordinator, the Executive Team positions are as follows: the Community Events and Planning Executive, the Logistics Coordinator, the Promotions Executive, the Research Coordinator, the Resources Coordinator, the Social and Political Advocacy Coordinator, and the Volunteer Coordinator.

The WGEN Coordinator is responsible for overseeing all WGEN activities, attending monthly PACBIC VAW-GBV, PACBIC, and AVN meetings, conducting consultations about programming and events, and acting as a consultant in the various University committees around violence against women, trans-inclusive spaces, consent, and gender.

The Community Events and Planning Executives are responsible for the creation and planning events for the communities WGEN serves, including women, trans folks, those who identify outside the gender binary or as gender-nonconforming, survivors of gender-based and sexual violence of all genders, and other members of WGEN.

The Logistics Coordinator is responsible for considering logistical aspects of event creation and planning including, but not limited to: accessibility needs, booking rooms, obtaining necessary resources (i.e. equipment, refreshments, etc.), and scheduling. They are also responsible for the facilitation of, communication with, and generally oversee the Events Committee.

The Promotions Coordinators are responsible advertising events and campaigns related to the WGEN mandate through various media, creating promotional material, and managing WGEN social media pages.

The Research Coordinator is responsible for research and content development for educational events and campaigns as well as keeping up to date on current events and issues related to the WGEN community.

The Resources Coordinator is responsible for the maintenance of an online and offline WGEN Library for McMaster University, the upkeep and organization of space resources, including bra donations, binders, and menstrual products, and connecting with clubs, Services, and groups on campus and in Hamilton to further obtain or make accessible the WGEN resources.

The Social and Political Advocacy Coordinator is responsible for imparting change while building awareness on campus about various social and political issues relevant to communities served by the WGEN, such as trans students and students who are survivors.

The Volunteer Coordinator is responsible for the outreach, scheduling, and coordination of Safe(r) Space Volunteers.

There are numerous roles on the WGEN Executive Team that play a vital role in allowing this Service to deliver its mission to the McMaster community. With so many hardworking individuals making up this team, it is evident why WGEN is able to continuously do great work for students.

#### Internal Research

##### Student Engagement

A total of 32 responses were received for the MSU WGEN survey. When analyzing the following data, please recognize that this is not a holistic view of the Service from the perspective of MSU members as 32 individuals comprises less than 0.1% of all undergraduate students. The following figures represent data which were accumulated through survey responses:

*Chart, bar chart

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Description automatically generated with medium confidence*

**Figure 1:** I feel that MSU WGEN advocates for a campus that is free from:

**Figure 2:** I feel that MSU WGEN hosts events that are:

*Graphical user interface, chart

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**Figure 3:** I have accessed the MSU WGEN space for the following reasons:

**Figure 4:** I feel that MSU WGEN provides a safe(r) space for folks who are:

**Figure 5:** I feel like MSU WGEN adds value to the McMaster community.

By analyzing the data, students who have interacted with WGEN clearly understand the value of the Service and several major aspects of what community work WGEN accomplishes each year. **Figure 1** asked students if they feel that MSU WGEN advocates for a campus that is free from Gender-Based Prejudice & Discrimination, Sexual/Gender-Based Violence (S/GBV), and Sexuality-Based Prejudice & Discrimination. The majority of responders agreed with each of the statements, thus demonstrating that students see WGEN advocating for students for each of the given reasons. **Figure 2** asked students to give their opinions on if they feel MSU WGEN’s events are educational, engaging, inclusive, interesting, and organized, among other factors. For this question, most responders tended to choose the agree or neutral options. The only factors that received disagree ratings were engaging, interesting, organized, and well-promoted. While the first three (engaging, interesting, and organized) are up to personal preference of each student, the well-promoted aspect is something worth taking into consideration, as has been discussed in the recommendations section at the end of this report. Concerns about WGEN’s promotional work have been a common discussion in this student survey, and something that should be addressed for future prosperity for the Service. **Figure 3** asked students to share their opinions on why they access the WGEN space, with some of the options including Advocacy Events, Educational Resources, and One-on-One Peer Support. While there are no obvious key takeaways from this specific question, it is worth noting the data in this report as it gives a glimpse into why and how students are accessing the Service. There seems to be a lot of attention going towards Educational Resources. In the future, it may be beneficial for WGEN to put more time into resources and give students further access by collaborating and establishing strong relationships with community partners. **Figure 4** asks students to give their opinions on if WGEN provides a safe(r) space for folks in various communities, such as disabled folks, BIPoC individuals, women, survivors of S/GBV, and those who identify within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Most responders agreed with each of the factors and indicated that they felt WGEN provides safe(r) spaces for folks within these communities. This is incredible work to see as it demonstrates that WGEN is serving a numerous diverse community across McMaster. Finally, **Figure 5** asked if students feel like MSU WGEN adds value to the McMaster community, over 85% of responders agreed and strongly agreed with the statement.

##### Volunteer Engagement & Retention

A total of 10 responses were received for the MSU WGEN Volunteer survey. When analyzing the following data, please recognize that these are not a holistic view of the Service from the perspective of MSU WGEN Volunteers. This survey was open for numerous weeks and was available to all current and former WGEN volunteers. While these responses will be useful, it is worth noting that it only comprises the opinions of 10 volunteers which functions as a significant limitation. The following figures represent data which was accumulated through survey responses:

**Figure 6:** I feel that I have received adequate training for what I experience within my volunteer role as it relates to:

***Chart, bar chart

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***Graphical user interface

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**Figure 8:** When on-shift I feel adequately supported by the following individuals:

**Figure 7:** I feel that MSU WGEN is appropriately:

Many of the questions that were asked to students (e.g., **Figures 2, 3, and 4**) were also asked to volunteers and it is worth noting that volunteers shared very similar opinions and sentiments. **Figures 6, 7, and 8**, each provide a glimpse into volunteer perspectives of the Service that were not echoed elsewhere in other surveys. These specific figures shed light on why specific recommendations are made at the end of the report. Looking at **Figure 6**, volunteers were asked if they feel they have received adequate training for what is experienced within their volunteer role as it relates to a variety of factors including Anti-Oppressive Practices, Mental Wellness, and Sexual/Gender-Based Violence. Many responders most agreed/strongly agreed that their peer support training adequately prepared them to deal with these scenarios. While it is great to see that volunteers feel this way it is also worth noting that the low number of survey responders does not quite give an all-encompassing opinion, so it may be worth looking into the adequacy of this training for the future, especially considering how different this school year has been. **Figure 7**, asks volunteers if they feel the Service is adequately funded, staffed, and supported. The responses to this question range quite a lot. There seems to be an even divide among survey responders and how they feel about the Services funding, staffing, and support. It may be beneficial for the MSU to investigate some external funding to help the Service receive sponsorships and donations to help support the Services mission. When looking at **Figure 8**, it’s clear that WGEN volunteers feel well-supported by one another but, comparing that to **Figure 7**, numerous folks indicated they do not feel the Service is well-supported. This can draw conclusions that seems to be feelings of WGEN not receiving external support whether that is from the university, the student’s union, or various community partners. This is something the MSU should consider looking into so that our peer-support volunteers feel well-supported in their positions.

#### External Research

Through weeks of conducted research it was quite difficult to find a Service that closely resembles what WGEN does at a different post-secondary institution. As one of many peer support Services offered by the MSU, WGEN is able to cater its approaches to a specific community and deliver events, support, as well as resources to folks who need them. While some schools such as offer general peer support clubs, such as Champions of Change, Pride, and Women in House at Brock University, as well as the Peer Support Center and Inclusivity Programming at the University of Western Ontario, there does not appear to be a support Service that is dedicated to advocating for a campus that supports safety for all, especially survivors, while also creating a drop in safe space for women, folks under the trans umbrella, folks outside the gender binary or as gender non-conforming, and survivors of gender-based and sexual violence of all genders. The work of MSU WGEN stands out as unique. The fact that the McMaster Students Union has a large variety of Peer-Support Services which are designed to cater to various groups of students with differing identities demonstrates the wonderful strides we have made thus far in trying to support our community. Taking these data into account also means that the best way to improve these Services is by critically examining the Service internally by taking student opinions into account.

#### Final Thoughts

##### Concluding Remarks

It is evident that MSU WGEN already does fantastic work for students and is a great Service offered by the Union. Students see a value in WGEN and feel that it creates a safe(r) space for numerous students of differing identities. The following recommendations are made to continue this trend of success for MSU WGEN. Similar to the previous report for the MSU EFRT, the first recommendation should be to investigate opportunities to increase support for WGEN volunteers. The volunteers for this Service continually work hard to offer peer support to students and it’s important that there are protocols in place for volunteers who have given support to receive support for themselves afterwards. It is paramount that the MSU to investigate avenues for offering support for volunteers. Furthermore, the MSU should investigate opportunities for establishing external funding and formal relationships with community partners to help increase MSU WGEN’s outreach potential so that they can receive sponsorships which can help to improve their resources library and access to materials. Should the MSU receive additional funding, opportunities for volunteer/executive honoraria would ensure members of the Service felt sufficient compensation for the completion of their duties. Additionally, taking into account some survey data, MSU WGEN should work closely with the MSU Marketing & Communications department to amend and analyze current promotional strategies for events and campaigns, so that more students are aware about what is happening. For the fifth recommendation, the MSU should evaluate the current adequacy of peer-support training for volunteers. Considering this past school year has been like no other, it is worth reassessing the current structure of volunteer peer-support training and adapting the training that is given to be more up-to-date with how our Services are operating and how they will continue to operate in the future. Moreover, peer-support Services (such as SHEC) can refer students to the Student Wellness Centre (SWC), while WGEN may already have the ability to also refer students, the specifics of this relationship are quite ambiguous; the MSU should work to establish a clearer and more direct referral system from WGEN volunteers to university Services and other community partners. Finally, considering how much work is put into each of our Peer-Support Services, it may be beneficial for the MSU to investigate the possibility of hiring a full-time staff who works to support our Peer-Support Services and volunteers, across not just MSU WGEN. While this is currently the responsibility of the Vice-President (VP; Administration), it may be beneficial to investigate hiring an individual whose sole responsibility is ensuring the support and upkeep of Peer-Support Services. This individual can report to the VP (Administration) and Executive Board just as a PTM would, but their job would focus directly on supporting Services such as this one.

##### Recommendations

1. The MSU should investigate opportunities to increase support for WGEN Volunteers (i.e., trauma/crisis support protocols, and relationships with SWC and community partners).
2. The MSU should investigate opportunities for establishing sources of external funding (i.e., sponsorships, etc.) to provide additional support for MSU WGEN staff and operations.
3. The MSU and WGEN should work to establish formal connections with community partners (i.e., SACHA).
4. MSU WGEN and the MSU Communications department should critically examine promotional strategies for the Service and seek ways to improve outreach.
5. The MSU and MSU WGEN should evaluate the current adequacy of peer-support training for volunteers.
6. The MSU and MSU WGEN should establish a clear and direct referral system from Service volunteers to University/community partners.
7. The MSU should investigate the potential for a permanent full-time staff to support Peer-Support Services.

Warm Regards,



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