



# **POLICY PAPER**

## ***Menstrual Equity***

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## Introduction

Period poverty affects an estimated 500 million individuals across the globe, impacts can be seen on their health, wellness and activities of daily living. Plan International Canada conducted a survey that revealed one-quarter (25%) of people who menstruate in Canada had to choose between purchasing menstrual products or essential items (i.e. food or rent)<sup>1</sup>.

Menstrual poverty can force individuals who menstruate to miss critical aspects of their lives: work, school, social activities, and physical activity. If these individuals are unable to access menstrual products, it can therefore negatively impact their health. Period products have also become increasingly unaffordable for people who menstruate, with a reported 82% of Canadian's who menstruate recognize that period products are expensive<sup>2</sup>. This number increases to 88% for menstruators ages 18 to 24, a large age demographic found at post-secondary institutions such as McMaster University<sup>3</sup>.

McMaster's focus on health and well-being across campus was led by the Okanagan Office of Health & Well-being. With their staff and volunteers partnering with campus groups (clubs) to form a Period Equity initiative, based in tackling menstrual poverty and providing menstrual products to the student population at no additional cost. With approximately eight of ten (82%) of surveyed Canadians agreeing that period products should be available for free in public washrooms; (95% for respondents aged 18 to 24), it is clear this initiative had both great need and purpose here at McMaster<sup>4</sup>.

Initiatives such as the Menstrual Equity Project provide support to vulnerable individuals in the McMaster community. Period poverty disproportionately affects marginalized groups, lower socioeconomic groups, those experiencing homelessness, non-binary<sup>5</sup>. The United Way Period Promise Research Project revealed that 75% of respondents indicated <sup>6</sup>. To foster an inclusive environment in our post-secondary institutions, we should ensure that all students have access to necessary resources to feel comfortable on campus.

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<sup>1</sup> "Period Poverty in Plain Sight: One in Four Canadian Women Have Had to Choose between Menstrual Products and Meals." *PlanCanada.ca*, May 24, 2023. <https://plancanada.ca/en-ca/about-us/media-centre/period-poverty-in-plain-sight>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Leger and Plan International Canada, *The Hidden Cost of Periods: A Canadian Perspective*, May 19, 2023, [https://plca-p-001.sitecorecontenthub.cloud/api/public/content/be4eb4c962c14eb5b87f3f7d210004d4?v=7042f8f7&utm\\_source=newswire&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_campaign=menstrual\\_health&utm\\_content=pdf\\_report](https://plca-p-001.sitecorecontenthub.cloud/api/public/content/be4eb4c962c14eb5b87f3f7d210004d4?v=7042f8f7&utm_source=newswire&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=menstrual_health&utm_content=pdf_report).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "Menstrual health inequities and 'period poverty' in Canada." (2022). *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 113(5), 728–737. <https://doi.org/10.17269/s41997-022-00703-0>

<sup>6</sup> Free Periods Canada. (2024, February 3). *Supporting menstrual health and equity in post-secondary institutions with reusable menstrual products*. Free Periods Canada. <https://www.freeperiods.ca/blog/supporting-menstrual-health-and-equity-in-post-secondary-institutions-with-reusable-menstrual-products>

While the University has committed to taking on the work of the Okanagan Office and the continuation of the Period Equity Project. This paper highlights the importance of ensuring continued access to menstrual products alongside highlighting the ways in which the Period Equity Project can be improved over the years to ensure the project achieve is able to provide free period products to McMaster Students across campus.

## **Access**

### **Ensuring Equitable Access to Menstrual Products**

Principle: All students should be able to access any sanitation products required for their basic human needs.

Principle: Reusable menstrual products should be used as often as possible due to affordability and environmental considerations.

Concern: The current supply of menstrual products across campus are not present in every bathroom.

Concern: Funding for menstrual products through McMaster Okanagan was temporary, and not sufficient to support the project.

Concern: Reusable menstrual products are often an initial financial burden for students.

Concern: Students should know where menstrual products can be accessed.

Recommendation: McMaster University should provide consistent and sufficient funding for menstrual products to be free of charge in all bathrooms across campus.

Recommendation: McMaster University should offer reusable menstrual products at a subsidized cost for students and staff to purchase.

Recommendation: McMaster University should create an accessible campus map showing where menstrual products are available across campus.

Menstruation has been deemed a fact of life by the Canadian federal government with menstrual products identified as basic necessities<sup>7</sup>. However, high-cost act as a barrier for many students when it comes to accessing menstrual products, where individuals who are struggling to afford daily cost of living are likely to have more difficulty accessing (sanitary) menstrual products.

The Centre for Human Rights Research at the University of Manitoba CHRR emphasizes menstruation as a fact of life and highlights the menstrual products that the Federal government provides for female

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<sup>7</sup> Canada, Employment and Social Development. "Menstrual Products Now Available at No Cost to Employees in Federally Regulated Workplaces." Canada.ca, December 15, 2023.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2023/12/menstrual-products-now-available-at-no-cost-to-employees-in-federally-regulated-workplaces.html>.

prisoner's<sup>8</sup>. In an institution for higher education to promote success of students, staff, and the McMaster community, providing menstrual products should be seen and addressed as a right not a privilege<sup>9</sup>. A pilot study carried out in Kenya and Nepal focused on challenges experienced by working adults who menstruate in an effort to address the various conditions individuals face when managing their periods in the workplace<sup>10</sup>. Interventions from the study found that by improving access to safe, sanitary, and hygienic, menstrual products, alongside safe, clean bathrooms and comprehensive menstrual health education, people were less likely to experience discomfort and anxiety about leakage due to their increased access to products and the ability to change them more frequently<sup>10</sup>. In addition, there is a sense of community among menstruators, and product sharing increases the positivity in this environment<sup>11</sup>. Post-secondary institutions should consider the benefits of making students feel more comfortable in their academic and social spaces. Providing basic hygiene products with the exemption of menstrual products creates a disadvantage for menstruating students.

A Menstrual Equity project is not the first of its kind at McMaster, but changes are necessary to establish a sustainable and long-term project. The McMaster Okanagan Office of Health & Well-being previously held temporary funding through the Okanagan Charter the university signed onto in 2017; however, this funding has not been sufficient or targeted. With approximately \$30,000 pulled from different budget lines, the project has been operating without adequate staffing, protocols, delivery systems, and without steady or long-term funding.

The Okanagan Office's previous oversight of the project was not sufficient to support its operations. Consultations with McMaster Facilities provided an avenue to have these products provided in a more efficient capacity. Current facilities staff restock toilet paper, paper towels, soap, and brown bags, providing an existing avenue to stock menstrual products along various options for storage with other facilities items.

To properly support our students, menstrual products should not only be readily available, but easy to access and locate on campus. For these reasons, McMaster University should support students by investing in the infrastructure & products required and create a campus map for easy location of menstrual products around campus. Having accessible products reduces the chance of people reusing products, using products for longer than what is safe, or not using any products at all<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Belec, H. (2024, May 30). *Access to menstrual products in federally regulated prisons in Canada*. Centre for Human Rights Research. <https://chrr.info/blog/reflection/access-to-menstrual-products-in-federally-regulated-prisons-in-canada/>

<sup>9</sup> Krishna, A., Eliatamby, D., Fry, W., & Avni, M. (2024). *Workplace menstrual health in the private sector: Results from a pilot study in Kenya and Nepal*. *Journal of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for Development*, 14(7), 473-485. <https://doi.org/10.2166/washdev.103255>

<sup>11</sup> Rawat, M., Novorita, A., Frank, J., Burgett, S., Cromer, R., Ruple, A., & DeMaria, A. L. (2023). *"Sometimes I just forget them": capturing experiences of women about free menstrual products in a U.S. based public university campus*. *BMC Women's Health*, 23, 351. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-023-02457-2>

<sup>12</sup> <sup>6</sup> Employment and Social Development Canada. (2023, December 15). *Requirements for employers to provide menstrual products in federally regulated workplaces*. Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/health-safety/reports/employer-requirements-workplace-menstrual-products.html>

| Month                 | May         |             | June       |            | July        |             | Aug         |             | Sept        |             | Oct        |            | Nov         |             | December    |             | January     |            | February    |             |     |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-----|
| Location/<br>Product  | Pads        | Tampons     | Pads       | Tampons    | Pads        | Tampons     | Pads        | Tampons     | Pads        | Tampons     | Pads       | Tampons    | Pads        | Tampons     | Pads        | Tampons     | Pads        | Tampons    | Pads        | Tampons     |     |
| Residence             |             |             |            |            |             |             |             |             |             |             |            |            |             |             |             |             |             |            |             |             |     |
| Thode                 | 960         | 900         |            |            | 1728        | 900         | 2496        | 900         | 2304        | 900         |            |            | 2496        | 1500        |             |             | 1152        | 900        | 1152        | 1728        | 900 |
| Mills                 | 1728        | 1000        |            |            | 1056        | 900         | 576         | 900         | 2440        | 900         |            |            | 1536        | 1000        | 1440        |             | 576         | 900        | 1152        | 900         |     |
| SAS<br>Testing<br>Ctr |             |             |            |            |             |             |             |             |             |             | 480        | 900        |             |             | 288         | 288         |             |            |             |             |     |
| MUSC                  |             |             |            |            |             |             |             |             |             |             |            |            |             |             |             |             |             |            |             |             |     |
| DSB                   |             |             |            |            |             |             |             |             |             |             |            |            |             | 192         |             |             |             |            |             |             |     |
| HSL                   |             |             | 672        | 900        |             |             |             |             | 672         |             |            |            |             | 672         | 900         |             |             |            |             |             |     |
| SWC                   | 100         |             |            |            | 96          |             |             |             | 384         |             |            |            |             | 288         | 288         |             |             |            | 288         | 288         |     |
| Hub                   |             |             |            |            | 96          | 96          |             |             | 480         | 900         |            |            | 480         | 900         |             |             | 200         | 400        | 288         | 288         |     |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>2788</b> | <b>1500</b> | <b>672</b> | <b>900</b> | <b>2976</b> | <b>1098</b> | <b>3972</b> | <b>1000</b> | <b>8280</b> | <b>1500</b> | <b>480</b> | <b>900</b> | <b>5084</b> | <b>3500</b> | <b>4032</b> | <b>1578</b> | <b>1928</b> | <b>900</b> | <b>3456</b> | <b>1578</b> |     |

Figure 1: Okanagan's menstrual product usage across campus buildings.

## Dispensers and Maintenance

Principle: Menstrual products should be provided in an accessible and organized manner.

Principle: Menstrual products should be consistently available.

Principle: There should be sufficient staffing available to restock menstrual supplies in bathrooms.

Concern: Without proper dispensers, products are disorganized and have an increased risk of vandalism.

Concern: Current menstrual product restocking is left to volunteers and staff at individual buildings.

Concern: Menstrual product restocking requires staffing across campus.

Concern: Dispensers should be working and accessible to use.

Concern: Dispensers require costs for maintenance in the event they are damaged.

Recommendation: McMaster University should provide lump sum funding for the installation of dispensers in all bathrooms across campus.

Recommendation: McMaster University should invest in high quality dispensers, free from high risk of vandalism or damage.

Recommendation: McMaster University should provide ongoing funding for the maintenance and expansion of dispensers.

Recommendation: McMaster University Facilities should implement restocking menstrual products as a routine service, like toilet paper and paper towel.

Recommendation: McMaster University should create a reporting service for students to alert them of malfunctioning or vandalized dispensers or empty products.

Recommendation: Malfunctioning dispensers should be repaired within a 36-hour time period.

Ensuring adequate funding for dispensers and menstrual products is key in ensuring menstrual products are provided in an accessible and organized manner. Funding should be allocated for the maintenance of the project to ensure that dispensers are accessible, as dispensers allow for a practical design for the distribution and restocking of products<sup>13</sup>. According to the Government of Canada, there must be a covered container for the disposal of menstrual products in workplaces<sup>14</sup>. Mechanical wall units are fixed to the wall which prevents tampering and limits the products to one at a time.

It is key when deciding on a dispenser to account for what type of product will be provided, as each dispenser is designed for a specific product. For instance, there are both single-product and dual-product

<sup>13</sup> IYNI Dispenser. (n.d.). *Pad and tampon dispensers*. IYNI Dispenser. <https://iyini-dispenser.com/pad-and-tampon-dispensers/>

<sup>14</sup> Krishna, A., Eliatamby, D., Fry, W., & Avni, M. (2024). *Workplace menstrual health in the private sector: Results from a pilot study in Kenya and Nepal*. *Journal of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for Development*, 14(7), 473-485. <https://doi.org/10.2166/washdev.103255>

dispensers, which are designed for tampons or sanitary napkins, or both<sup>15</sup>. According to a Harvard survey, 47% of menstruators used regular tampons, 46% used sanitary napkins/pads, 43% used panty liners, 33% used super absorbent tampons, 19% used internal menstrual cups, and 19% used period underwear<sup>16</sup>. This expresses a need for dual-product dispensers, with a high portion of menstruators using tampons, pads, or a combination of both.

This requires the need for lump sum funding from McMaster University to purchase and install dispensers, and continual funding to ensure maintenance and restocking of products. In addition, policies for what is expected for repair times & uptime percentages should be established. It is recommended to repair malfunctioning dispensers within 36 hours, as during this time students will be expecting operating dispensers. Critical services aim for uptime percentages in the high 90%, which may not be achievable for menstrual product dispensers<sup>10</sup>. However, if students frequently find that the dispensers are broken, this can create distrust in the product providing system.

Given the fact that students and staff will be interacting with these dispensers on a constant basis, there should be a way to report if a dispenser needs repairs. Although Facilities staff should be monitoring this upon restocking, there may still be gaps in the timings of them reporting this. If a dispenser is vandalized, tampered with, or destroyed, McMaster University Facilities should create a reporting service to ensure students can self-report dispensers that are not functioning properly. This is mostly easily accomplished through a QR code system that students can scan and report, which is consistently monitored by Facilities staff.

## Usage Tracking

Principle: McMaster Facilities should know how often to order new products.

Concern: Facilities will not be able to keep track of the demand for restocking certain locations without adequate usage tracking.

Recommendation: McMaster University should implement a data collection system to identify the restocking needs of each dispenser across campus.

Recommendation: McMaster University Facilities should create a dynamic restocking schedule according to needs of each menstrual product location.

Usage tracking can offer many benefits for this project. First, is it critical to be aware of which locations require more frequent restocking, a greater supply of products, and whether tampons or pads are primarily used. Different seasons will also use greater products than others, with Figure 1 showing much higher usage of products in September than May. This allows staff to make informed decisions when ordering products and when creating restock schedules. Without consistent tracking, there may be a lack of product available to refill dispensers, and times where students can't access menstrual products. With an accumulation of usage tracking over the next few years, McMaster Facilities can predict approximately how much product to order to fulfill student demands.

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<sup>15</sup> Citron Hygiene. (n.d.). *Benefits of tampon & sanitary-napkin dispensers in public bathrooms*. Citron Hygiene. <https://www.citronhygiene.com/resources/benefits-of-tampon-sanitary-napkin-dispensers-in-public-bathrooms/>

<sup>16</sup> Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. (2023, May). *Menstrual hygiene products: Pads and tampons are the go-to choice*. Apple Women's Health Study. <https://hsph.harvard.edu/research/apple-womens-health-study/study-updates/menstrual-hygiene-products-pads-and-tampons-are-the-go-to-choice/>

Tracking usage and data collection can help positively inform the status of the project. In reference to Figure 1, it can provide information relevant to sites across campus with increased usage, prompting an increase in products at that site to prevent empty dispensers. Usage reporting can include a QR code to scan and fill out to indicate to McMaster University Facilities that a specific washroom needs restocking. This prevents a lack of knowledge of need, especially in higher-than-normal usage times. This can be done in conjunction with a QR code to report a broken dispenser, that way the supply of menstrual products is consistently available.

## Promotion of Resources

### Community Hubs

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| <p>Principle: Students should be aware of menstrual product initiatives.</p> <p>Principle: Residences are a high-volume area to reach first year students.</p> <p>Concern: Without promotion students may not realize products are available.</p> <p>Concern: Any educational resources require marketing for students to access them.</p> <p>Recommendation: McMaster University should promote the menstrual equity project in residence as a part of regular Housing &amp; Conference service programming.</p> <p>Recommendation: The Student Wellness Centre should promote educational resources on period stigma.</p> <p>Recommendation: The Student Wellness Centre should engage in promotion of the menstrual products.</p> <p>Recommendation: McMaster University should partner with the McMaster Students Union to promote menstrual products and educational resources across campus.</p> |
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When strategizing how to outreach the menstrual equity programming to students, it is important to target areas where students might seek out information. Community hubs are defined as “one-stop neighborhood-based locations where residents can connect with a range of services and supports...”<sup>17</sup>. These areas are where multiple resources intersect, including organizations, service providers, and living. The goal of using these areas is that services and support should be in locations where people are more likely to be able to access them. As many students do not access resources due to lack of knowledge, we should work to ensure that such a crucial project should be highlighted to all students. Therefore, the project should utilize the various community hubs across campus.

As for McMaster’s campus, one type of community hub includes the various residences. McMaster University as of 2025 has 13 residences, and around 4,000 beds<sup>18</sup>. With around 32,000 undergraduate students, promotions in residence have the potential to educate over 12% of the student population<sup>19</sup>. In addition, there are multiple avenues to promote to first-year students in residence. First-year students in residence have scheduled programming from their Community Advisors (CA’s) and Residence Life Area

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<sup>17</sup> View of rethinking postsecondary access and engagement for low-income adult learners through a Community Hub Partnership approach. (n.d.). <https://cjsae.library.dal.ca/cjsae/article/view/5669/4649>

<sup>18</sup> Keast, M. (2023, February 14). New residences at McMaster University aim to ease student-housing crunch. The Globe and Mail. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/industry-news/property-report/article-new-residences-at-mcmaster-university-aim-to-ease-student-housing/#:~:text=The%20university's%20current%20student%20enrolment,recently%20opened%20residence%20in%202019.>

<sup>19</sup> Future Students. (n.d.). McMaster University. <https://future.mcmaster.ca/why-mcmaster/>

Coordinators (RLACs), which can be made to involve information about menstrual product locations & other educational information. This can be done through posters, bulletin boards, involvement in community meetings, and QR codes in bathrooms. In addition, the Living Learning Community (LLC) Women in Leadership can be used as a resource for partnership and promotion. Overall, McMaster Facilities should partner with Housing & Conference services to ensure students in residence are accessing and knowledgeable on menstrual products information.

The Student Wellness Centre (SWC) is also a common hub for students to use for information regarding their health. The SWC has already been involved in period advocacy and should be partnered with in the future for the promotion of resources. This includes educational resources about types of menstrual products, stigma, location of menstrual products, and more.

## Academic Resources

Principle: All students access academic materials such as syllabi and courseware.  
Concern: Menstruation may cause students to unfairly miss coursework due to pain, leaking, and other symptoms.  
Concern: Students may hide discomfort due to menstruation often because of stigma.  
Recommendation: McMaster University should standardize the inclusion of menstrual supply locations in course syllabi through a QR code or URL.  
Recommendation: McMaster University should develop a clear menstrual absence policy, aligning with AODA.  
Recommendation: McMaster University should standardize an absence policy, allowing the ability to miss classes and tutorials for sickness/period symptoms.

A common factor across all students is accessing academic materials such as syllabi and course outlines. These syllabi must include the major policy statements such as Academic Integrity, Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities, Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work (MSAF), Academic Accommodation for Religious, Indigenous, or Spiritual Observances (RISO), and information on Online Elements and Extreme Circumstances. Many courses also include their own attendance requirements, some with universal accommodations, such as one tutorial can be missed for sickness.

With these documents being universally required, important information regarding menstruating students should also be supplied there. It is recommended to include a map of where menstrual supplies are location in the course syllabi, which can be directly imbedded, or through a QR code or URL. This allows all students to access this information without having to seek it through external sites or social media pages. In addition, most instructors will review courseware at the beginning of the semester, which brings further awareness to accessible resources.

Not all menstruators experience equal periods, and not all menstruators have consistent symptoms between their periods<sup>20</sup>. Symptoms such as pain, bloating, and negative mood are commonly reported, however the experience goes beyond this. More than 850/1732 respondents in a survey by the University of Manitoba reported having to miss class or work to manage menstruation<sup>21</sup>. In addition to this, a study by the Canadian Public Health Association found that up to 70% of women claim to have missed work or school due to their period<sup>22</sup>. These findings can potentially be attributed to debilitating symptoms including pain, migraines, fatigue, nausea, dizziness, diarrhea, difficulty concentrating, and heavy flow. Further, those with menstrual related disorders such as endometriosis and premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) found it even more problematic to manage their symptoms due to a lack of support and structures in place within the education system<sup>22</sup>.

Absences due to menstruation are not limited to symptoms but extends to those who cannot afford menstrual products experience absence from school<sup>23</sup>. This affects a large population, as a 2023 Plan International Canada survey found that 34% of Canadians under 25 struggle to afford menstrual products<sup>23</sup>. Although we should do our best to support students to prevent them from having to miss class or work, extenuating circumstances due to period symptoms should be considered. As a result, all classes should be mandated to have universal absence policies that account for the continual symptoms that menstruators experience.

## Education

### Types of Menstrual Products

Principle: There are many different types of menstrual products.

Principle: Menstruation varies between each individual.

Principle: Reusable menstrual products are more environmentally sustainable and long-term financially accessible.

Principle: Student services have pre-existing connections and support with students.

Concern: Students are often only educated on disposable products such as pads and tampons.

Concern: Students should understand how to use all types of menstrual products, the benefits to each, risks, and sanitation practices.

Concern: Student services often do not have the funding to pursue large-scale projects.

Recommendation: McMaster University should partner with the McMaster Students Union and Student Wellness Centre to create an educational guide to using reusable menstrual products.

Recommendation: McMaster University should provide funding for the Student Health Education Centre (SHEC) for collaboration and promotion of educational resources.

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<sup>20</sup> Ainsworth, A. J., Peven, K., Bamford, R., Zhaunova, L., Salimgaraev, R., Prentice, C., Wickham, A., Cunningham, A., Goddard, F., Ponzo, S., & Babayev, S. N. (2022). Global Menstrual Cycle Symptomatology as reported by users of a menstrual Tracking mobile application. medRxiv (Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory). <https://doi.org/10.1101/2022.10.20.22280407>

<sup>21</sup> Tennent, P. (2024, July 18). A report on period poverty and equity, On Campus and Beyond - Centre for Human Rights Research. Centre for Human Rights Research - <https://chrr.info/resource/a-report-on-period-poverty-and-equity-on-campus-and-beyond/>

<sup>22</sup> Period Poverty in Canada and around the Globe | Canadian Public Health Association. (2019, June 25). <https://www.cpha.ca/period-poverty-canada-and-around-globe>

<sup>23</sup> Ontario Newsroom. (n.d.). <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1004870/ontario-increasing-access-to-free-menstrual-products-in-schools>

Recommendation: McMaster University should provide funding for SHEC to continue their distribution of menstrual cups and cleaning solution.  
Recommendation: McMaster University and SHEC should partner to give away reusable menstrual products.

Limiting education on menstruation and menstrual health is a large contributor to menstrual equity being achieved in Canada. The lack of education further perpetuates stigma and stops individuals from participating in activities of daily living: school, work, physical activity. Individuals are often unaware of different product options beyond common disposables such as pads, tampons, and panty liners. As those who menstruate spend around \$6000 on menstrual supplies, and potentially even more in rural regions, awareness to alternate products should be supplied<sup>24</sup>. Using only disposable products, an individual will use an average of 12,000 tampons, which contributes to landfills<sup>25</sup>. As a result, there are many factors to consider when choosing menstrual products.

We should ensure that information regarding varying menstrual products is readily available, this could include giving an overview of disposable products like pads and tampons and reusable products such as menstrual cups, menstrual discs, period underwear, and health conditions related to menstruation. This allows students to make educated decisions about the products they use, and what is best suited for them. Each product offers pros and cons, as evidenced through guides to products<sup>26</sup>. An educational guide should be created and promoted, in collaboration between McMaster University and SHEC, outlining the benefits of each product, how to use them, the sanitation process, risks, and environmental impact. This should be accessible through educational campaigns, partnerships with the Student Wellness Centre, and through QR codes at menstrual product dispensers.

Individuals who menstruate can self-monitor symptoms in relation to educational campaigns. Those who have additional questions or concerns can access the Student Wellness Centre to seek out professional medical advice or appropriate referrals. Highlighting the health of individuals who menstruate will increase knowledge in the McMaster community. The education should be targeted to a wide array of cultures and beliefs.

In addition, a wide array of products should be available for students to try. When students were asked what would lead them to using reusable products, respondents answered free trials and information about how they work would be convincing factors<sup>27</sup>. According to the Student Health Education Centre (SHEC), during their initial launch of a pop-up menstrual cup giveaway, they successfully gave away 53 diva cups within a span of 4 hours. Although they do not currently have access to fund this project consistently as an item to giveaway, this pilot project shows student interest. In addition, students should be able to

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<sup>24</sup> Tennent, P. (2024b, July 18). A report on period poverty and equity, On Campus and Beyond - Centre for Human Rights Research. Centre for Human Rights Research -. <https://chrr.info/resource/a-report-on-period-poverty-and-equity-on-campus-and-beyond/>

<sup>25</sup> Dudley, S., Nassar, S., Hartman, E., Wang & Wang, S. (2018, January 24). Tampon Safety - National Center for Health Research. National Center for Health Research - The Voice For Prevention, Treatment and Policy. <https://www.center4research.org/tampon-safety/>

<sup>26</sup> HealthPartners. (2025, July 15). Which feminine products are best? Pros and cons of pads, tampons, menstrual cups and others. HealthPartners Blog. <https://www.healthpartners.com/blog/feminine-products-pros-cons/>

<sup>27</sup> Blogger, G. (2021, September 13). Obstacles to students using reusable menstrual products: the current reality & Ways forward. Aisle. [https://periodaisle.com/blogs/all/obstacles-to-students-using-reusable-menstrual-products?srsltid=AfmBOoqi\\_rsxOj-CDE0llahu-iwAOaTLQeoRHcHe\\_\\_S0bicmBJ9tfYwM](https://periodaisle.com/blogs/all/obstacles-to-students-using-reusable-menstrual-products?srsltid=AfmBOoqi_rsxOj-CDE0llahu-iwAOaTLQeoRHcHe__S0bicmBJ9tfYwM)

access cleaning solution as this reduces the chance of infection and increases the lifespan of reusable menstrual products<sup>28</sup>. The Student Wellness Centre has also run a program giving away reusable products, and product goes very quickly, with demand from students to continue the program. We ask that McMaster University partner with SHEC to promote education products and provide funding for the distribution of reusable products & cleaning solutions.

## Reducing Stigma

Principle: Periods are a basic human process that should be recognized by everyone.  
Concern: Students often feel shame or embarrassment about their period.  
Concern: Students often feel uncomfortable disclosing their period symptoms to professors, teaching assistants, and staff, including pain, cramps, and leaks.  
Concern: Students don't feel safe using reusable menstrual products in bathrooms across campus.  
Recommendation: McMaster University should partner with the Student Wellness Centre to create resources about how to manage periods, including cramps, products, and the impact of contraceptives.

Despite periods being a fact of life for a significant portion of the population, there is much stigma that exists. There are many existing myths, negative affiliations, and shame associated with menstruation<sup>29</sup>. Many cultures, menstruation is stigmatized and described as dirty or impure. In addition, menstruators are described as crazy and disordered during the premenstrual phase. This affects mental health, school, and work. A study performed in Spain showed that of those surveyed who menstruate, 34.3% stated that they would consider using menstrual leaves from work during times of discomfort<sup>30</sup>. Despite this, only 17.3% requested time off as they were fearful of professional repercussion<sup>30</sup>.

Many people grew up feeling as if menstruation was something to be embarrassed of and to hide. Further, menstruation is often described through euphemisms, such as "on the rag", which reinforces feelings of shame<sup>31</sup>. This causes people to hide menstrual products at school and work, building further stigma. Only 16% of Australian students reported feeling confident managing their periods at university<sup>32</sup>. Also, in a 2023 survey, 68% of girls and young women had experience period related symptoms that concerned them but did not discuss these with their doctors<sup>33</sup>. By reducing stigma, we not only make students feel more comfortable, but can potentially protect their health.

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<sup>28</sup> Leigh, M. (2025, February 16). How to properly clean your menstrual cup. Mooncup.

<https://wearemooncup.com/blogs/the-bloody-bulletin/how-to-properly-clean-your-menstrual-cup>

<sup>29</sup> Van Lonkhuijzen, R. M., Garcia, F. K., & Wagemakers, A. (2022). The stigma surrounding menstruation: Attitudes and practices regarding menstruation and sexual activity during menstruation. *Women's Reproductive Health*, 10(3), 364–384. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23293691.2022.2124041>

<sup>30</sup> Western Communications. Western University. (2024, December 18). Expert insight: Workplaces can better support menstruating workers. *Western News*. <https://news.westernu.ca/2024/12/supporting-menstruating-workers/>

<sup>31</sup> Gillibrand, R. (2023). 'Dirty red': how periods have been stigmatised through history to the modern day. *The Conversation*. <https://doi.org/10.64628/ab.v3hyj99eh>

<sup>32</sup> Munro, A. K., Keep, M., Hunter, E. C., & Hossain, S. Z. (2022). Confidence to manage menstruation among university students in Australia: Evidence from a cross-sectional survey. *Women's Health*, 18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17455065211070666>

<sup>33</sup> Jean Hailes for Women's Health. (2018). *Periods and Australian women: A national online survey of 4,202 women aged 18–44*. <https://www.jeanhailes.org.au/uploads/periods-and-australian-women.pdf>

Although some efforts towards stigma must be addressed through personal interactions, as a university there are steps, we can take to reduce this. Supplying menstrual products, educating students on the different types of products, symptoms, and menstrual disorders are all ways to effectively combat this stigma. Through the Student Wellness Centre, students can be further educated on the truths about periods, which leads to normalization and acceptance. A lack of understanding is largely attributed to stigma, and menstruation is a topic that even those who experience it are not always knowledgeable on<sup>34</sup>. By increasing knowledge among all individuals, the stigma surrounding menstruation can be removed.

## **Policy Statement:**

**Whereas:** All students should be able to access the sanitation products required for their basic human needs.

Whereas: Reusable menstrual products should be used as often as possible due to affordability and environmental considerations.

Whereas: Menstrual products should be provided in an accessible and organized manner.

Whereas: Menstrual products should be consistently available.

Whereas: There should be sufficient staffing available to restock menstrual supplies in bathrooms.

Whereas: McMaster Facilities should know how often to order new products.

Whereas: Students should be aware of menstrual product initiatives.

Whereas: Residences are a high-volume area to reach first year students.

Whereas: All students access academic materials such as syllabi and courseware.

Whereas: There are many different types of menstrual products.

Whereas: Menstruation varies between each individual.

Whereas: Reusable menstrual products are more environmentally sustainable and long-term financially accessible.

Whereas: Student services have pre-existing connections and support with students.

Whereas: Periods are a basic human process that should be recognized by everyone.

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<sup>34</sup> Åkerman, E., Wängborg, A., Persson, M., Sörensdotter, R., & Klingberg-Allvin, M. (2024). Navigating menstrual stigma and norms: a qualitative study on young people's menstrual experiences and strategies for improving menstrual health. *BMC Public Health*, 24(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-20936-5>

**Be It Resolved That (BIRT):** Student Affairs should work with Residence Life to develop and endorse health promotion events specifically targeted to students experiencing challenges as a result of university-related transitions.

Be It Further Resolved That (BIFRT): There should be a bridge between upper year students and Student Affairs in which useful and informative resources regarding the transition to off-campus housing are provided.

BIFRT: McMaster University should provide consistent and sufficient funding to for menstrual products to be free of charge in all bathrooms across campus.

BIFRT: McMaster University should offer reusable menstrual products at a subsidized cost for students and staff to purchase.

BIFRT: McMaster University should create an accessible campus map showing where menstrual products are available across campus.

BIFRT: McMaster University should provide lump sum funding for the installation of dispensers in all bathrooms across campus.

BIFRT: McMaster University should invest in high quality dispensers, free from high risk of vandalism or damage.

BIFRT: McMaster University should provide ongoing funding for the maintenance and expansion of dispensers.

BIFRT: McMaster University Facilities should implement restocking menstrual products as a routine service, like toilet paper and paper towel.

BIFRT: McMaster University should create a reporting service for students to alert Facilities of malfunctioning or vandalised dispensers or empty products.

BIFRT: Malfunctioning dispensers should be repaired within a 36-hour time period.

BIFRT: McMaster University should implement a data collection system to identify the restocking needs of each dispenser across campus.

BIFRT: McMaster University Facilities should create a dynamic restocking schedule according to needs of each menstrual product location.

BIFRT: McMaster University should promote the menstrual equity project in residence as a part of regular Housing & Conference service programming.

BIFRT: The Student Wellness Centre should promote educational resources on period stigma.

BIFRT: The Student Wellness Centre should engage in promotion of the menstrual equity project and different types of menstrual products.

BIFRT: McMaster University should partner with the McMaster Students Union to promote menstrual products and educational resources across campus.

BIFRT: McMaster University should standardize the inclusion of menstrual supply locations in course syllabi through a QR code or URL.

BIFRT: McMaster University should develop a clear menstrual absence policy, aligning with AODA.

BIFRT: McMaster University should standardize an absence policy, allowing the ability to miss classes and tutorials for sickness/period symptoms.

BIFRT: McMaster University should partner with the McMaster Students Union and Student Wellness Centre to create an educational guide to using reusable menstrual products.

BIFRT: McMaster University should provide funding for the Student Health Education Centre (SHEC) for collaboration and promotion of educational resources.

BIFRT: McMaster University should provide funding for SHEC to continue their distribution of menstrual cups and cleaning solution.

BIFRT: McMaster University and SHEC should aim to give away at least 50 menstrual cups a semester.

BIFRT: McMaster University should partner with the Student Wellness Centre to create resources about how to manage periods, including cramps, products, and the impact of contraceptives.