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New Wellness Centre highlights Laurier's commitment to providing high-quality mental and physical care

WATERLOO – In an effort to enhance support for students' physical, emotional and mental health, Wilfrid Laurier University will be combining its existing Counselling Services and Health Services offices into a single Wellness Centre at its Waterloo campus.

Following a similar model to the one used on Laurier's Brantford campus, the new Wellness Centre at Laurier's Waterloo campus will use a "circle of care" approach, offering comprehensive wellness support in a seamless and coordinated fashion. A multidisciplinary team will combine professionals offering medical care, counselling and mental health services.

By integrating the wellness supports and services available on its Waterloo campus, Laurier is hopeful the new Wellness Centre will make it easier for students to find the help they need, and for faculty and staff to know where to refer students when the need arises. Karen Ostrander, the current manager of Health Services, has been named Director of the new Wellness Centre.

"Our primary goal is to shape an enriching learning environment that is intentionally integrated and cohesively structured where students feel welcomed, valued and understood, particularly when they are faced with challenging personal conditions," said David McMurray, vice-president: Student Affairs at Laurier. "Our Wellness Centres in Brantford and Waterloo are crafted with a circle of care approach in mind, supporting student success that does not come at the price of personal health and well-being."

The vision of integrating Health Services and Counselling Services was affirmed by recommendations from an external review on student wellness at Laurier conducted last summer. The review commended Laurier for its commitment to holistic education and high quality student services, while offering 17 recommendations for improved student wellness. The new Wellness Centre is just one way in which Laurier is enhancing student wellness.

"Through our student wellness initiatives, we've made significant progress related to enhanced community partnerships, education and awareness, wellness policies and services and supports geared to supporting students' wellness," said Leanne Holland Brown, dean of students on Laurier's Waterloo campus. "We were one of the first universities in Canada to hire a mental health/student support team leader, which led to the formation of student groups, numerous events promoting mental health as well as individual attention for students struggling with mental illness."

Laurier continues to build stronger connections with community partners to ensure that if students can't get the help they need on campus, they can still be connected with the right resources. Partnerships include organizations like Grand River Hospital; Skills for Safer Living, which offers programming for students with suicidal behavior; and Bridges to Health, which provides programming for students who have identified concerns with substance use.

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An increased focus on students' well being has spurred education programs designed to better equip faculty and staff to assist students facing mental or physical health issues. This spring, a group of Laurier faculty and staff will participate in a "Mental Health First Aid" program, which will enable them to deliver training to staff and faculty to better recognize the signs and symptoms of mental illness and learn how to support someone experiencing a mental health issue.

The new Wellness Centre will take over the space currently occupied by the separate Health Services and Counselling Services offices in the Student Services Building. Construction will start in early summer and the new facility will be operational in September 2014. Health Services and Counselling Services will operate in alternate locations during the renovations.

The Office of Student Affairs has already collected feedback from over 2,000 students who have been connected with either Counselling Services or the Mental Health/Student Support Team Leader. However, more opportunities for input on the Wellness Centre and the student wellness strategy will be available in the near future. The Wellness Centre can be found on Twitter: @LaurierWellness.

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