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MARCH 10, 2015 | 044-15

## Study by Laurier researchers into gendered violence on campus shapes university efforts to change culture and improve services

WATERLOO – Wilfrid Laurier University today welcomed the findings of a new evidence-informed report into gendered violence that makes 11 recommendations for changing the culture on campus by enhancing the prevention programs and support services provided by the university.

Called The Change Project, the research involved quantitative and qualitative research undertaken on Laurier's campuses over a two-year period and includes an environmental scan of promising practices at other universities. The research involved a survey of 570 students, as well as qualitative data collected from interviews, conversations and engagement with another 51 students, staff, faculty and community partners. The Change Project was led by members of the Social Innovation Research Group in the Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of Social Work at Laurier, in partnership with the Sexual Assault Support Centre of Waterloo Region. The project received funding from Status of Women Canada, the Laurier Student Life Levy, and Mitacs.

The Change Project research was designed to explore existing efforts to address gendered violence against students on campus, as well as the gaps, barriers and challenges that need to be addressed. The goal was to provide sound evidence to inform the development of strategies to change the culture that enables gendered violence to persist, and to improve prevention programs and support services for survivors.

"We live in a violent society," said Principal Researcher Ginette Lafrenière. "It is therefore important to understand that there is a context here that we must unpack: the gendered violence that we see on campuses is a microcosm of the violence perpetuated towards women within our larger community and society."

A key insight that emerged from the research is the importance of language, definitions, and the micro- and macro-aggressions that constitute a spectrum of "gendered violence."

"While it is hugely important to pay attention to the issue of sexual violence," said Lafrenière, "it is equally important to pay attention to defining the idea of 'gendered violence,' including cat calls, derogatory name calling, homophobic statements, and racial slurs. All of these practices and behaviours establish, exploit and reinforce gendered power-inequities that result in physical, sexual, emotional, economic or mental harm."

Although the research was not designed to make general claims about the prevalence of gendered violence at Laurier, the trends in the types of gendered violence experienced by students generally reflect what we expect to see based on published research on gendered violence against students in Canada and the United States. While this may be expected, the survey of students enabled the researchers to identify important trends in the types of gendered violence experienced by students.

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"The qualitative methods corroborate the finding that gender discrimination and sexual harassment may be some of the most frequent types of gendered violence that students experience," said Project Coordinator Jay Harrison. "Further, the gendered violence that students experience is fairly ubiquitous in that it happens wherever students are gathering on campus, in the community and online."

The Change Project report commends the Laurier community for its long-standing efforts to address issues of safety, awareness and support involving gendered violence, and its past record of working with external partners such as the Sexual Assault Support Centre of Waterloo Region. But the report also identified areas that need improvement and it makes a total of 11 recommendations grouped in four areas:

### **Prioritizing prevention**

Action 1: Develop and implement a sustainable bystander intervention program.

Action 2: Focus on men and masculinity.

Action 3: Deliver broad-based and targeted education and awareness campaigns.

### **Coordinated, student-centred response**

Action 4: Ensure policies follow promising practices and that all members of the university community are familiar with them.

Action 5: Develop a sexual assault response protocol.

Action 6: Deliver training for likely first contacts.

### **Committed, accountable and transparent leadership**

Action 7: Establish a standing committee to provide oversight on issues related to gendered violence against students.

Action 8: Assign a new or existing role with the responsibility of coordinating on-campus efforts to address and respond to issues related to gendered violence.

Action 9: Develop monitoring and evaluation systems.

### **Improved collaboration between the university and community.**

Action 10: Develop a partnership with community-based service providers to deliver services to students on or off campus (e.g. the Sexual Assault Support Centre of Waterloo Region).

Action 11: Develop education and awareness campaigns in partnership with the City of Waterloo and City of Kitchener.

David McMurray, Laurier's vice-president of Student Affairs and lead advocate for the university's gendered violence initiatives, welcomed The Change Project recommendations.

"As the report states, the Laurier community has been active for many years in addressing the spectrum of issues associated with gendered violence," said McMurray. "However, it also identifies areas where the university needs to do better. The evidence-informed nature of The Change Project recommendations provides excellent guidance for Laurier as we continue to move forward as an institutional leader in developing inclusive, equitable and compassionate campus communities."

McMurray said Laurier's Gendered Violence Steering Group and associated Task Force of over 200 faculty, staff, student, and community volunteers, is well positioned to build on The Change Project recommendations and on existing Laurier programs and other proven best practices to shape a distinctive Laurier Gendered Violence Action Plan going forward.

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"Gendered violence is a serious and systemic issue that impacts individuals, communities and society as a whole," said McMurray, who also serves as chair of the Council of Ontario Universities' Reference Group addressing issues of sexual violence. "Universities need to take a leadership role in education and prevention, fostering a culture where gendered violence and its impacts are understood, survivors are supported, and those who perpetrate gendered violence are held accountable. At Laurier, we are committed to nurturing a safe learning and work environment where there is no tolerance for any form of gendered violence."

Laurier's Gendered Violence Action Plan is poised to include:

#### **1. Leadership**

- Presidential commitment to action.
- Student Union and Graduate Association support and engagement.
- Faculty Association, Staff Association, and Union representation support and engagement.
- Additional initiatives aimed at engaging all members of the Laurier community.

#### **2. Communication**

- Create a dedicated Gender Violence institutional webpage identified on the main website.
- Design social media *#Change* campaign identity and maximize communication opportunities.
- Engage in professional development presentations, conferences, webinars and workshops.

#### **3. Policy, Protocol, and Practices**

- Review existing policies, protocols and procedures to ensure best practices.
- Determine need and jurisdiction for a gender-violence policy that would encompass reporting options.
- Develop an effective, efficient, well-understood sexual assault response protocol.
- Determine the appropriate reporting balance between compliance and compassion.

#### **4. Education, Training, and Prevention**

- Institute education and prevention initiatives, and training for all students, administration, faculty, and staff.
- Deliver first-response and referral training for likely first-contacts.
- Prioritize prevention (e.g., bystander intervention, and men and masculinity focus).
- Recognize importance of peer-to-peer engagement and develop training opportunities for it.

#### **5. Support and Services**

- Clearly identify and communicate institutional and community resources and all supports on and off campus.
- Organize a survivor-engagement group, and safe space.
- Confirm an institutional documentation/accommodation procedure.

#### **6. Community Partnerships**

- Improve collaboration between Laurier and community-based service providers.
- Partner with the cities of Waterloo, Brantford and Kitchener to develop and deliver awareness campaigns.
- Build capacity through campus community relations.

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## 7. Assessment

- Collect evidence-based data to support decision-making and continuous improvement.
- Encourage continued research activity to inform best practices.
- Determine most appropriate reporting mechanisms, contacts, and documentation systems.

The Sexual Assault Support Centre of Waterloo Region, which secured the initial Change Project funding from Status of Women Canada and partnered with the Laurier researchers throughout the initiative, was pleased with the outcome of the research project and with the university's response.

"The results of The Change Project come at a time when universities and colleges across the province are being mandated to adopt campus-wide sexual violence and harassment policies," said Sara Casselman, public relations & operations manager at the Sexual Assault Support Centre of Waterloo Region. "In our experience, Laurier is sincerely committed to a process that goes beyond compliance with new regulations. We are committed to our partnership with the university and to ensuring support is accessible to students when they reach out."

The full Change Project report can be found at: <http://www.sascwr.org/the-change-project>

- 30 -

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