



Science Students' Council Policy Paper
**Recommendations to the Science & Basic Medical
Sciences Academic Counselling Office**

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Introduction

This policy paper aims to identify opportunities for development of the Science and Basic Medical Sciences Academic Counselling services and provides specific recommendations on how to expand the valuable role that these services play in the student experience. This paper consists of two main sections:

1. recommendations to improve and support the mental health of students through academic counselling, and;
2. an outline of various technology solutions that may improve the efficiency of academic counselling services.

Part 1: Mental Health

Relief from Academic Work

Principle: Students may require relief from academic work due to mental health-related or personal reasons. There should be avenues that grant students reasonable accommodation for these needs in a manner which grants them adequate flexibility within their courses.

Concern: Students experiencing mental health or personal stressors are often unable to receive academic accommodation. Alternatively, these students may acquire doctors' notes even though their circumstances could be better dealt with in another manner.

Concern: Wait times in academic counselling are increased due to many students who require minor academic considerations that could alternatively be dealt with online.

Recommendation: Science Academic Counselling should be the first of the faculties at Western to revise the academic accommodation policy to include a No Documentation provision for students who are experiencing short-term mental health or personal issues.

The Western Mental Health and Wellness Strategic Plan recommends that a review be conducted of the practices related to reweighting of course assessment for missed midterms, tests, and assignments to recognize the difference between accommodation for illness or disability through the office of SSD and the academic relief provided through academic counseling for short term situations¹.

A potential solution could be an online self-reporting No Documentation tool for assessments under 25% of a course's final grade resulting from short term medical or personal situations. This policy has been successfully implemented at McMaster University for situations

¹Western Student Experience. Western Mental Health Plan. Retrieved from mentalhealthplan.uwo.ca

lasting up to three calendar days, where students may request academic relief using the McMaster Student Absence Form (MSAF) once per term with no further documentation required, and are required to speak with their instructors to determine the appropriate relief.² A similar pilot project of this nature should be implemented by Science Academic Counselling. Some other Canadian universities have also removed the requirement of physician notes for medical accommodation regarding short-term illness. Memorial University, for example, removed the requirement for supporting medical documentation for short-term illnesses lasting fewer than five days that may affect a student's participation in classes, labs, and/or evaluations related to their courses.³

Early-Alert System to Recognize and Assist Students Who Require Support

Principle: With earlier recognition and support, students experiencing mental health stressors can avoid further mental health deterioration and can more efficiently return to their normal levels of mental health and academic performance.

Concern: Students may not always actively seek help when necessary and can benefit from having the appropriate resources be offered to them directly.

Recommendation: That Science Academic Counselling implement a program that allows faculty and staff to identify and report early signs of a student's academic issues through a secure online form and connects students to appropriate supports in order to improve student retention and success.

The University of British Columbia's Academic Counselling office has a successful "Early Alert" program in place, which allows faculty and TA's to provide better support for students facing academic difficulties by allowing them to identify their concerns about students using a secure online form. Academic counsellors then review these concerns, reach out to students, and offer to connect them with resources and support they need to help them get back on track.⁴ An OWL site could be used as a platform to provide an online training module which outlines background information on student behaviour that may indicate academic difficulties. This site could be similar to WHMIS and Accessibility in Service (AODA) training sites on OWL which are short in length and provide a comprehensive overview of the program to the user.

²McMaster Student Absence Form. Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work. Retrieved from <https://www.mcmaster.ca/msaf/>

³Memorial Gazette. Sick Note Policy Update for Winter 2015. Retrieved from <http://today.mun.ca/news.php?id=9321>

⁴Student Services - Faculty and Staff Resources. Early Alert. Retrieved from: <https://facultystaff.students.ubc.ca/systems-tools/early-alert>

A Phone Triage System for Academic Counselling to Identify Severity of Student Issues

Principle: Academic Counselling should have a quick and efficient way to respond to urgent student concerns.

Concern: The current first come, first serve waitlist system does not adequately prioritize time sensitive issues.

Recommendation: Science Academic Counselling should adopt a telephone-based scheduling and wait-list system to assess student needs and connect students to the correct counseling services based on severity of issue.

Rockland-Miller and Eells⁵ proposed a model for University Counselling Centres (UCC) to implement a clinical triage system, whereby students call the UCC and have an initial brief (15 to 20 minute) telephone screening with an experienced administrative member. This screening is intended to determine the level of care necessary for the student at that time: emergent, urgent, or routine, and an appointment can be scheduled accordingly at the discretion of the counsellor. A study⁶ analyzing the telephone screening triage system showed that the student wait-time for an initial consultation (i.e. an in-person appointment) was reduced, allowing for more efficient use of resources. While this system can be used to improve overall efficiency of the Academic Counselling office, it could also be the next step forward in helping students cope with mental stressors by allowing serious and immediate issues to be resolved in a timely manner. For example, with the growing need for psychological services in higher education settings, we believe this method would decrease the overall wait time for students requiring mental health accommodations in comparison with the traditional in-person, waitlist system. In a meeting with Martha Fuller, manager of Science Student Services at Western University, Ms. Fuller expressed interest in implementing a live-chat feature to offer more immediate responses to students, which will be discussed further in Part 2 of this paper. The phone triage system could potentially be staffed and maintained in a similar manner to the live-chat.

⁵Rockland-Miller, H. S., & Eells, G. T. (2006). The Implementation of Mental Health Clinical Triage Systems in University Health Services. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 20(4), 39-51. doi:10.1300/j035v20n04_05

⁶Hardy, J. A., Weatherford, R. D., Locke, B. D., Depalma, N. H., & Diuso, N. T. (2011). Meeting the Demand for College Student Concerns in College Counseling Centers: Evaluating a Clinical Triage System. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 25(3), 220-240. doi:10.1080/87568225.2011.581929

Promotion of Mental Health Resources

Principle: The provision of consolidated and clear information regarding mental health resources is crucial in empowering students to seek care from the appropriate services.

Concern: While there are many mental health resources present at Western, information regarding those resources is often scattered and difficult to find, which represents a barrier for students trying to access care.

Recommendation: That students should be made aware of the various mental health resources and support systems available on- and off-campus and should have access to this information on a centralized platform like the Science Academic Counselling website.

The Academic Counselling website should include a prominently-displayed link to the Mental Health and Wellness Resource Guide to provide more efficient and effective access to mental health and wellness information to the Western community. The guide outlines different mental health resources for undergraduate and graduate students including on- and off-campus resources, online resources, counselling resources, and 24-hour crisis services.⁷

The University of British Columbia's Academic Counselling website outlines a "Bounce Back" program, which includes a comprehensive list of meditation and mental health apps, videos, and e-books that students can utilize to help improve their mental health.⁸ Improving access to these resources is directly in line with Science Academic Counselling's goal of assisting students struggling with university adjustment.

Additionally, the Academic Counselling website could outline opportunities available across campus for students to learn and practice stress reduction strategies such as meditation as a method of stress management—several faculties (e.g. Law, Medicine Dentistry, Science, and Kings College) have programs and drop-in sessions, and the Wellness Education Centre also offers a mindfulness lecture series.⁹

Lastly, academic counselling could partner with and advertise the Peer to Peer Support resources offered by The Wellness Centre, where students can feel free to talk to other trained students about mental and physical health topics like how to manage academic and personal stress.

⁷Western Student Experience. Mental Health and Wellness Resource Guide. Retrieved from: http://studentexperience.uwo.ca/student_experience/wellness_initiatives/mental_health_resource_guide.html

⁸Retrieved from <https://cmha.bc.ca/programs-services/bounce-back/>

⁹Western Student Experience. Western Mental Health Plan. Retrieved from mentalhealthplan.uwo.ca

Part 2: Technology Solutions

Enhancing Student Experience and Reducing Queuing Time via a Text-Messaging Based System

Principle: Decreasing in-office wait times provides a more focused, distraction-free work environment for Academic Counselling employees and improve students' experiences with Academic Counselling.

Concern: When the number of Science students requiring guidance exceeds the immediate service availability, idle waiting time for students increases.

Concern: Students currently do not have a method of communication with Science Academic Counselling that considers their personal preference in modes of communication.

Recommendation: That a text message system be implemented that can improve student experience by allowing effective interaction with Academic Counselling to reduce waiting times and congestion in the office.

Concentrated crowds of students—especially during peak semester times such as course drop deadlines, midterms, and final exams—could potentially lead to ineffective use of administrative resources and cause an inconvenience to both the counselling department and students due to excessive wait times. This waiting time may be avoided by implementing a streamlined process to ensure proper time management and resource usage. A technological service to reduce queue times provides a promising solution. According to both Pew Internet & American Life Project and Business Insider, students send an average of 60-67 texts per day¹⁰ with texting being the most prominent and preferred form of communication on smartphones¹¹.

¹⁰Lenhart, A. (2012, March 19). Teens, Smartphones & Texting. Retrieved February 24, 2018, from [http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media//Files/Reports/2012/PIP_Teens_Smartphones_and_Texting.p](http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media//Files/Reports/2012/PIP_Teens_Smartphones_and_Texting.pdf)
[df](http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media//Files/Reports/2012/PIP_Teens_Smartphones_and_Texting.pdf)

¹¹Anderson, M. (2015, August 20). How having smartphones (or not) shapes the way teens communicate. Retrieved February 24, 2018, from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/20/how-having-smartphones-or-not-shapes-the-way-teens-communicate/>

Following the lead of MacEwan University in Alberta¹² and La Cité collégiale in Ontario,¹³ we recommend a queue management software be implemented that offers an intuitive and easy setup, and a customizable multiple choice text-message-based user interface which allows students and administration to easily communicate without crowding the academic counselling office. The overall goal is to minimize unnecessary face-to-face interactions for bureaucratic procedures. Specifically to combat the issue of long wait times, this two-way communication queue management software should allow students to automatically join the virtual line from anywhere via a text-message. The student can then update their status in the line, ask for help, or leave the line based on their schedule. When the student is near the front of the line (top 3) they would receive a text asking them to head to the Academic Counselling office for their appointment.

A potential software system might be “Qminder” (<https://www.qminder.com>). Currently used by La Cité collégiale, Qminder offers the benefit of providing instructions in multiple languages—a potential method to engage international students. A higher-end, but perhaps more expensive solution might be “Lavi Industries” (<https://www.lavi.com/en/queue-management>). With a personalized virtual queuing system, academic counselling could offer a solution tailored to meet the needs of Science students.

At MacEwan University, the system was supported and partially financed by the Student Technology Fee Committee¹⁴. This provides a unique opportunity to collaborate with the Science Students’ Council and potentially utilize some of the funds from the SSC’s Legacy Fund to finance this initiative (though the specific details of any future potential funding arrangement will be determined by future members of the SSC; the current SSC members cannot pledge a future donation).

Please refer to Appendix 1.1 for a promotional poster created by MacEwan university outlining their new text message based system.

¹²A better way to queue. (2013, December 12). Retrieved February 24, 2018, from https://www.macewan.ca/wcm/MacEwanNews/MYQ_SYSTEM_VIRTUAL_QUEUE

¹³Q. (n.d.). Queue Management System for Education. Retrieved February 24, 2018, from <https://www.qminder.com/customers/education/>

¹⁴Skip the OUR line – here's how. (n.d.). Retrieved February 24, 2018, from https://www.macewan.ca/wcm/MacEwanNews/MYQ_STUDENT_PRIMER

A Live-Chat Webpage Add-on that Provides an Immediate Response to Science Students

Principle: Science students should be able to receive personalized feedback to simple questions or concerns.

Concern: Minor problems or quick questions requiring counselling are often asked and answered in-person, increasing the in-person wait times and delaying help to students that require guidance with important and urgent issues.

Recommendation: That Science & Basic Medical Sciences Academic Counselling open the two-way communication feature in the current alert/notification text-messaging alert system as an immediate solution to address this issue.

Recommendation: That a long-term solution would be to support a live chat functionality on the Academic Counselling website where students can acquire answers to their immediate questions.

The 2017 Live Chat Customer Service Report found that in the education industry (including multiple universities), there were a total number of 4.1 million chats, with an average satisfaction rating of 84.46% and an average chat time of 11 minutes 48 seconds¹⁵. With a high satisfaction rating and reasonable chat time, the live chat feature provides an opportunity to simultaneously reach a wider array of students and reduce the in-person wait times.

Currently at the University of Western Ontario, Western Libraries concurrently uses a live chat and live text-in¹⁶ feature to help Western students with any general or research-specific queries. This implies that there is an existing technological framework for live chats at Western that can be utilized by Science Academic Counselling in partnership with Information Technology Services. In addition, multiple universities including, Stanford, Boston, Texas A&M, and University of Colorado use the “LiveChat” software¹⁷ (<https://www.livechatinc.com>). This is a more expensive, higher-end software system in comparison to the current framework used by Western Libraries; however, they do offer a 30 day free trial that includes a plethora of customizable features, so the service can be explored without making a definite financial commitment.

Please refer to Appendix 1.2 for a promotional poster created by the “LiveChat” software explaining the advantages of live chat over email or phone.

¹⁵Firuta, J., Jaskólski, F., Wójcik, J., & Jaskiewicz, A. (2017). Customer Service Report 2017 – The latest customer service metrics. Retrieved February 24, 2018, from <https://www.livechatinc.com/livechat-resources/customer-service-report-2017/>

¹⁶Frequent Contacts. (n.d.). Retrieved February 24, 2018, from <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/contact/index.html>

¹⁷Live Chat for Education & Admissions. (n.d.). Retrieved February 24, 2018, from <https://www.livechatinc.com/livechat-for-education/>

Intuitive Academic Advising Flowchart

Principle: There should be a centralized location on the Academic Counselling website where students are able to find the correct bureaucratic processes (ie. forms and procedures) required to resolve their issue without the need to search the entire website.

Concern: Science students are not aware about the correct forms, procedures, or permissions required to efficiently address issues regarding mental health, academics, accommodations, courses and/or appeals.

Recommendation: That a site map page exist on the current Science Academic Counselling website that outlines the required steps and procedures for different issues most commonly faced by Science students.

Many issues require leg work (i.e. in terms of forms, procedures, etc.) before steps can be taken by Academic Counselling to help resolve the issues. Ms. Martha Fuller also expressed interest in designing a simple and intuitive flowchart that provides a visual outline for students consisting of steps to follow for some of the most common issues. Posting this flowchart, both online on the Science counselling website and in the counselling office, would save time spent on explaining the correct procedures to students, thereby conserving the limited resources of the office. A great example of a relevant flow chart can be found in Appendix 1.3, which displays an academic advising flowchart created by the Faculty of Medicine at McGill University.

Specific to Science Academic Counselling at Western University, the flowchart could potentially include the following procedures that are offered according to their website:

- Wellness and mental health concerns
- Academic issues
- Exam or special accommodations
- Add/Drop a Course
- Academic Appeals
- Degree/Program Changes

Based on the expertise of Academic Counselling, categories can be added or removed based on the similarity of the involved procedures. We also recommend including hyperlinks to the correct forms in the online version of the flowchart. This will allow students to conveniently access all the correct resources in one centralized location.

Mutually Beneficial Partnership Between Science Academic Counselling and Science Students' Council (SSC)

Principle: Science Academic Counselling and the Science Students' Council share the same goal of helping Science students succeed and therefore should work collaboratively to increase their cumulative positive impact.

Concern: Events such as Wellness Wednesdays are simultaneously hosted individually by both Academic Counselling and SSC which minimizes the impact of the event because students must choose to attend one or another.

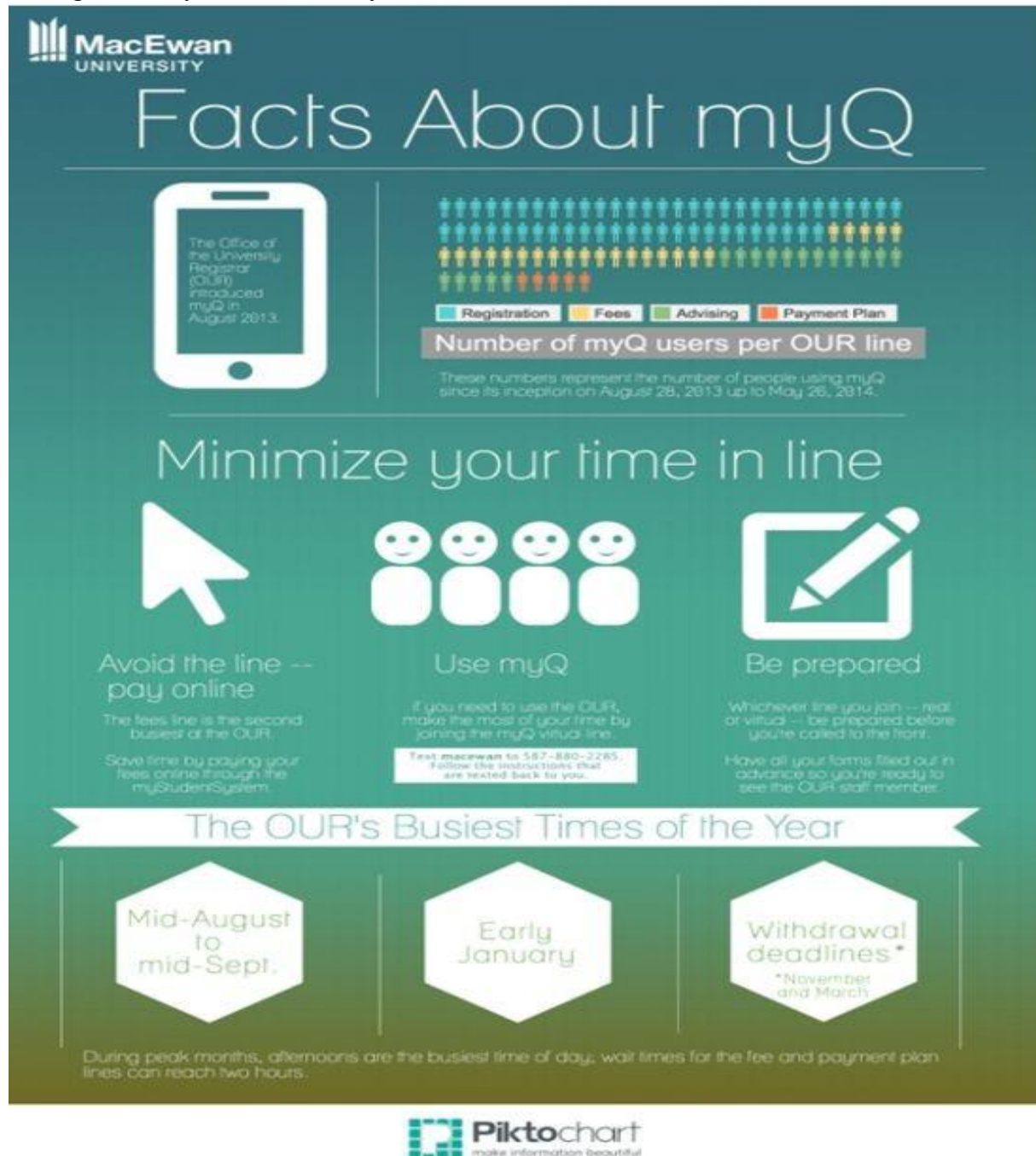
Recommendation: That Science Academic Counselling and SSC work together on events and help promote each other's initiatives.

With the mandate of the Science Students' Council (SSC) being to enhance the student experience for undergraduate students in Sciences and Medical Sciences at Western University, Danny Chang, President of the Science Students' Council, believes, "it is imperative that [SSC] work collaboratively with Academic Counselling." He explains, "by coming together, [SSC and Science Academic Counselling] can provide very unique, yet crucial perspectives to tackle academic issues that students face." While there has been some partnership in the past, he "hopes that moving forward, this relationship can continue to grow to benefit students."

Appendix

1.1

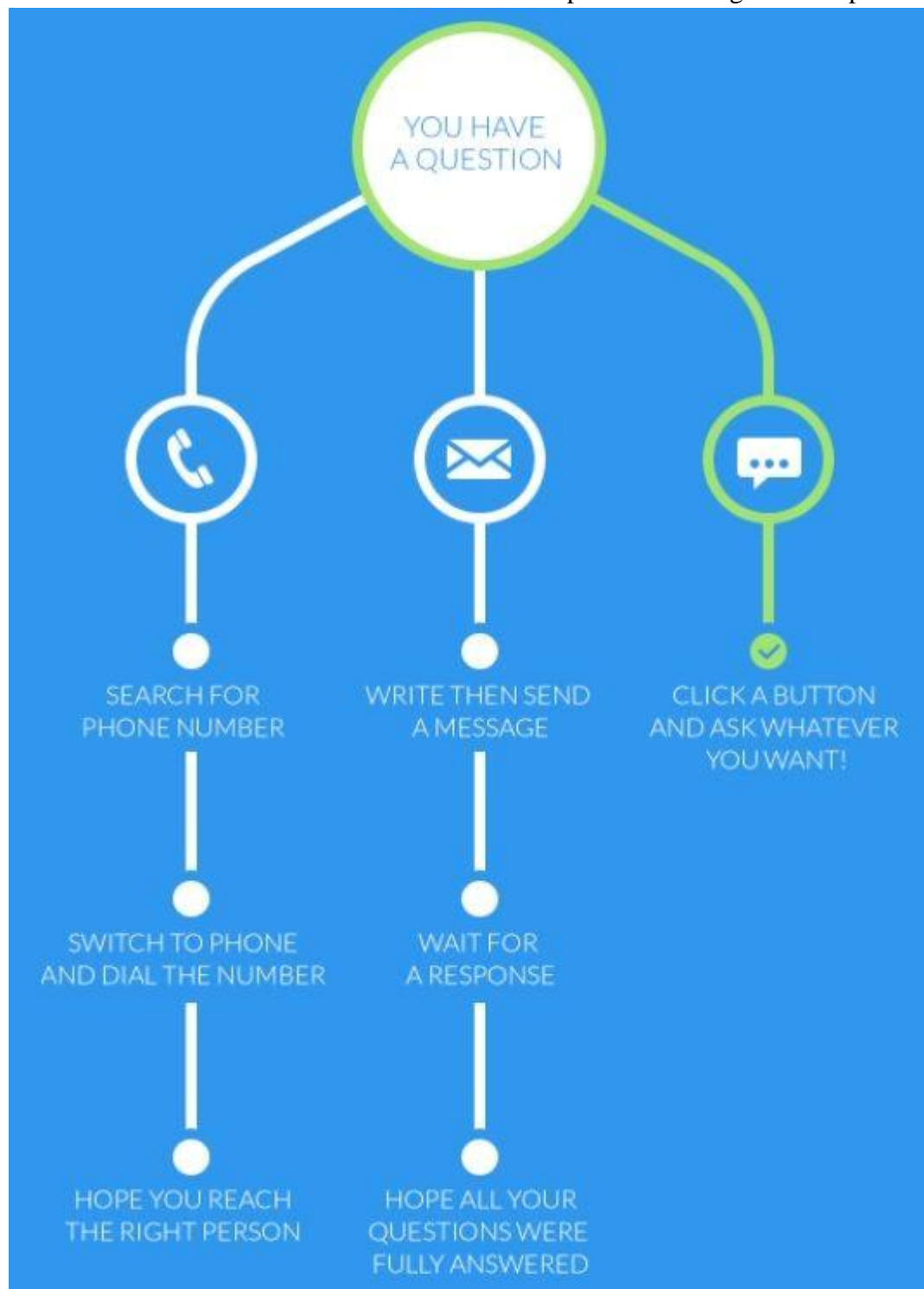
Promotional poster created by MacEwan University¹⁸ to inform their students about the new text message based system named “myQ”



¹⁸Skip the OUR line – here's how. (n.d.). Retrieved February 24, 2018, from https://www.macewan.ca/wcm/MacEwanNews/MYQ_STUDENT_PRIMER

1.2

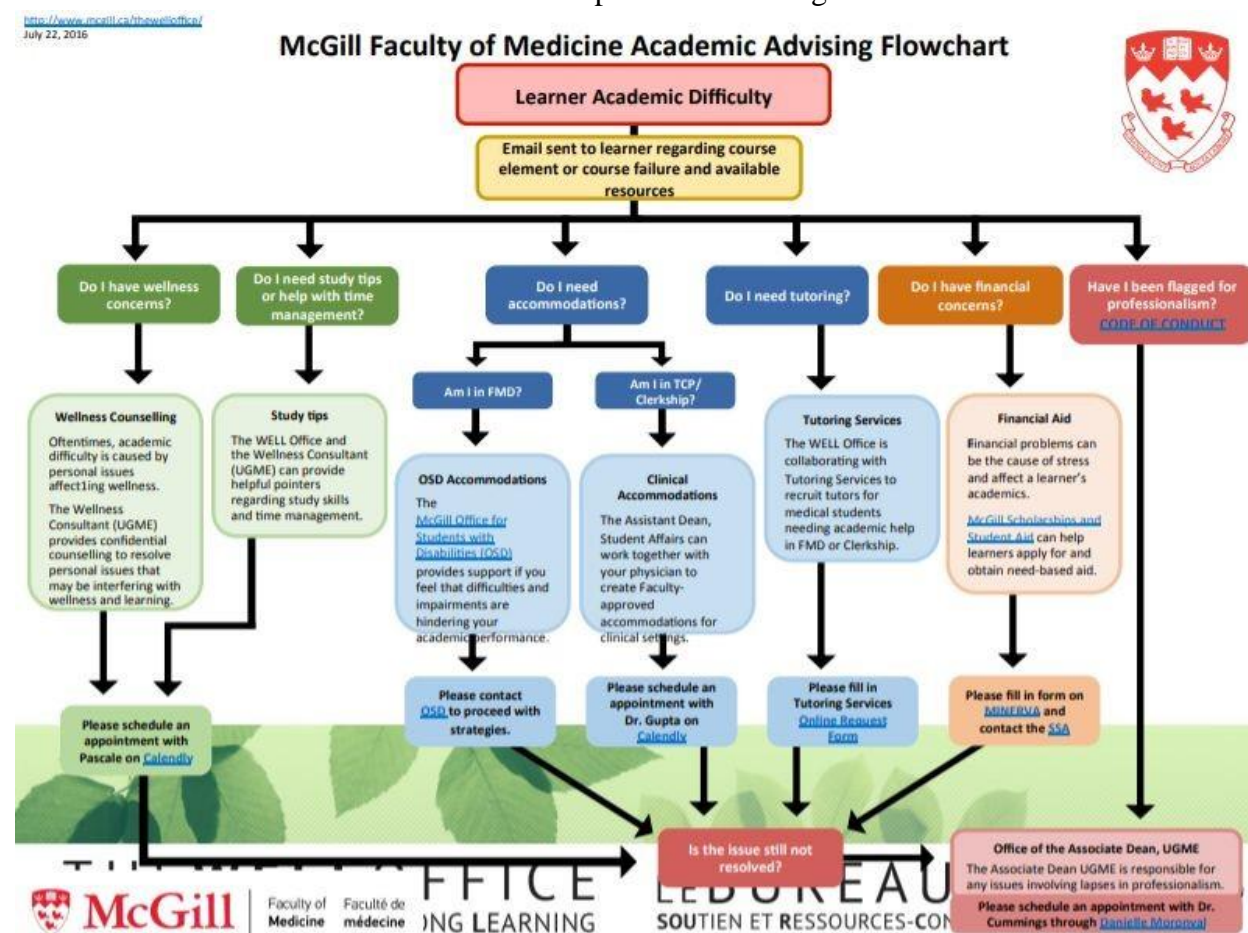
Promotional poster created by the “LiveChat” software¹⁹ that outlines the positive advantages of a live chat feature to contact administration in comparison to using email or phone



¹⁹Why LiveChat - benefits of live chat software. (n.d.). Retrieved February 24, 2018, from <https://www.livechatinc.com/why-livechat/>

1.3

Academic Advising FlowChart created by McGill university²⁰ for students in the Faculty of Medicine. The flowchart is divided into multiple different categories.



²⁰ McGill Faculty of Medicine Academic Advising Flowchart. (n.d.). Retrieved February 24, 2018, from http://mcgill.ca/thewelloffice/files/thewelloffice/academic_difficulty_flowchart_210816.pdf