



# FORUMSPACE

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## Student panel: Creating a culture of consent at McMaster University

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### OUR PROCESS

The McMaster Health Forum has helped to demonstrate the value of informing policymakers about priority issues with the best-available research evidence, systematically elicited citizens' values, and stakeholder insights by convening over 50 citizen panels. As this year's Forum Fellows, we aimed to adapt the Forum's Citizen Panels program to identify strategies for creating a culture of consent at McMaster University through student/staff engagement. To realize our vision, we developed and piloted a new Fellow-driven program —Student Panels— that took into account lessons learned to date in conducting citizen panels.

We outline below the five key stages involved in our process of convening the first student panel. In addition, an overview of the student brief that was developed to inform the panel and key features of the student panels are provided in Table 1.

First, we established a diverse and experienced steering committee, consisting of people involved with current efforts to create a culture of consent on campus. Through in-person meetings, our steering committee provided input that shaped all facets of the project, including the student brief that will be sent to participants prior to the panel, key informants to interview before preparing the student brief, the recruitment strategy, and post-panel dissemination strategies.

Second, we developed a draft outline of the student brief, hereafter referred to as terms of reference (TOR), which outlined the problem, options for addressing it, and implementation considerations to be included. The TOR was developed iteratively and informed by data and research evidence, as well as the views and experiences of steering committee members and key informants.

Third, during the process of developing the TOR, we identified key informants in collaboration with our steering committee. We conducted brief interviews with six of them to solicit feedback to further shape and refine the TOR.

### THE CONTEXT

Sexual violence is a significant societal problem that has a pronounced impact on university campuses.<sup>1</sup> Currently, several policies and programs are in place to deal with sexual violence at the provincial level in Ontario, as well as on university campuses across the province. For example, the Ontario government instituted the Sexual Violence and Harassment Action Plan Act in 2016, which outlines the legal obligations for all Ontario universities to support survivors and handle reports of sexual violence.<sup>2</sup> At McMaster, the Sexual Violence Policy was introduced in 2016. This policy outlines the roles of various stakeholders in responding to complaints of sexual violence involving members of the university community, the process through which complaints are adjudicated, and the sanctions that may result.<sup>3</sup> Such policies reflect both the importance of dealing with sexual violence and decision-makers' desire to address the problem at many levels.

At McMaster University, recent social movements regarding sexual violence (e.g. the #MeToo movement) have prompted discourse and planning of various approaches to build a culture of consent, rather than focus only on after-the-fact interventions in response to cases of sexual violence. However, achieving such goals in a way that reflects the best-available research evidence and integrates systematically elicited insights from key stakeholders on campus (including students who have lived experience with sexual violence) is an ongoing challenge. The 2018/2019 McMaster Health Forum Fellows sought to build on a citizen-engagement process already established at the Forum to develop a unique approach that could help address this gap.



In the fourth stage, we drafted the student brief with input from Health Forum staff and our steering committee. This brief will be pre-circulated to all panelists prior to the panel. The brief is meant to support informed deliberations by presenting the best-available data and evidence about the problem, options for addressing it, and implementation considerations.

Lastly, we are currently in the process of recruiting a diverse group of 14-16 students to participate in the panel, which will convene on March 26, 2019.

### PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

In the student brief, we identified three driving forces that make sexual violence a pressing challenge and that highlight the need to foster a culture of consent. These include the following:

- 1) sexual violence is a widespread problem in society, particularly on university campuses;
- 2) cultural norms and socializations can prevent people from exercising bodily autonomy; and
- 3) current efforts focus on responding to cases of sexual violence, and little attention is devoted to proactively preventing new cases.

In collaboration with our steering committee, the potential elements of the solution were formulated by surveying the problem, looking at what has been implemented on other campuses and in other organizations, incorporating feedback from key informants, and analyzing research evidence. The three elements of a potential solution in the brief include:

- 1) establishing coordination structures that clarify leadership, integrate objectives, and strengthen collaboration across the university administration and campus groups;
- 2) complementing after-the-fact interventions with cost-effective primary prevention (public health) efforts; and
- 3) addressing the cultural basis of sexual and gender-based violence.

One challenge we faced was identifying systematic reviews relevant to these elements. The limited research available about these possible elements of a solution underscores the need to elicit student perspectives through the Student Panels program.

### NEXT STEPS

We are currently recruiting students to participate in the student panel. Following the panel, we will compile key themes that emerge from the discussion into a panel summary that will be broadly disseminated to inform and support any future campus-level initiatives taken at McMaster or elsewhere to drive action towards creating a culture of consent.

As with other McMaster Health Forum programs, we will conduct formative and summative evaluations of all components of the Student Panels program through surveying panellists to ensure that the program can effectively spark action on campus-level issues. This evaluation will allow us to reflect on what worked and what can be improved upon in future Student Panels that address other high-priority, student-centered issues.

Table 1: Overview of key features of student briefs and panels compared to citizen panels

Key Features of Student Briefs	Key Features of Student Panels
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe what is known (and not known) about a high-priority issue currently being faced by students at McMaster University.</li> <li>• Provide descriptions of the policy context at the campus and the provincial level.</li> <li>• Write in plain-language.</li> <li>• Use the best-available research evidence (with priority given to systematic reviews instead of single studies whenever possible) to provide credible information to support the panel deliberations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address a high-priority issue currently being faced by students at McMaster University that:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◊ Can, at least in part, be addressed by leaders at the university;</li> <li>◊ Is driven by McMaster University student priorities, rather than the priorities of policymakers, stakeholders, and researchers;</li> <li>◊ Is informed by a pre-circulated plain-language student brief;</li> <li>◊ Convenes 14-16 students involved in or affected by the issues or by future decisions related to the issue;</li> <li>◊ Ensures fair representation that reflects the diversity of students involved in or affected by the issue;</li> <li>◊ Engages the Forum Fellows and Forum staff to assist with the deliberation;</li> <li>◊ Allows for frank, off-the-record deliberations by following the Chatham House rule; and</li> <li>◊ Aims to find common ground and identify the values underlying different positions.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

### REVIEWED BY DR. KAELAN MOAT & DR. MICHAEL WILSON

Dr. Kaelan A. Moat is Managing Director at the McMaster Health Forum, an Assistant Professor (part-time) in McMaster's Department of Health Research Methods, Evidence, and Impact, and a member of Centre for Health Economics and Policy Analysis (CHEPA). His research focuses on how to support the use of research evidence in health system policymaking. Dr. Michael Wilson is the Assistant Director of the McMaster Health Forum, an Associate Professor in the Department of Health Research Methods, Evidence, and Impact, and a member of CHEPA. His research focuses on supporting the use of research evidence by health system decision-makers, including policymakers and stakeholders such as community-based organizations.