
Connecting Campus and Community: Exploring Student Involvement with Poverty Related Work at McMaster University

A Project of the McMaster Poverty Initiative

It is widely reported that 20% , or 95 000, of Hamilton residents live below the poverty line. Members of the McMaster community are involved in a variety of volunteer, work, and academic activities that address local poverty on some level.

In February 2008, the McMaster Poverty Initiative launched a web survey that asked McMaster students, faculty, and staff to share how they are involved with poverty-related work in Hamilton. From these respondents, several participated in focus groups that addressed more in-depth issues about the nature of poverty and McMaster's role in addressing social injustice.

The project was designed with the purpose of developing a comprehensive picture of McMaster's present role in addressing poverty in Hamilton and to serve as a platform for continued work by the McMaster Poverty Initiative.



REPORT HIGHLIGHTS:

- Trends in student involvement
- Opportunities for community engagement
- Insights from the focus groups
- Recommended next steps for McMaster

ABOUT THE MCMASTER POVERTY INITIATIVE

The McMaster Poverty Initiative is a team of faculty, students, and staff of McMaster University dedicated to research, advocacy, education, and action surrounding issues of poverty in Hamilton. By fostering collaboration between groups with similar objectives, we can lay the groundwork for larger projects and critically examine unmet needs. Understanding the big picture of anti-poverty action in Hamilton will help McMaster students, faculty, clubs and services to be an effective force for change in the community.

SURVEY RESULTS

Between February and April 2008, more than 150 members of the McMaster community participated in an online survey asking them about their involvement in poverty-related work in Hamilton. The responses, over 80% coming from students, provided great insight into what is currently being done to address poverty and the ways in which students are engaged in the community

Major Trends among McMaster Students

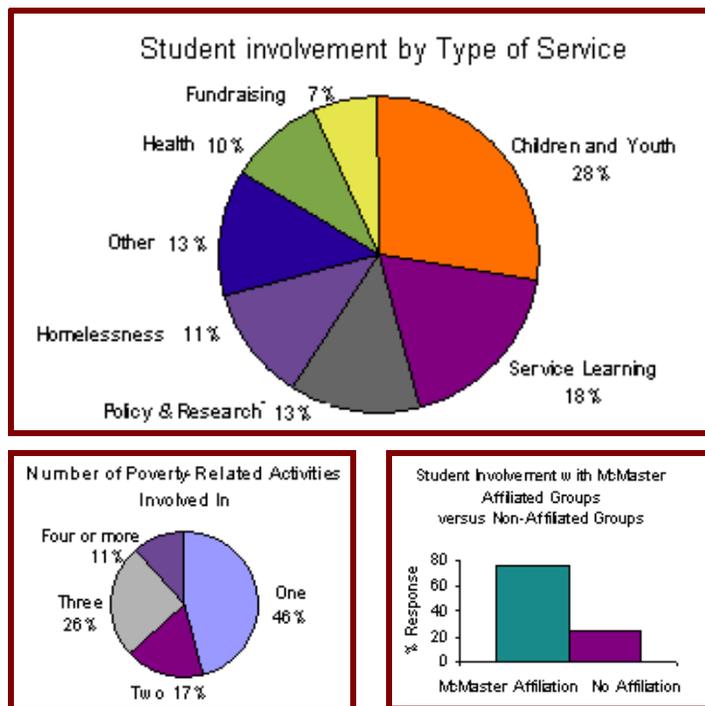
Students of all faculties are engaged in poverty-related work

Most students are involved in direct service volunteer work such as working with children and youth, homeless outreach, serving food, and literacy programs

The vast majority of students who volunteer in the community do so through campus clubs

Of those students who report being involved in poverty related work, over 50% work with more than one club or organizations and 37% work with three or more different organizations

Students are incorporating their interest in poverty into their work on McMaster's campus through Service Learning, courses such as Experiential Education, and events like the annual Global Citizenship Conference



POPULAR VOLUNTEER GROUPS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Students work with a wide variety of McMaster clubs and service organizations in Hamilton. Outlined below are the groups that student survey respondents most commonly reported working with.

McMaster Service Learning

<http://servicelearning.mcmaster.ca>

Service Learning is form of experiential education where students work with others to address community problems and reflect upon their experience. One-time placements in Hamilton are offered throughout the year as well as week-long experiences over Reading Week.

OPIRG McMaster

<http://opirg.ca>, MUSC Room 229

OPIRG is a student funded and directed organization working on issues of human rights, the environment and social justice. Working groups include Food Not Bombs and the Anti-Poverty group. The OPIRG resource library features a large collection of social justice and poverty oriented books, periodicals, and videos.

Community Volunteer Action Group (CVAG)

http://www.opirg.org/mcmaster/cva/group_list.php

An OPIRG working group, CVAG is a network of volunteer groups that promotes community service and reflection among students. Approximately 300 students in 29 teams are involved in volunteering opportunities in Hamilton with agencies that deal directly with those living in poverty.

Hamilton Out of the Cold

<http://www.hamiltonoutofthecold.freesevers.com>

provides food and shelter for Hamilton's homeless and near homeless during the winter months

INSIGHTS FROM FOCUS GROUPS

Many survey respondents agreed to participate in focus groups to discuss how the university can become a more prevalent and appropriate force for change in the Hamilton community. Two sessions were facilitated in March 2008, one for McMaster students and another for McMaster staff. All quotes are from student participants.

Approaching poverty

“You need to be careful that you’re not coming in thinking that first of all you know everything about the situation [of impoverished people], because you don’t, and also that you have all the answers, because you don’t. You need to be careful to work with people and not for people.”

Students may feel vulnerable in the face of challenging situations when venturing out and familiarizing themselves with poverty in Hamilton. Staff participants noted that McMaster’s commitment to promote involvement must include an equal commitment to training and preparing students to address community issues, and to guide them in advocating for change in a way that is respectful of the impoverished.

Recommendation: More volunteer opportunities offered through McMaster should adopt a service learning approach, which involves preparation and education about the community issue being addressed, and debriefing sessions.

From charity to social justice

McMaster can direct play a key role in facilitating a shift in mindset among its students: from participating in short-term solutions to addressing systemic issues, such as the social and economic inequalities propagated by public policy.

“The university atmosphere played a lot into my transition from focusing on charity to social justice... I learned so much about advocacy work and community involvement. I don’t think I would have fully grasped the concept [of social justice] and understood what it meant without coming to McMaster.”

Recommendation: Continue to empower students to approach issues from a social justice perspective through academics, research and advocacy work. This may include encouraging professors to put a local spin on public policy discussions, and encouraging students to undertake research and thesis projects that investigate the basis of community issues.

Community focus

“A lot of students aren’t from here and so think ‘why should I care about Hamilton? It isn’t my community’”

Students and staff believe that McMaster has a responsibility to “let students know what is going on in OUR community.” When students choose McMaster as a university, they are also choosing Hamilton as a city in which to live and learn. Group consensus was that a university education should produce not simply students, but engaged citizens. Immersion in the community is an important starting point.

Recommendation: Students should be encouraged to venture off-campus, even beyond volunteering efforts. McMaster could provide more information on local attractions and hold more university events in community venues.

Addressing community issues through academics

Students emphasized that an opportunity to engage in the Hamilton community should be provided through every faculty. Poverty is an interdisciplinary issue that demands more than a theoretical understanding for its eradication.

Recommendation: Expand the incorporation of advocacy, service learning and experiential education into cross-listed courses.

“Experiential education is great in terms of getting you connected with the community. It is giving you the opportunity to learn outside of the classroom, and that’s so important.”

How to connect campus and community

“There is a stereotype or stigma associated with downtown [Hamilton]. So having a club or having someone or something to start off with is really important. It’s easier once you know it’s not so scary”

General consensus was that the plurality of volunteer and advocacy groups can be overwhelming and difficult to navigate, especially for an incoming McMaster student. Participants agreed that becoming involved in a campus club is often the easiest way to begin connecting to the community.

Recommendation: Develop a comprehensive, McMaster-supported database with contacts for campus clubs and organizations that work in the community and the nature of their involvement. This clearinghouse of information should also include links to Hamilton databases of local agencies for students who seek further volunteer opportunities.



Through consideration of the information and comments offered in the online survey and focus groups, four areas have been identified for McMaster to build a stronger connection with the Hamilton community. These suggestions are primarily intended to stimulate discussion, and to serve as a starting point for further investigation.

- Further collaboration between campus and community organizations to provide a clearinghouse of information and contacts to promote local engagement.
- Expansion of experiential education opportunities and focus on systemic community issues in coursework.
- Further investigation of the role that research conducted by McMaster faculty could play to address poverty in Hamilton.
- Development of alternative Welcome Week events and materials to introduce incoming students to the Hamilton community. This may include a bus tour of the city, a service learning opportunity, promotion of community events, and provision of information local agencies.

Ultimately, we see the need for McMaster University to promote a culture of responsible engagement and advocacy relating to community issues in Hamilton, with an emphasis on social justice. This report offers possible directions for achieving this goal, as a mission shared by students, staff, and faculty alike. We encourage you to continue the discussion and to translate it into action against poverty in Hamilton.



This bridge is located behind Barton St. in Hamilton. It marks the North boundary of Beasley, connecting it to the North End. Beasley is the neighbourhood located at the heart of the city, bordered by James & Wellington and Main & Barton. It is an enormously diverse community and possesses the highest concentration of social services in the city (Photo credit Jeanette Eby).

A PROJECT OF THE MCMASTER POVERTY INITIATIVE

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This report was prepared by Leigh Ayton and Katie Huth. The opinions expressed in this report are not those of McMaster University.

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