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Peer connections the focus of new Student Wellness Ambassador Program supported by former chancellor

Janice Varzari headlines program fundraising with matching donation

A new program designed to enhance student wellness at the University of Lethbridge is receiving a boost of support from its former chancellor, Janice Varzari (BN '90, MEd '02).

The [Student Wellness Ambassador Program](#) (SWAP) is a student-led wellness initiative aimed at developing peer connections and promoting wellness. The program has already been active in raising funds from alumni and donors to support it through its first four years, and Varzari and her husband Glenn pledge to match the money raised, up to \$20,000.



“In talking with Janice, she was looking to support something related to student wellness that was more than a one-time gift and would have a lasting impact,” says Jennifer Ellis-Toddington (BSc '99, MEd'05), manager of Counselling and Career Services at the U of L. “I’ve felt we’ve always needed a peer support program. We have many ways for our students to connect with counselling services at the University but not every student needs or wants a professional counsellor.”

The SWAP initiative will focus on two main areas, regular student-led (and developed) wellness initiatives that allow peer-to-peer connections on and off campus, and peer support services.

“As a proud alumna and long-time volunteer and supporter of the University of Lethbridge, I care deeply about our students and their experiences while studying at the U of L,” says Varzari. “As at most post-secondary institutions, our students are experiencing significant stresses that affect their mental wellness, and the University is seeing increasing demands upon its mental health services.

“My husband Glenn and I are thrilled to offer our financial support to this initiative. We are encouraging other alumni and supporters to consider making a gift to this much-needed program.”

Ellis-Toddington says students are seeking ways to connect with each other, noting a 45 per cent participation increase in group events offered by Counseling Services.

“Our virtual book clubs fill up almost immediately and it’s been that way since the start of the pandemic, so something like this is needed now more than ever,” she says.

A Student Wellness Ambassador Committee will be responsible for planning weekly outreach events that provide students opportunities to engage in wellness activities as well as learn about mental health resources on campus. Peer listeners will be trained by counseling services staff and provide peer support through active listening and referrals to other services, if needed.

“This will really fill a gap for our students,” says Ellis-Toddington. “I see it as a prevention strategy in that students who may not be willing to come forward to talk with counsellors, maybe they will reach out if it’s a peer they can connect with. Our listeners will be trained to talk with them and if they need further support, they can get the help they need.”

Students who participate as wellness ambassadors will earn valuable training and also receive credit on their My Experience Transcript (MET).

Those looking to support the Student Wellness Ambassador Program can do so on the [SWAP web page](#).

Attached Photo: Former U of L Chancellor Janice Varzari and husband Glenn Varzari.

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