Dear friends and supporters of Wolverine Support Network,

Hello! Thank you so much for your interest in Wolverine Support Network (WSN) and our 2019-2020 year in review. We are excited to share this report, which outlines WSN’s growth, learning, and accomplishments in the past academic year. WSN continues to flourish as a community that University of Michigan students call “the best part of the week”, “refreshingly open and honest” and, simply, “home”. We strive to create an inclusive atmosphere through our 30+ weekly peer-to-peer groups, as well as open community-building events.

Our group members and leadership team are helping to build a community where vulnerability is normalized and empathy is celebrated. Together, we prioritize self-care and care for our fellow Wolverines. We assert that mental and emotional health deserves a place in our conception of what a ‘successful’ student looks like. Through our programming, we work to enable authentic relationship-building and support students in their well-being journey.

None of WSN’s success would be possible without the support from University of Michigan’s Counseling and Psychological Services, Diane Orley and Linda Aikens, and all the past director teams. These individuals and groups have helped WSN become the strong and purpose-driven organization it is today. We would also like to thank our donors for their continued support as we work to destigmatize mental health, and provide our cost-free resource to the University of Michigan student body. Lastly, we want to thank the passionate and talented 2019-2020 director team for their invaluable contributions this year.

All this said, our work scratches the surface and the journey continues. We are determined to continuously improve and work towards a campus community where every student feels supported, included, and accepted for who they are. Thank you for being on this journey with us, and celebrating our milestones along the way.

WSN love,

Hannah Connors, WSN Executive Director
Todd Sevig, Ph.D., Director of U-M Counseling and Psychological Services
Luke Henke, Psy.D., Coordinator of Peer Initiatives, U-M Counseling and Psychological Services
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Special Acknowledgements

Note from Hannah

I would like to start by thanking all of the University of Michigan students and alumni that I have had the pleasure of meeting through WSN. Your compassion, humor, and friendship have made this work infinitely more joyful and meaningful. My involvement with WSN has been the most transformative part of my college experience, and I am so grateful to all our supporters who make this work possible. Specifically, I want to thank our advisors at U-M Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)—Todd Sevig, Director of CAPS, and Luke Henke, Coordinator of Peer Initiatives. Finally, a big thank you to everyone involved with WSN’s leadership team this past year, including my fellow directors, our group leaders, and our amazing Organizing Team. You all inspire me everyday and have been integral to WSN’s mission.

Note from Luke

I would like to offer my deepest gratitude to WSN’s current leaders and directors for their passion, dedication, and love for their community. I would also like to thank our past members, leaders, and directors for providing the foundation and opportunities for growth that have allowed for our success. Thank you to each and every one of you for all that you do to provide support to your fellow students. While this year was similar to past years in WSN’s dedication to building community and destigmatizing mental health concerns, the interruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic required increased flexibility and creativity to find the balance between providing support and keeping our community safe. Not surprisingly, our wonderful Executive Director Hannah Connors and her director team were more than up to the task, transitioning to virtual meetings, reorganizing training events, and completing next year’s recruitment on the fly. This worldwide event and the disruption it caused brought out the best in WSN: commitment to community. In short, life happened and WSN was there for U of M. I am grateful that I get to be part of WSN and I am excited to see what next year brings!

Dr Luke Henke, Coordinator of Peer Initiatives and Staff Psychologist, U of M CAPS
WSN’s History and Mission

Wolverine Support Network (WSN) was founded by a passionate group of students who recognized the social stigmas, financial burdens, and timing inconveniences associated with discussing student mental health and well-being. Ignited by the loss of two fellow students at the University of Michigan to suicide, incumbent Student Body President Bobby Dishell, Student-Athlete Advisory Committee President Cooper Charlton, Emily Lustig, and Elizabeth Pratt developed a resolution in the fall of 2014.

Simply put, their solution was honest and open peer-to-peer dialogue. Parents Diane Orley and Linda Aikens, in partnership with the George Orley Mental Wellness Initiative, assisted the founding leadership team in moving WSN from an idea to a reality. Moreover, this model of peer support groups on the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor campus would not have been possible without the hard work and support of our University’s Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) Director, Todd Sevig.

WSN’s first weekly groups were held in winter 2015. Since its inception, WSN has aimed to be the first sustainable peer-to-peer support model on a college campus. The model—inspired by a peer support program at Harvard-Westlake High School in Los Angeles, California—has been retrofitted for a collegiate environment.

Our mission is to empower University of Michigan students to create a resilient community and to support each other’s identity, mental well-being, and day-to-day lives through weekly, peer-facilitated groups, and community-building events. We are driven by values like inclusivity, empathy, mindfulness, courage, accountability, and confidentiality.
WSN’s Structure and the Peer-to-Peer Model

WSN was founded on the idea that, when struggling, students often turn to their peers before anyone else. While various other mental health-related resources exist, research shows that undergraduate students provide the most potent source of influence on fellow undergraduate students’ affective and cognitive growth and development during college (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1993; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1999). Further, research indicates that peer-support programs are helpful when focused on assisting students with social/emotional or academic problems (McGannon, Carey, & Dimmitt, 2005; Whiston & Sexton, 1998). Thus, the model capitalizes on peer-to-peer influence with the goal to inspire increased self-awareness, vulnerability, and resilient, high-quality connections.

Today, WSN is housed as a Sponsored Student Organization (SSO) under U-M Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). CAPS facilitates our leader training through their involvement in our annual leader retreat, and assisting with our weekly leader meetings. Additionally, CAPS assists in the growth and development of WSN through student referrals, advertising, and director team guidance. While WSN’s training and development efforts are supported by CAPS, WSN is a peer effort that is run by and designed for students.

Programming

WSN offers students a community in two ways: peer-facilitated weekly groups, and community-building events.

Weekly peer-to-peer support groups: Our weekly groups comprise the core of WSN. The various groups are organized by member/leader availability and meet in the same time and location each week. The groups are entirely confidential and inclusive spaces where students are allowed and encouraged to share anything they wish. It can be something seemingly small such as doing well on a test, to something seemingly large like the loss of a loved one. This is an environment for thoughtful, empathetic, inclusive, and completely safe discussion, with leaders who have been trained and educated on how to successfully facilitate such conversations. We also offer a weekly “drop-in” group which requires no sign up or RSVP.

Community-building events: Our community-building events are open to the entire WSN community, as well as the university’s student body at large. These events are deliberately sober environments, and some of our favorite events to hold include game nights, trivia, and potlucks. Additionally, these activities bring members of WSN together and are a great way for students to build high-quality connections outside of their individual weekly groups. Our structure for community-building events has shifted from our original ‘Kickback Friday’ model, and you can learn more about this transition in the Internal Growth and Development section.
Student Participation

Students are able to participate in WSN in four different ways: group member, group leader, Organizing Team, and director.

Group Members

Members are all students who sign up for a weekly group. The members of WSN span all class standings, including undergraduate and graduate, and individual schools within our university. WSN values the diversity of campus and strives to be an accessible space, with inclusive dialogue for all University of Michigan students.

Group Leaders

WSN leaders facilitate weekly group. Leaders are selected following application and interview processes each semester. All WSN leaders partake in training that is conducted by the University of Michigan’s CAPS, University Health Services’ Wolverine Wellness, Intergroup Relations (IGR), Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center (SAPAC), and various other campus resources.

Organizing Team

Piloted for the first time this winter, WSN’s Organizing Team is made up of group members, group leaders, and other U-M students otherwise not affiliated with WSN. It is open to all U-M students, and consists of several committees overseen by our directors. The Organizing Team works on event planning, marketing, and other operational tasks. For more information about the Organizing Team’s pilot semester, see the Internal Growth and Development section.

Directors

WSN directors oversee the operations and development of the organization, and have all been group leaders in the past. These positions, as well as the individuals that held them in 2019-2020, include:

- Executive Director: Hannah Connors
- Director of Business Development: Jackson Gray
- Director of Program Development: Simran Jagirdar
- Director of Leader Development: Betsy Saylor
- Director of Marketing and Outreach: Evelyn Wallace
- Director of Operations: Liadan Solomon
- Assistant Director of Development: Tyler Atkinson
Weekly Groups Data

Data can be a great way to illuminate the work that WSN is doing on campus and can provide leadership with valuable insights about areas for future growth. Each semester, we collect data from our group members at multiple points. Firstly, we administer a pre-survey to all members during the first week of groups, which allows us to gauge the member population about multiple indicators before their group experience really begins. Then, at the conclusion of groups for the semester, we administer a post-group survey that assesses member growth since the beginning of the semesters’ groups and solicits feedback about ways WSN can improve.

In the Fall 2019 Semester, our membership was 12.6% Graduate Students and 87.4% Undergraduate Students. Below is a breakdown of expected graduation dates for our membership in Fall 2019. As shown, the distribution across grades is pretty even, although it appears that Sophomores and Juniors are more heavily represented. It is important to note that our presence among Freshmen is not strong, and this is definitely an area for future growth of the organization. In terms of gender, WSN is majority women. Reaching more men and students of all other genders is another future goal to diversify the organization.

*We have since changed our gender question on the sign-up form to a “select all that apply” question, with response options of man, woman, transgender, non-binary, and other, after receiving feedback from the U-M Spectrum Center.
For Fall 2019, we analyzed the attendance data only for the first eight out of ten groups, as we did not have enough consistent data collection for the final two weeks to include it in the analysis. Based on this, the below bar chart demonstrates the percentage of member attendance by week in the group cycle. As shown, attendance at the first group of the semester is the highest we see, but overall attendance pretty solidly remains at or above 30% of our membership for the duration of the semester. Exploring why many students sign up for a group but never attend, or why students only attend a few times, continues to be a priority for WSN.

As a result of their experience in WSN Weekly Group in Fall 2019...

- 88.46% of students feel like they are better able to listen to others more meaningfully
- 84.81% of students feel like they are better able to understand and empathize with those around them
- 82.05% of students feel like they are better able to share personal or sensitive topics with others

Number of Members
Winter 2020: 482 members placed into groups
Fall 2019: 470 members placed into groups
* In the past, we have used sign-ups as a metric of our reach on campus; however, we feel that members placed into groups is a better representation of our reach due to the submission of incomplete sign-ups, duplicate sign-ups, etc.
**What motivates members to attend group?**

From this data, it is clear that members choose to attend weekly group for a host of different reasons, most notably for the positive environment + energy, to build connections with peers, to engage openly and honestly with others, and to care for their mental health.

When asked “What’s the biggest or most meaningful impact for you from WSN?”, members shared the following:

- “8 new friends. Laughter and support when I really needed it.”
- “Being in a space where it’s okay to be vulnerable and share unconventional parts about myself and my feelings.”
- “Leave group feeling great every time, even if my day leading up to it was not good”
- “It was not what I expected, because it was SO MUCH better than what I expected... They are all amazing people that have given me a piece of their heart.”
- “WSN has helped me see that my voice is valued when I had previously not felt that way.”
- “I loved getting to know other grad students! It felt like a community outside of my every day classes and cohort.”
Leader Training

Leader training during the 2019-2020 year occurred at an off-campus fall retreat, an on-campus winter retreat, and leader meetings each Monday night.

Our off-campus, overnight fall retreat took place in September at Tamarack Camps’ main location in Ortonville, MI, a 1 hour drive from Ann Arbor. Fall retreat contains two main pieces to kick off our year. One portion involves basic training for all WSN leaders, while the other focuses on community building and creating a sense of connection to the mission and values of WSN. In small groups and as one large group, leaders learned and discussed facilitation skills such as empathy, motivational interviewing, and validation. They had the opportunity to discuss scenarios that occur frequently in WSN groups, and new leaders got to experience being in the facilitator role with “mock groups”. The leaders also went through the Leader Guidebook, which details WSN’s history and mission, and outlines leader responsibilities. For the bonding portion of retreat, leaders participated in activities to connect their personal values to the mission of WSN, and team building activities to build and strengthen their relationships with each other. The bonding and relationship building portion of retreat also serves as a model for leaders cultivating connections in their own weekly groups.

Our winter retreat in January contained elements and goals similar to fall retreat, but happened during a seven-hour day in the Michigan League. The first half of the retreat was exclusively for our new winter leaders and directors. Everyone participated in icebreakers and “getting to know you” activities. This was followed by “Question, Persuade, Refer”, a suicide prevention training led by our CAPS advisor. Completing this training is a requirement for all leaders before they can lead group. When our veteran leaders arrived, we did team building activities as a full group, followed by discussions about facilitation skills and common group scenarios. We ended with mock groups. This represented the first year that returning leaders participated in winter retreat and it proved to be helpful in creating a unified WSN leader community.
Leader meetings throughout the year remained on Monday evenings from 6:00-7:15pm. Different mental health professionals and other relevant experts at the University of Michigan joined our leader meetings to enrich our leaders with different workshops and training relevant to WSN groups. The professionals that presented at our leader meetings came from departments such as our counseling center, Sexual Assault and Prevention Awareness Center, wellness center, and more. Topics that we explored as a group included general facilitation skills, diversity and inclusion, body image, gender identity and sexuality, grief/loss, and resilience. This holistic training approach recognizes mental health as multi-faceted. Leader meetings not only serve as a space where leaders continue to learn topics that could come up in their support group, but also as a way to debrief what happens in group, how to handle difficult situations, participate in discussions with other leaders about group dynamics, and continue to build bonds within the WSN leader community.
Financial Report

Each year, WSN strives to maintain our model of providing entirely cost-free offerings and opportunities for all students. In order to do so, we rely on generous donors who believe in our mission and the work that we do each day. These funds go towards improving our organization as a whole including student leader training, weekly group expenses, community and campus outreach, and more. Here is a breakdown of our budget for the 2019-2020 school year:

Giving Blueday

WSN relies on extensive outreach and fundraising efforts to operate. At the University of Michigan, Giving Blueday is an annual event that allows student organizations to do a majority of their fundraising in one day each year. After months of planning and preparation, WSN enjoyed our most successful Giving Blueday yet! Due to our incredibly supportive community, our final Giving Blueday 2019 statistics are as follows:

Annual Improvement from 2018: $6,460.13 more raised, or a 68.4% annual increase
Raw Donations: $15,067.86
Funds Matched by the University: $3,374.95
Giving Blueday Challenge Earnings: $2,000.00
Total Funds Raised: $20,442.81
Number of Donors: 197

The WSN director team is grateful to everyone who contributed gifts this year. We truly could not continue to operate and expand without these generous donations. We would like to extend our special gratitude to The Norman and Sadie Lee Foundation, as well as Linda and Bruce Aikens for their donations to WSN this year. It takes a community to allow us to reach our goals, and we are thankful to all of our supporters!
Internal Growth and Development

Graduate Student Groups

While WSN does not have “themed” groups or groups for people of specific identities, the one place we do stratify is between undergraduate and graduate students. Because of the major differences between the experiences of undergrad and grad students, we offer separate groups for these two populations. Thanks to increased outreach and recruitment of more grad leaders and members, in 2019-2020 WSN saw our number of grad student groups increase from 1 to 4. We also offered a weekly grad student specific drop-in group for the first time.

The growth of our grad student program necessitates some adjustments that the organization will examine in the coming years. Specifically, there are unique challenges grad students face that most undergrad students do not, such as issues surrounding starting a family or returning back to school after years in the workforce. With this content often coming up in grad groups, WSN is exploring offering some specific leader trainings exclusively for our grad student leaders. Additionally, the varying schedules of grad students has sparked suggestions that we begin offering morning or lunchtime groups in addition to our normal evening times.

Community-Building Events

Since its founding, WSN has used a model for community-building events called “Kickback Fridays”, in which we planned bi-weekly Friday events open to the entire U-M community. The goal was to provide a sober environment for connection, stress relief, and fun. Upon reflecting this year, we realized some of our events were actually meeting completely different goals. Some of these events were almost entirely attended by group leaders, serving as bonding time for this community of people. One of our Fall 2019 events, an event on a front lawn with puppies (Paws for Relaxation), was extremely well-attended by students who had no connection to WSN, thus serving our marketing and outreach goals.

With this knowledge, we pivoted in Winter 2020 from our traditional model. We no longer stick to a biweekly schedule, nor do we call our events “Kickback Fridays”, as we are not confined to Fridays. We also work to plan different types of events with more specific goals, including:

1. **Leadership bonding events.** These events are specifically for our directors, group leaders, and Organizing Team members to bond and get to know each other more. Spending time together as a community outside our training or task-oriented meetings is extremely important to cultivate a sense of belonging within the organization. Examples of some bonding events include an Oscars watch party, potluck, and speed friend-dating.

2. **Open community-building events.** These events are most similar to our traditional Kickback Fridays. Open to all WSN group leaders, group members, Organizing Team
members, and all U-M students, they aim to provide a fun environment to make friends and relieve stress. By holding these less frequently than our original biweekly schedule, we hope to not oversaturate people’s calendars/inboxes and be more intentional in our planning. We work to do interactive, activity-based events, like trivia and game nights.

3. **Educational or awareness-raising events.** These events serve as an opportunity to educate the U-M student body on mental health issues, decrease stigma, and partner with other campus organizations. This semester, in collaboration with Mindful Michigan and 180 Degrees Consulting, we held an awareness event on Seasonal Affective Disorder.

4. **Marketing and outreach events.** The goal of these events is to spread the word about WSN and reach people in spaces where they already are. As previously mentioned, our puppies event attracted many students who were unaffiliated with WSN. This semester, we piloted a biweekly ‘Bagel Buddies’ event in the undergraduate library (Ugli), where we gave away free bagels in exchange for people learning about WSN and following us on Instagram.

**Organizing Team**

In the fall, we reflected on some problems with our organizational structure that we hoped to address. The first major issue was that the majority of WSN’s logistical work and planning was centralized to a very small group of people: the 7-person director team. The channels we had for group leaders to get more involved with this side of the work were largely informal and unstructured. The second issue we saw was that we reject dozens of students every semester who want to be group leaders. This felt antithetical to our values of inclusion and accessibility, and we wanted to offer another, no-barrier way for students to get more involved with WSN.

Thus, the Organizing Team was piloted in Winter 2020. While we required students to fill out an application, everyone was accepted, and placed on either their first or second choice committee. The Organizing Team is open to WSN group leaders, group members, and students not affiliated with WSN. We met on Mondays 7:30-8:30 pm, following our leader training meetings.

The Organizing Team is split into four committees, each headed by 1 or 2 of the directors:

1. **Community-Building and Organizational Culture.** Focused on planning leadership bonding and open community-building events, designing meetings to foster more connection, planning little morale boosts, and general brainstorming on culture.

2. **Marketing and Outreach.** Focused on spreading WSN’s brand on campus through social media, outreach events, and building relationships with other student groups.

3. **Community and Campus Partnerships.** Focused on partnering with other community and campus groups to educate students on mental health issues, decrease stigma, and serve the campus community through other avenues besides our weekly groups.

4. **TechOps.** Focused on WSN’s technology; specifically this semester, focused on a complete website redesign.
Other Accomplishments

Some of our other accomplishments from the 2019-2020 academic year include:

- Presenting at the Student Mental Health Summit in Lansing
- Streamlining the group member placement process through a computer program designed by friends of WSN, Malcolm Maturen and Evan Jonokuchi
- Developing more training resources and documentation for incoming directors

COVID-19

No one could have predicted how this academic year would end, with COVID-19 disrupting our campus community and the world at large. While the transition to online classes and the subsequent quarantine has been challenging for everyone, WSN was able to quickly pivot our programming to a virtual format and continue providing support during this unique time.

On March 11, 2020, before the University of Michigan announced classes were moving online, our director team sent emails to both leaders and members, explaining that all groups would be offering a virtual option. We left it up to leaders whether they would like to continue to meet in person while offering a remote option to any members who would prefer that, or meet entirely remotely. By March 19, 2020, all of our groups had transitioned to entirely virtual, including our weekly drop-in groups.

We also transitioned our leader training meetings to a virtual format, and scrapped our original training topics, electing instead to focus on what was most salient during this time. This included meetings on virtual group facilitation best practices, COVID-19 related anxiety, and how to set boundaries and practice healthy relationship skills with families and roommates. Our leaders took this transition in stride, making our Monday evenings joyful and productive even though we could not congregate together in person.

In addition to moving our weekly groups online, we also planned a few virtual community-building events, including a guided meditation and journaling session, a guided discussion on Elizabeth Gilbert’s TED Talk about creativity, and a bonding event for leaders/Organizing Team members based on the card game “We’re Not Really Strangers”. In the face of this challenging time, our group leaders and Organizing Team showed immense creativity and resilience. They stayed committed to WSN’s mission and figured out new ways to work towards it, given the circumstances.

Though the end of the semester was challenging in a variety of ways, WSN’s commitment to supporting students on their well-being journey remained intact. Mental health is just as
important as physical health, even in a pandemic, and we are honored to continue this important work even when it has to be re-imagined.

**Future Directions + Thank You!**

As WSN continues to grow and expand, we are excited to continue this work and increase our reach. We are eager to increase diversity within our leadership and membership, expand the grad student program, explore new methods of communicating with group members once they sign up, build out an alumni network, and more! This is only the beginning for the WSN and our mission to destigmatize mental health on University of Michigan’s campus.

Thank you so much for your interest in WSN and for all your support. To keep up with us in the future, make sure to check out our website at [http://umichwsn.org](http://umichwsn.org), or shoot us an email at WSNdirectors@umich.edu. Be well!