

# **Post-Secondary Periods: Access to Menstrual Supplies on Campus and Impacts on Students**

Research Report

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### About the Authors

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### About the Douglas College Menstrual Research Group (MRG)

The Douglas College Menstrual Research Group was founded in 2020 to foster research into the social and political aspects of menstruation in Canada. To learn more, visit our website: <https://www.douglascollege.ca/about-douglas/learn-about-douglas/research-college/research-groups/douglas-college-menstrual>

### **Executive Summary**

The present study, one of the first of its kind in Canada, documents existing access to menstrual supplies at a Canadian mid-size post-secondary institution, and the impacts on students' capacity to pursue an education. The study consists of a complete audit of all campuses and near-campus facilities in the Fall of 2019, and a survey of 370 students between March 2020 and July 2020.

Study results show that existing availability on campus of disposable single-use tampons and pads is inadequate, problematic, and expensive. Dispensers do not work or cannot be found, campus stores charge high prices and overtax the items, and it is a long walk off-campus to buy from the nearest store. Study participants reported unexpected periods and menstrual spills, leaks, and stains on a frequent basis. Students report resorting to make-shift, ad hoc solutions in order to remain on campus, such as using toilet paper as a temporary pad. Some participants reported academic penalties, missing class, or leaving campus to go home due to lack of menstrual supplies. Overall, existing menstrual supplies on campus reflect out-dated societal expectations for menstruation to be managed at the individual level. Poor availability of menstrual supplies on campus is a barrier to full participation in post-secondary education and campus life.

Study results indicate the need for post-secondary institutions to classify menstrual products as 'essential' items to be included in restrooms, in line with toilet paper, hand soap, hand-drying facilities, sanitary bins, and urinals. This approach would equalize the support and convenience of restrooms for both sexes and eliminate the need for students to take money or their own supplies into the restroom. Providing support for menstruation on campus will help all people who menstruate as they pursue higher learning.

### **Summary of Results**

#### ***Campus Audit Results***

- There are 36 menstrual product dispensers college-wide, most located in women's restrooms;
- Campus vending dispensers charge \$0.25 to \$0.50 for a tampon or pad;
- 28% of campus vending dispensers malfunctioned, either empty or broken;
- 61% of campus universal and gender-neutral restrooms have no menstrual product dispenser;
- Campus bookstores sell menstrual products for \$5.99 per box of 10 and improperly charge 5% GST and 7% PST, bringing the cost of these tax-exempt items to 67-cents each;
- The closest off-campus locations to buy menstrual supplies require students to walk (one-way) 0.34 km and 1.34 km respectively, then return to campus.

#### ***Student Survey Results***

Study participants reported the following:

- 68.2% have started their period unexpectedly while on campus;
- 62.8% experienced a spill, leak, stain or overflow of menstrual blood while on campus;
- 67.0% have had to leave class while it was in session to manage menstrual flow;
- 46.0% have been late for class in order to manage menstrual flow;
- 49.0% missed, had to leave, or arrived late for class because they did not have the menstrual products they needed readily available;
- When asked how they manage unexpected periods or menstrual leaks while on campus:
  - 67.2% used toilet paper as a make-shift pad;

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- 46.7% asked a friend for menstrual product;
- 17.3% went home and stayed home;
- 15.2% left campus to purchase a menstrual product;
- Study participants missed exams, assignments, lectures due to lack of menstrual supplies;
- Study participants shared frustrations about empty dispensers, the high cost of menstrual products, and the lack of tampons and pads in restrooms.

### ***Highlights from open-ended questions:***

Study participants used the survey to share personal experiences, below are two instances that reflect common themes:

I once got my period on campus and didn't have a pad. I checked the dispenser and they were empty. Went to the bookstore and found that they were out of stock and I didn't know that the student union carried pads. I also didn't have anyone of my friends around me for me to ask them so I had to leave campus and drive to the Save on Foods near by and pick up a pack. Because of that I was late for class and since attendance was mandatory I was marked away because I was late!

I have experienced several occasions when I have unexpectedly started bleeding in class and did not have menstrual products with me. At those times when I am not prepared to handle my period, I have felt distress and embarrassment. I do not have friends to lend me products during class time and can rarely afford to purchase products on my own (I still rely on my mom). It is during these times when I truly feel the most oppressed by society. Menstrual products should not feel like a luxury and all women should receive equal access at all times. Sometimes my flow is so heavy I have to leave lectures every half hour, which can be distracting for myself and everyone around me, but I feel like I shouldn't have to miss out on learning because of menstruation! Ideally, I would like to see free menstrual products in all public washrooms with options that are safe and effective (scented products should not be allowed, and pads should be comfortably wearable).

### **Main Findings**

- Existing restrooms on campus do not adequately support the management of menstruation;
- Existing access to menstrual supplies on campus negatively impacts students and disrupts educational pursuit and participation in campus activities.

### **Key Recommendations**

- Ensure all women's, universal and gender-neutral campus restrooms contain a coin-free dispenser of tampons and pads;
- Replace existing coin-operated machines with coin-free push-button or no-touch dispensers, or modify existing machines to dispense for free;
- Monitor product levels and dispenser functionality as part of regular custodial maintenance duties;
- Ensure all men's restrooms have a coin-free dispenser and that at least one toilet stall has a sanitary disposal bin in order to support trans-men and non-binary menstruators;
- Revise institutional policy governing restroom facilities to reflect these changes and ensure support for menstruation on campus;
- Ensure menstrual products sold in campus stores are tax-exempt.

### Preamble

The primary intended audience for this report is post-secondary administrators, including senior management, campus facilities, student services, and students' unions, as well as students, staff, and faculty. The findings are also relevant to policy makers at all levels and to the general public. Subsequent publications intended for a scholarly audience will provide more in-depth analyses of data and fuller discussions of findings with reference to scholarly literature and theoretical frameworks.

This report includes a brief overview of the context and literature that informed the study in Section 2 and an abbreviated version of methodology in Section 3. Sections 4 and 5 present and discuss the main findings. The report concludes with sections on study limitations, suggestions for future research, summary, and concluding remarks. Recommendations for all post-secondary institutions are provided in **Section 8**. Readers most interested in the overall study findings are encouraged to refer to the **Executive Summary** or the summary in **Section 9**, and/or jump directly to **Sections 4 and 5**.

### 1. Introduction

On post-secondary campuses across Canada, menstruation is a normal biological process regularly experienced by women, trans-men, and some non-binary individuals. Within global policy, free access to menstrual supplies<sup>1</sup> in public spaces has been identified as integral to menstrual flow management in a safe, reliable and non-stigmatized manner (Weiss-Wolf, 2017). Challenges related to menstrual flow management affect the ability of girls and women to fully participate in activities outside the home, such as work, education, business, and entertainment. There is a growing body of research that examines access to menstrual supplies for students in the K-12 system (Kuhlmann et al. 2020; Kuhlmann et al. 2019), and policy changes have been enacted in several Canadian jurisdictions. However, less is known about the post-secondary context and the impact of existing availability of menstrual supplies on post-secondary students who menstruate.

At present, most Canadian post-secondary institutions treat period supplies as a commodity for sale. Research suggests that arbitrary barriers to menstrual supplies reinforces menstrual shame and stigma and echoes societal expectations for individual management of menstruation. As a result, students' unions, activists, and advocates have begun campaigning for free period supplies in restrooms on post-secondary campuses.

The present study documents the availability of menstrual supplies at a typical post-secondary institution in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia and assesses the impacts of this availability on students' ability to pursue their studies and engage in campus activities. This research supports informed change at local and national levels. More broadly, this research identifies menstruation and adequate support for menstrual health management as important factors in the health and well-being of girls, women, and all people who menstruate.

### 2. Context and Literature Review

Menstruation, or 'having a period', is a normal, healthy, biological process experienced by girls, women, and some trans-men and non-binary individuals. During menstruation, the uterus sheds its

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, menstrual supplies/products and period supplies/products refers to single-use, disposable tampons and pads.

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blood-rich lining, which then flows from the vagina by gravity. Periods typically begin between age 12 and 13 but can start as early as age 8 and continue until approximately age 55 (Hillard, 2002), sometimes up to 10 years later. The average menstrual cycle spans 28 days, including 5-7 days of bleeding. Average is a mis-leading term because there is significant variability in cycle length, flow strength, and duration throughout the various stages of life. Menstrual cycle lengths can range from 20-35 days or more and include as little as 3 days or more than 8 days of continuous bleeding. Nonetheless, during a typical 28-day cycle, a woman will bleed or pass blood through the vagina 20-25% of the time, 24-hours per day. Put another way, on any given day, 1 out of every 4 or 5 women will be menstruating at any one time.

Menstrual blood is captured inside the vagina with disposable tampons or re-useable menstrual cups, or outside the vagina with disposable or re-useable absorbent pads placed in underwear, or with rags, paper towel, toilet paper or other materials on-hand.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, there is no indicator to tell when menstrual flow will begin, no bladder to hold the blood, and no warning when menstrual products are full. This means that leaks and menstrual emergencies or surprises are the norm rather than the exception.

In Canadian society menstruation is treated as a burden for the individual to manage at their own expense and trouble (Smith et al., 2020; Smith et al., *forthcoming*). Menstruation and menstrual supplies are shrouded in shame (Kissling, 2006; Newton, 2016). Monthly blood flow is expected to be dealt with quietly and privately so that it does not interrupt the functioning of ‘everyday life’ (Sommer et al., 2015). Treating menstruation as an individual problem places an unfair burden on people who menstruate. It impedes access to menstrual supplies and creates unnecessary delays in changing out supplies, e.g. wearing tampons and pads longer than advised in order to stretch out their supplies. These delays can have severe and lasting impacts on short and long-term reproductive health and safety.

According to Kuhlmann et al. (2019) adequate menstrual hygiene can be defined as follows,

... access to clean sanitary materials that can be changed in private as often as necessary, access to soap and water for washing, and access to a place for the hygienic disposal of used sanitary materials or washing, if reusable pads are used (p. 238).

In Canadian public places, period supplies are commonly kept behind pay walls, if available at all, and strongly held cultural and social norms prevent people from requesting what they need. Policy changes designed to support menstruation should consider adequate menstrual hygiene as well as the needs of all population groups impacted. Within this broader context, barrier-free access to period supplies is an important first step. Unfortunately, Canadian regulations are silent on the subject of menstruation. This silence is reinforced at the level of operations, which leads to negative impacts. In the education system this includes negative impacts on students’ physical and emotional well-being, and negative impacts on attendance and participation (Kuhlmann et al., 2020).

In Canada, publicly accessible restrooms, including campus restrooms, are required by law to provide toilet paper, soap, wash water, and hand-drying facilities (Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations, Part IX Sanitation; British Columbia Occupational Health and Safety

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<sup>2</sup> New technologies for capturing menstrual blood include period underwear, which are re-useable underpants with built-in pads. Menstrual suppression using oral contraception is another way to manage menstruation. These modes are not the focus of this study but are touched on briefly in the discussion.

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Regulation Section 4.85; other provincial health and safety codes; federal and provincial Building Codes). All of these regulations also specify urinals for the men's restrooms and sanitary disposal bins for the women's restrooms. There are no requirements for menstrual supplies. As a result, the majority of women's restrooms do not have tampons and pads, and the few that do keep them behind paywalls in locked vending machines. The end result on campus and elsewhere, is male restrooms that provide free-of-charge everything men need to conveniently manage their normal bodily functions, and women's restrooms that do not. In fact, female students need to bring their own supplies and money to the restroom to manage their everyday biological functions.

On Feb 26, 2019, New Westminster Board of Education became the first public school district in Canada to adopt a policy of placing free menstrual supplies in school bathrooms, instead of at the school office where students had to ask an adult for them (CBC News, Feb 27, 2019). Six weeks later, all BC public schools were mandated to do the same (BC Government News, April 5, 2019; Sept 6, 2019). By May 2019, the federal government started the process to amend the Canada Health Act to include free period supplies in federally regulated workplace restrooms, a move that will affect federal buildings, RCMP offices, banks, airports, and telecommunications offices across the country (CTV News, May 2019). By February and March 2020, City of Vancouver initiated a study to put free menstrual supplies in publicly accessible restrooms in civic buildings, parks, and community centres. These policy changes were initiated in part by Dr Tribe and amplified by the work of other individuals and organizations like United Way of the Lower Mainland's Period Promise.

Wide media coverage of these advancements has led to other Canadian jurisdictions following suit. Victoria, Edmonton, Toronto, Montreal, Halifax, and many British Columbia municipalities are just a few of the places that have recently approved policies or started pilot projects to put free menstrual supplies in restrooms. It is notable that these pro-period policies have been adopted based on people's lived experience and largely in the absence of significant research into the social and political aspects of menstruation.

In the 2019-2020 academic year, approximately 52% of post-secondary students were female<sup>3</sup>; therefore, menstruation is a regularly occurring experience for a significant portion of the post-secondary student population. In fact, we can assume that on any given day, approximately 15-20% of female students will be menstruating on a typical post-secondary campus. Some Canadian post-secondary students' unions and student interest groups have completed informal audits of period supplies on campus. Many Canadian campuses now provide free period supplies in restrooms or have started pilot projects, including Langara College, Camosun College, University of Victoria, Vancouver Island University, University of Northern British Columbia, Centennial College, Queen's University, University of Alberta, McGill University and others. Many British Columbia post-secondary student unions have signed on to the United Way's Period Promise campaign (United Way of the Lower Mainland, 2021a; Douglas Students' Union, 2020). Yet, there have been no scholarly studies that document menstrual supplies at post-secondary institutions in Canada.<sup>4</sup> Our research addresses this gap by documenting existing access to period supplies at a typical British Columbian post-secondary institution and assessing the impacts on students.

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<sup>3</sup> The BC Government currently collects data on student populations using the following categories: female, male, other (Government of British Columbia, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> As we write this report, we are aware that there are several groups engaged in similar studies across North America and in other parts of the World. We look forward to engaging with these groups and sharing results to build a fuller understanding of the extent of menstrual inequity on campus and elsewhere.



### 3. Research Objectives and Methodology

The present study employed a mixed-methods approach to document fixed physical structures, as well as student experiences managing menstrual flow on a post-secondary campus. Key research questions included:

- *Where and how can one get period supplies on campus and in surrounding areas?*
- *Are there barriers to existing access and what are they? (e.g. broken machines, distance, time, etc.)*
- *Does existing access interrupt educational pursuits? (e.g. attending classes, taking exams, delivering presentations, etc.)*
- *Does existing access interrupt students' capacity to participate fully in campus life? (e.g. extra-curricular activities, etc.)*

The study contained two main components:

- A comprehensive **audit** of the entire post-secondary institution and surrounding neighbourhoods to determine the availability of menstrual supplies, and;
- A **survey** (with closed and open-ended questions) of students to assess how they managed menstruation on campus, and if lack of menstrual supplies impacted their educational pursuits and participation in campus activities.

#### 3.1 Audit

The campus chosen for the study is a mid-size post-secondary institution in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. The audit involved mapping existing period supplies on campus, including all restrooms and other campus locations such as stores and student union facilities. In addition, the surrounding campus neighbourhood was mapped to identify how far students must travel to buy menstrual supplies if none were available on campus.

For the restroom audit, an audit document was designed to record the supplies in each restroom and the general condition of physical structures that support menstrual management (see **Appendix A: Restroom Audit Form**). Most fields were worded to receive 'yes' or 'no' answers with a column for comments. A key feature of the restroom audit sheet was to count the number of menstrual supply dispensers, test their functionality, determine what supplies were dispensed, and the cost. The cost for the audit was paid out of pocket by Dr. Tribe who provided the money to test the menstrual product vending dispensers. Additional restroom features were observed, such as the presence and condition of sanitary disposal bins. Floor plans of campus buildings helped ensure all restrooms were examined in the audit.

Each restroom was visited by two Student Research Assistants equipped with: clipboard, pens, camera (or cell-phone), four rolls of quarters (\$40), a plastic bag to hold the vended menstrual supplies, and campus floor-plans. One person recorded data onto the audit sheet, the other tested the menstrual product dispensers to determine if they worked and what products were vended. Each dispenser or basket of menstrual products was photographed. Other notable features in the restrooms were also recorded and photographed, i.e. overflowing sanitary disposal bins. Audits of the men's restrooms were performed by a male research assistant. The time of the day and week were picked to coincide with average working conditions and usage of the facilities, i.e. mid-day, mid-week, mid-semester.

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The audit also documented the availability and cost of menstrual supplies at other campus locations such as the students' union, bookstores, and other campus stores. In addition, our team ventured into the near-campus neighbourhood to identify the closest stores with menstrual supplies in order to determine how far a student must travel to procure supplies if none were available on campus.

### 3.2 *Survey*

A survey with closed and open-ended questions was developed to complement the audit. The survey explored student experiences of menstruating on campus as it related to accessing menstrual supplies. The original intent was to survey faculty and staff in addition to students; however, time constraints necessitated a more focused study. Students comprise the largest population on campus and the most frequent users of restrooms, therefore we concentrated on this population.

Survey questions focused specifically on access to period products. For example, the study asked about leaks, stains, and overflows but did not ask about menstrual cramps, which are outside the scope of this study. Study participants did raise some issues around menstrual cramps and general discomfort, something touched on briefly in the discussion section. Survey questions were mostly closed ended. For some open-ended questions, if participants answered yes, they could check as many items as applied and add additional information into the comments box. The complete survey questionnaire can be found in **Appendix B: Period Product Access Survey**.

The survey was reviewed by the Douglas College Board of Ethics. All study participants read and completed an informed consent form to provide free and informed consent. Survey data was collected on Qualtrics between March 2020 and July 2020. To qualify for the survey, participants had to be 18 years or older, currently enrolled as a student at the post-secondary institution or enrolled within the past 5 years, and have menstruated at some point on campus. All participants were self-selected volunteers. Some participants received a 1% course credit as an incentive to complete the survey. Participants were recruited for the study using posters, email, social media posts, and individual class visits.

Survey results were downloaded from Qualtrics as Excel files, then cleaned and tabulated. Qualitative responses were analysed separately from quantitative responses to draw out main themes. Of those who participated, 59 were removed during data cleaning due to data entry errors, invalid responses, or survey ineligibility. This left a total of 370 participants. Not all of these 370 participants responded to every question since participants had the option to skip questions they did not wish to answer.

## 4. **Results**

This section presents the main findings from the audit and survey, including highlights from the open-ended survey responses. For a more concise summary of research results, readers are encouraged to consult the **Executive Summary** or the summary in **Section 9**.

### 4.1 *Audit Results*

The post-secondary institution chosen for this study has two main campuses, a student union building and an annex (C1, C2, SU, Annex). The restroom audit was performed in Fall 2019 over a span of 2 days, one day for each campus area, with each campus-area audit taking 2.5 hours to complete. All men's women's, universal, and gender-neutral restrooms were surveyed. Restrooms

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were audited during the mid-morning or the mid-afternoon, with time slots selected to ensure that the results were representative of a ‘typical’ day’s usage. Table 1 gives audit results by building location.

### 4.1.1 Campus Restrooms

Institution-wide there are 36 menstrual product vending dispensers in 82 restrooms, most located in the women’s restrooms (Table 1). Menstrual vending dispensers are located in 39% of the universal and gender-neutral restrooms. The failure rate of dispensers was 28%, half being empty, the other half broken. There was no dispenser in 61% of universal and gender-neutral restrooms. Four of the universal and gender-neutral restrooms had no sanitary disposal bins, which are required in restrooms used by women according to current regulations. Eighty-three percent of vending dispensers had twist- or pull-knob activation, which can be challenging for some people to operate. The remaining 17% utilized an easier push-button mode of dispensing.

The price for a single tampon or pad in campus restrooms ranged from \$0.25 to \$0.50 and varied within a single building and across campuses (Table 1, Fig. 1, 2). Most Campus C1 restrooms and Annex restrooms with dispensers charged \$0.25 per item. All Campus C2 restrooms and a few Campus C1 restrooms charged \$0.50 per item.

**Table 1**  
**Menstrual Product Dispensers at a Post-Secondary Institution**

	Campus or Building Name				Total	Percent
	C1	C2	SU	Annex		
Number of restrooms	31	31	8	12	82	
Number of women’s (men’s) restrooms	13(13)	12(12)	3(3)	4(4)	32(64)	
Number of universal (gender-neutral) restrooms <sup>5</sup>	5(0)	7(0)	2(0)	0(4)	14(4)	
Number of women’s restrooms with dispensers	13	12	0	4	29	100%
No. of universal & gender-neutral restrooms with menstrual vending dispensers	1	6	0	0	7	38.9% <sup>6</sup>
Number of malfunctioning dispensers	5	4	0	1	10	27.8%
Dispenser cost \$0.50 per tampon or pad	3	18	0	0	21	58.3%
Dispenser cost \$0.25 per tampon or pad	11	0	0	4	15	41.7%
No. of restrooms with basket of free supplies	0	0	4	0	4	
Percentage of all restrooms institution-wide containing a menstrual product vending dispenser						43.9%
Percentage of all restrooms institution-wide available to women that contain a working menstrual product vending dispenser						52.0%

<sup>5</sup> Universal restrooms are single-room, single user, and wheelchair accessible; gender-neutral restrooms are multi-stall, multi-sink, multi-user of both sexes and may or may not be wheelchair accessible.

<sup>6</sup> 44.4% if not including the one SU universal restroom that contains a basket of free supplies.

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Many vending dispensers were missing the labels that describe the contents or the price and some of the labels that did exist were ambiguous (Fig. 1, 2). Many dispensers exhibited signs of wear and light vandalism. Knobs were often wobbly or barely working, reflecting user's frustration with getting at the contents. Most campus vending dispensers were locked with 1 or 2 padlocks to prevent theft of coins inside (Fig. 1, 2).

Across the institution, four restrooms in the student union building were the only restrooms offering free menstrual products (Figure 3).

Most vending dispensers, especially those at Campus C2, had signs posted by the institution informing the user to go to the security office if the machine was broken or empty (Fig. 1). We spoke with security personnel, who indicated that women do inform them about the machines on a regular basis. The most common issue was the machine 'ate' the money without vending a product. Security personnel would then provide a tampon or pad from the supplies in their cupboards in full view of a busy campus concourse.

Most menstrual product dispensers utilize a twist-knob or pull-knob operational mode (Fig. 1, 2), which can be difficult for people with mobility or strength challenges. Standard accessibility guidelines recommend devices with push button or hands-free operation to accommodate physically challenged patrons. Some vending machines were difficult for our able-bodied research



**Figure 1: Menstrual product dispensers in women's restrooms**

Typical vending machines on campus C2. These models dispense pads and tampons for \$0.50 each. Padlocks protect the coins inside. **Left:** Labels above the knobs are missing with no indication of the product, price, or denomination. A printed sign helps somewhat. If the machine is empty or broken, the sign directs students to the Security office, which is located in a busy central area. **Right:** Labels above the coin slots show a tube or a box for sale without naming the products directly. There is no empty indicator and no posted sign with instructions. One of the pull knobs is broken.

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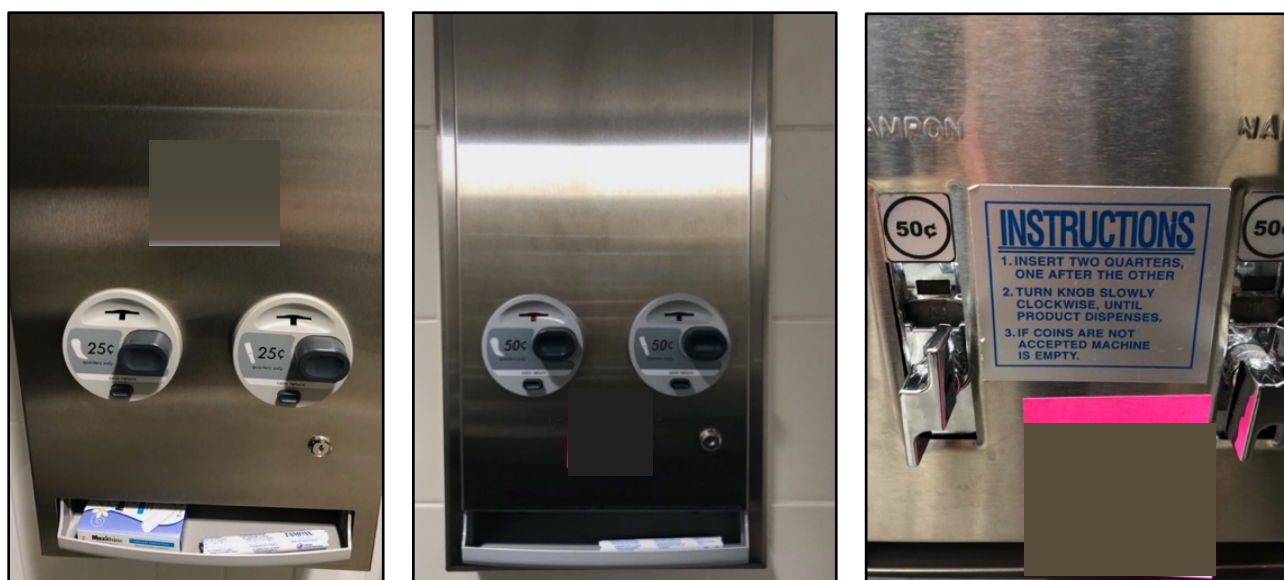
assistants to operate, requiring jiggling and perseverance to obtain the vended product without dropping coins or products on the floor of the restroom.

### 4.1.2 *Campus Bookstores*

The post-secondary institution chosen for this study operates campus bookstores that sell menstrual supplies during normal business hours of 9:00 am to 4:00 pm, Monday to Friday. Products available include packages of 10 tampons or 10 pads for \$5.99 per pack. This equates to a cost of \$0.60 for a single item. Bookstore personnel indicated they sold anywhere from 20-100 boxes of menstrual products per month. These numbers reflect the essential nature of menstrual supplies and may also reflect the fact that current restroom dispensers do not properly support menstruating students. Students view the bookstores as sources of menstrual supplies on campus despite the high prices. Students on campus after 4:00 pm and in need of tampons or pads must walk off-campus some distance to procure these items from stores in the neighbourhood (see section 4.1.5).

### 4.1.3 *Campus Taxation of Menstrual Products*

The audit process revealed that the bookstores operated by the post-secondary institution chosen for this study charged PST (7%) and GST (5%) on menstrual products despite their being tax-exempt for years in Canada. Taxes increased the cost of a package by 12% to \$6.67, or \$0.67 per item. Assuming a conservative average value of 35 boxes of menstrual supplies sold monthly at each bookstore, this equates to approximately \$500 per year of unlawful tax revenue collected



**Figure 2: Menstrual product dispensers in women's restrooms**

**Left:** Newer style of dispenser with push-buttons and clearer signs. Cost of a tampon or pad is \$0.25. **Centre:** Identical dispenser on the same campus charges twice the price, \$0.50 per item. **Right:** This model requires 2 quarters inserted in succession and features a twist-knob vending mechanism that can be difficult to operate, especially for those with strength or mobility challenges. The cost per item is \$0.50 and the dispenser is secured with 2 padlocks.

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from customers<sup>7</sup>.

Surprised by this finding, our team conducted an informal survey of 10 other post-secondary campuses in the Greater Vancouver area in January and February of 2020 and found similar results: that menstrual products are being improperly taxed at several locations. Taken together, of the 12 campuses we investigated representing 8 post-secondary institutions in total, 5 of the 12 campuses (42%) had stores that sold and taxed menstrual products. Four of the 12 campuses (33%) did not sell menstrual products from on-campus stores. Only 3 of the 12 campuses visited (25%) sold menstrual products from on-campus stores without taxation, i.e. in accordance with tax law. Our investigation demonstrates that the tax-exempt status of menstrual supplies is not widely known among store owners, managers, and customers. All campus stores should be checked to ensure taxes are not levied on these products. Taxation of menstrual supplies requires immediate corrective action.

### 4.1.4 Other Sources on Campus

There were a few sources of free menstrual supplies on campus, notably the student union, student services, campus security, and informal personal supplies of staff and students. The student union had baskets of free supplies in 4 out of 5 of their women's and universal restrooms (Figure 3). The student union also had a large basket of free supplies in the main hallway outside the administration office (Figure 3). A sign on the basket invites students to "Take one per student". The student union kiosk located in the main concourse at campus 2 also displayed jars of free pads or tampons. Student support services and the student wellness centre provided free menstrual supplies in baskets at campus 1. As we note in the discussion, these offerings are important; however, these sources are not widely known, are located far from restrooms, and in the end do not provide a sustainable and systemic approach to supporting menstrual flow management on campus.



**Figure 3: Free menstrual supplies in baskets**

The student union building is one of the few places on campus offering free menstrual supplies. Many students are unaware of these sources. **Left:** Small basket on the counter by the sink. Menstrual products are vulnerable to water damage and tampering. **Right:** A large basket of free menstrual products on the coffee table in front of the student union main office. Some survey participants expressed reservations about taking supplies from such an open and public place.

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<sup>7</sup> Improper taxation at the studied post-secondary institution has been rectified.



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During the course of this research, it became apparent that campuses have numerous undocumented sources of menstrual supplies held in purses, cupboards, and desks. Our team was approached on several occasions by faculty and staff who informed us they had ‘secret stashes’ of supplies in their offices to assist colleagues and students in need. Lab facilitators in the Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences have free menstrual products in the lab offices. Both Drs. Tribe and Smith have long held their own ‘secret stashes’ of menstrual supplies for both personal use and to support colleagues and students. We suspect these stockpiles of menstrual supplies are common at other post-secondary institutions too.

### *4.1.5 Campus Neighbourhood*

A survey of the off-campus neighbourhood was undertaken to determine how far students had to walk if they were unable to find supplies on campus (ie. broken or empty dispensers, no knowledge of free supplies, or the campus bookstores were closed). The nearest stores to Campus 1 include grocery stores and drugstores with the closest location being 340 m away. Students at Campus 1 would have to walk about 700 metres round trip to return to campus, an excursion that might take an average of 20-30 minutes to complete including time to purchase the items from the store.

For students at Campus 2, not only is the price for dispensed tampons and pads twice as much as at other campus locations (e.g. Campus 1), but the walk is significantly greater. The nearest location is a shopping mall located 1.25 km away. Students at Campus 2 would have to walk about 2.5 km round trip to return to campus, an excursion that might take 45-60 minutes to complete including time to purchase the items from the store.

### *4.2 Survey Results Overview*

To accompany the campus audit, a student survey was designed to document any impacts on post-secondary students resulting from the existing availability of period supplies. The following section provides an overview of survey results. As mentioned at the outset, this report presents descriptive statistics of part of the entire data set and does not contain advanced statistical analyses. See **Appendix B: Period Product Access Survey** for the complete list and format of survey questions.

#### *4.2.1 Study Participant Demographics*

Study participants (N = 370) self-identified as follows: 97.4% female, 1.1% male, 0.3% trans-gender female, 0.6% trans-gender male, 0.3% gender variant/non-conforming/non-binary, and 0.3% preferred not to self-describe. Domestic students made up the majority of the study population at 90.8%, while international students represented 9.2% of study participants. A small portion, 5.7% of the study population reported being of indigenous heritage, and 41.2% reported being racialized as persons of colour.

#### *4.2.2 Experiences of Menstruation on Campus*

Of those who completed the study, 68.2% reported starting their period unexpectedly on one or more occasion while on campus. Participants who responded ‘Yes’ to the question, ‘Have you ever started your period unexpectedly while on campus?’ were asked to indicate ‘what they have done’ by checking **all** that apply on a drop-down list of options. Many participants checked multiple boxes. Table 2 presents the responses.

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Approximately one third of students who reported starting their period unexpectedly on one or more occasion while on campus indicated that they did not notice their period had started and just under 10% noticed but did nothing. A significant portion, 74%, noted that on at least one occasion they had a product with them and went to the campus restroom to change. However, in many cases responses indicated that on at least one occasion participants needed to go beyond individual reserves. For example, 46.7% asked a friend for a product (Table 2). It is worth emphasizing that a high percentage of participants, 67.2%, used toilet paper from campus restrooms as a make-shift pad on at least one occasion. In addition, many participants who responded to this list checked at least 3 items and in some cases as many as 5 to 7. This suggests that participants rely on a range of solutions and furthermore, that they experienced periods unexpectedly while on campus on more than one occasion and/or required more than one solution.

In addition to periods starting unexpectedly on campus, 62.8% of study participants reported experiencing spills, leaks, stain or overflows of menstrual blood while on campus. Approximately one third reported not noticing until later and two thirds reported having a product on hand. However, as with Question 4 discussed above, participants had the option of noting what they did on occasions where they did not have product available or on hand. Complete results are given in Table 3.

Study participants reported spills, leaks, stains and/or overflow of menstrual blood on a regular basis. Of those participants, many reported not noticing until later or doing nothing and about two thirds (66.4%) reported having product with them (Table 3). Again, a significant portion of participants (31.4%) reported relying on a friend to provide a menstrual product. In addition,

**Table 2**  
**Q4: (Have you ever started your period unexpectedly while on campus?)**  
**What have you done? (Check all that apply)**

<b>Variable label</b>	<b>YES (Frequency)</b>	<b>YES (%)</b>
I didn't notice until later	76	31.1%
I did nothing	24	9.8%
I had a menstrual product with me and went to the campus restroom to change	179	74.0%
I asked a friend for a tampon or pad (or other menstrual product)	114	46.7%
I purchased a tampon or pad from a coin dispenser in the campus restroom	23	9.4%
I purchased tampons or pads from the campus bookstore	23	9.4%
I went to the Douglas Student Union building to get a menstrual product	25	10.2%
I left campus to purchase a menstrual product	37	15.2%
I went home and stayed home	42	17.3%
I went home to get a menstrual product/change and came back to campus	18	7.4%
I used toilet paper as a make-shift pad	164	67.2%
I used paper towel as a make-shift pad	37	15.2%



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participants noted relying on toilet paper (51.2%), paper towel (12.6%), and the thin distribution of for-purchase supplies across campus. Finally, 66.7% reported going to the campus restroom and cleaning up as best they could. This shows that participants use the restroom facilities to manage menstruation, and that in many cases adequate products are not available or access to them is restricted.

From Questions 4 and 6, we draw attention to the percentage of study participants who reported leaving campus to purchase menstrual supplies, 15.2% and 10.6% respectively (Table 2, 3). A significant percentage of study participants (17.3%, Table 2) reported going home due to an unexpected period, and 32.7% reported going home and staying home due to a menstrual leak, stain or overflow (Table 3). Further research is needed to understand if leaving campus and staying home is due to issues such as cramps or general discomfort. Nonetheless, we conclude that access to supplies is a starting point as many participants did go in search of supplies on campus, for example, in restrooms or campus bookstores.

Study participants indicated that managing menstrual flow impacted educational participation in several ways (Table 4). For example, 67.0% of study participants reported having to leave class while in session to manage menstrual flow, 46% reported arriving late for class to manage menstrual flow, and 49% reported missing, arriving late, or having to leave class because they did not have supplies readily available to manage menstrual flow (Table 4).

Participants were asked if managing menstrual flow had interrupted their participation in

**Table 3**  
**Q6. (Have you ever experienced a spill, leak, stain or overflow of menstrual blood while on campus?) If yes, what have you done?**

<b>Variable label</b>	<b>YES (Frequency)</b>	<b>YES (%)</b>
I didn't notice until later	72	35.1%
I did nothing	21	10.4%
I had a menstrual product with me and went to campus restroom to change	144	66.4%
I asked a friend for a tampon or pad (or other menstrual product)	65	31.4%
I purchased a tampon or pad from a coin dispenser in the campus restroom	11	5.6%
I purchased tampons or pads from the campus bookstore	11	5.6%
I went to the Douglas Student Union building to get a menstrual product	13	6.6%
I left campus to purchase a menstrual product	21	10.6%
I went home and stayed home	67	32.7%
I went home to get a menstrual product/change and came back to campus	6	3.1%
I used toilet paper as a make-shift pad	110	51.2%
I used paper towel as a make-shift pad	25	12.6%
I went to the campus restroom and cleaned up as best I could	142	66.7%

**Table 4**  
**Q11: Has managing your menstrual flow interrupted your participation in other education related activities?**

Variable label	YES (Frequency)	YES (%)
Presentations	62	37.3%
Labs	65	39.2%
Field trips	46	27.5%
Group meetings	67	40.4%
Practices for a sports team you are a member of	51	30.7%
Games for a sports team you are a member of	42	25.3%

other education-related activities (Table 4). Again, they had the option of checking **all** that apply. Participants indicated that field trips, sports team participation, and classroom-related activities were impacted by the need to manage menstrual flow. Responses are tabulated in Table 4.

Study findings show that students frequently need period supplies **on** campus. As we elucidate in the next section, study participants reported scrambling to find a solution on their own due to inaccessible menstrual supplies and unreliable availability.

#### 4.2.3 Highlights from Open-Ended Questions

The survey provided multiple opportunities for study participants to elaborate and share experiences of menstruating on campus. Students reported that they missed exams, assignments, and lectures due to managing menstrual flow, and they added additional context related to the lack of readily accessible menstrual supplies. They shared frustration about empty coin dispensers, expensive products, and generally the lack of available tampons and pads when and where they are most needed. Students also shared experiences of menstruation on campus that were not related to accessing period supplies, suggesting the need for further research, something we touch on in the subsequent section.

On several occasions, study participants used the additional comments sections of the survey to elaborate on their frustration with existing product dispensers in the restrooms. One participant observed,

The one time I tried to get a tampon from the dispenser in the bathroom it was completely out.

In another instance, a study participant commented,

It would be helpful if the vending machine for pads or tampons in the restroom actually works. I have experienced it twice when I have to buy pads or tampons in the washroom or restroom and the pads did not ‘exit’ the vending machine and it was frustrating since I have to ask a friend if they have extra pads.

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Here the study participant confirms the findings in the audit, that malfunctioning or broken machines are common, and emphasizes the impact of this lack of reliability. In this case, the student sought out support from a friend who happened to have 'extra pads' on hand.

Several study participants noted making use of the freely available menstrual supplies at the security desk and other sites on- and off-campus. For example, one study participant shared,

I've used the trial sized tampons at the [...] security desk/student info in [the concourse] and that saved me. Also used the free tampon in [an adjacent off-campus building] while working out at the gym, however, the last time I was there it was empty.

Note that in the second instance, the supply was exhausted. A similar issue is highlighted by a participant below,

I once got my period on campus and didn't have a pad. I checked the dispenser and they were empty. Went to the bookstore and found that they were out of stock and I didn't know that the student union carried pads. I also didn't have anyone of my friends around me for me to ask them so I had to leave campus and drive to the Save on Foods near by and pick up a pack. Because of that I was late for class and since attendance was mandatory I was marked away because I was late!

As this study participant noted, on one occasion they needed a menstrual product and did not have any with them. They exhausted all available options on campus and were unaware of the pockets of free supply. The time spent searching for a menstrual supply resulted in an academic penalty. This is no small thing: the student's grade was impacted because a regularly occurring biological function is not supported on campus.

Several study participants also noted being unaware of existing sources of free menstrual supplies on campus. One study participant observed,

When I finished my morning class, I started to feel cramps and dizzy. So, I went to the washroom to check if I'm on it and I did have my period. I checked my bag if I had brought extra pads but, I didn't so I started freaking out. In the end, I had no choice but to use toilet paper as temporary pads and they were uncomfortable to be in. When I got out of the washroom I hurriedly went out off campus to go buy pads at the stores because I didn't know that Student Union and the bookstore had them on campus. Luckily, I had time to kill before my afternoon class started. Getting your period at school feels uncomfortable for me because I get really bad cramps and it's hard for me to concentrate during class due to the pain.

This response highlights the considerable time and stress involved in not being able to find menstrual supplies when needed. The study participant expressed how general discomfort is a factor as well.

On menstrual leaks and unexpected periods on campus, one study participant stated,

I have experienced several occasions when I have unexpectedly started bleeding in class and did not have menstrual products with me. At those times when I am not prepared to handle my period, I have felt distress and embarrassment. I do not have friends to lend me products during class time and can rarely afford to purchase products on my own (I still rely on my mom). It is during these times when I truly feel the most oppressed by society. Menstrual products should not feel like a luxury and all women should receive equal access at all times. Sometimes my flow is so heavy I have to leave lectures every half hour, which can be distracting for myself and everyone around me, but I feel like I shouldn't have to miss out on learning because of menstruation! Ideally, I would like to see free menstrual products in all public washrooms with options that are safe and effective (scented products should not be allowed, and pads should be comfortably wearable).

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As this study participant observed, they experienced on several occasions the onset of bleeding in class and grappled with the lack of menstrual products around campus. In their own words, unexpectedly starting to bleed led to feelings of ‘distress and embarrassment.’ They recognized and criticized wider social structures by stating that ‘all women should receive equal access at all times.’ The study participant expressed support for ‘free menstrual products in all public washrooms’ that are ‘safe and effective.’

Another study participant expressed that finding available menstrual supplies is challenging and sometimes they had to resort to ‘makeshift’ solutions. For example,

I recall experiences when I’ve had a leak or unexpected period arrival. Those occasions when I did not have menstruation products prepared were often solved by cleaning up after myself in the bathroom and using makeshift toilet paper. Although I assume that menstruation products are available at the campus, it was either too difficult or complicated to get to in that moment, so cleaning up after myself or making a makeshift solution was usually the best bet.”

Several study participants indicated that these makeshift solutions were inadequate. One participant shared,

My flow is heavy, especially on the first few days, so using paper towels or toilet paper isn’t ideal when my period comes unannounced. I don’t really have a choice to go home as I typically have something important to do, but it’s harder to deal with because I’m uncomfortable/worried. My period almost never comes on time, it’s either late or early, which makes it hard to plan ahead. I try my best to always have a pad or tampon with me but sometimes I forget to pack more. I also wasn’t aware until recently that there were period products in the campus store and union building.

In addition to general impacts on students’ experiences on campus, several study participants indicated that lack of accessible menstrual supplies interrupted specific important educational activities such as presentations. One study participant shared,

[On presentation day] I went to the bathroom and saw that I had gotten my period and had a big stain on my pants (from my crotch area to my backside). I didn’t have any period products so I used toilet paper. When it was my turn to present, I stood with my legs crossed to hide any stain that was visible in the crotch area and angled myself so my classmates couldn’t see my backside. I had to stand at an angle to prevent losing marks, without exposing my stain.

Participant data shared here highlights the tangible and real impacts students face when menstrual supplies are not readily accessible.

Several participants shared environmental concerns related to the use of disposable menstrual supplies and the generation of waste. Study participants employing reusable supplies, such as the Diva Cup or birth control for menstrual suppression, used the comments section of the survey to share their experiences and views. For example, one study participant noted,

Because I use a diva cup, and I am on birth control, I always wear my diva cup starting from the 3rd morning after taking out my Nuva ring. I have never leaked on campus or been unprepared because with the diva cup I am always prepared.

Some participants expressed a desire for hypoallergenic and environmentally sustainable period supplies. Issues related to reusable supplies and sustainability are touched on in the Discussion and Future Research sections.

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Overall, we were surprised by the length and detail of responses to the open-ended questions in the survey. More than two-thirds of study participants chose to complete the open-ended questions. Such a high response rate indicates that participants were eager to document the issues they face. Participant responses add additional context to the work and worry of menstruating students as they deal with periods on campus.

### 5. Discussion

In this section, we discuss the main themes that emerge from the study and the implications for post-secondary institutions.

#### 5.1 *Adequate Menstrual Hygiene*

Research results demonstrate that existing support for menstruation on campus is inadequate. Although students have access to restroom facilities that provide privacy and soap and water for hand washing, the existing availability of menstrual supplies on campus does not meet the definition of adequate menstrual hygiene as defined by Kuhlmann et al. (2019),

... access to clean sanitary materials that can be changed in private as often as necessary, access to soap and water for washing, and access to a place for the hygienic disposal of used sanitary materials or washing, if reusable pads are used (p. 238).

For example, hygienic disposal of used menstrual materials was only reliably available in women's restrooms. This is because existing regulations specify the installation of sanitary disposal bins in bathroom stalls used by women. Yet women need more than a disposal bin for adequate menstrual management. They require wash facilities to clean underwear, clothing, or empty and wash diva cups, preferably without having to navigate the shared space of a public restroom. Complete privacy is provided in single-stall universal restrooms, many of which do not have a menstrual supply dispenser. This makes it difficult for menstruating trans-men and non-binary students to adequately manage their menstrual hygiene outside of women's restrooms.

#### 5.2 *Dearth of Supplies*

Survey results reveal the high number of students who experience 'menstrual emergencies' on campus, and how common it is to be caught by surprise and have to scramble to manage blood flow. Study participants report spending considerable time and effort seeking menstrual supplies on campus, through personal networks, and off-campus. The dearth of menstrual supplies necessitates students resort to make-shift solutions on a regular basis, frequently using wadded-up toilet paper or paper towel as a temporary pad. Study participants felt stress, embarrassment, and shame when they were unable to meet societal expectations to conceal menstruation.

Malfunctioning dispensers, supply shortages, cost, and lack of knowledge of free supplies were identified as significant barriers to effective menstrual management. The current state of affairs assumes that students 'always have' menstrual supplies with them. While many study participants did have product with them, almost an equal portion did not. Unexpected periods, variable and heavy flows, running out of supplies, and lack of money are some of the reasons study participants were caught short. This research provides ample evidence on the frequency of these occurrences and contradicts society's assumption that students are always equipped with supplies.

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### 5.3 *Academic Penalties*

A significant percentage of survey participants suffered academic penalties related to problems managing their periods. Our results show a large number of students leave campus, go home, or miss classes and important evaluations such as presentations due to lack of available menstrual supplies on campus. These findings are particularly worrying. Our data show that menstruating students are sometimes penalized for what amounts to oversight and lack of accommodation by the post-secondary institution. This is a serious issue in light of the mandate to provide equal access to education for all students regardless of sex or gender identity.

### 5.4 *Comparison with Other Biological Functions*

Post-secondary institutions accommodate numerous aspects of physical and mental health for students, for example mobility, language, and learning challenges; therefore, it is curious that menstruation is ignored. At post-secondary institutions and in other public spaces and buildings, men's restrooms provide free-of-charge all the things men need to manage their normal bodily functions. Even urinals are specified by all levels of regulation, for example in federal and provincial health and safety regulations, and in federal and provincial building codes. In contrast, the regulations omit any accommodation for menstruation. Men use the restrooms knowing the necessities will be there, whereas women and other menstruating students have no such assurances and must take their own supplies or money to the restroom.

The contrast between how some normal biological functions (urination, defecation) are supported in public restrooms but menstruation is not is even more stark when you consider that one never knows exactly when a period will start. There is no warning bell before it happens, or when tampons or pads are full. There is no 'bladder' to collect the blood until a more convenient time to go to the bathroom; it simply falls out by gravity. Wearing tampons or pads ahead of time, just in case, or for longer intervals to save money and stretch supplies is not recommended by health officials due to the possibility of contracting bacterial infections or potentially lethal Toxic Shock Syndrome. Based on these considerations alone, the need for regulatory and institutional support for menstruation is amply warranted.

### 5.5 *Emergency Supplies*

Providing free disposable tampons and pads in restrooms amounts to ensuring emergency supplies are available. Emergency supplies enable menstruating students to remain on campus, in class, and alleviate much of the need to leave campus to purchase from a store or to go home to manage menstrual flow. Most menstruators have strong preferences for style, brand, and absorbency of menstrual products, and will likely continue to carry their own preferred products with them. Emergency menstrual supplies in institutional restrooms should be enough to get the job done and continue on with one's day.

### 5.6 *High Costs*

The high cost of menstrual products in restroom dispensers and at campus bookstores, is another barrier for students. Tampons and pads need to be changed every 4-6 hours. Some students with heavy menstrual flows might need to wear a tampon and a pad together and change these items every hour, perhaps more frequently. If they obtain their supplies from the restroom vending

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dispensers, this could cost several dollars a day. Given that toilet paper, paper towels, toilet seat covers, and soap are freely provided, it is notable that tampons and pads are the only items for sale in restrooms. Current regulatory guidance that ignores menstruation is the cause of this situation.

Padlocked dispensers send the message that menstrual supplies are valuable and available only to those who can afford them, despite the fact that the locks are used to prevent coin theft. The wholesale cost for individually wrapped tampons and pads to stock dispensers is under \$0.05; therefore, the price is marked up by 5 or 10 times in the restroom dispensers. Multiple prices for the same item, for example in different restrooms in the same building, is a direct result of the lack of legislative guidance governing menstrual supplies. Building managers are left to decide if menstrual supplies will be available in restrooms, if a price should be levied and how much. Ultimately, students pay the price for this flawed distribution system.

### 5.7 *Coin-free Dispensers*

The students' union is commended for placing baskets of free menstrual supplies in restrooms; however, these items are not secured and are vulnerable to water damage and tampering. Coin-free, enclosed dispensers will safeguard menstrual supplies from damage and tampering. Dispensers should have hands-free or push-button modes of operation to suit individuals with mobility or strength challenges. Wall-mounted dispensers are available from custodial supply sources and range in price from \$20 to \$300 each. Many existing vending dispensers can be modified to operate without coins, alleviating the need for organizations to completely replace their current inventory. Dispensers should be checked regularly for stock and performance.

### 5.8 *Free Menstrual Supplies in Restrooms*

Student survey responses clearly show that menstruation is managed in the restroom. The biology of menstruation necessitates it be dealt with in the washroom stall and on the toilet, i.e. blood flow from the vagina, changing tampons and pads, disposing of used tampons and pads in sanitary disposal bins located in toilet stalls. Asking a student who is in immediate need of a tampon or pad to go across campus or to the office to ask a person in authority is a poor solution to a personal and potentially embarrassing problem. Consider a comparable situation, for example if toilet paper was locked in a coin-operated dispenser and only provided for free at the security office. Such a dysfunctional distribution system would quickly be rectified and with good reason.

Having free supplies available in offices or kiosks allows students to take some home for later use or to use while off-campus, e.g. at work, shopping or engaging in social activities. Nonetheless, it is critical for free menstrual supplies to be in restrooms just like toilet paper and other items needed for adequate menstrual management, e.g. soap, wash water, sanitary bins.

Women's restrooms and universal and gender-neutral restrooms, which are intended for both sexes and all gender identities, ought to provide full, barrier-free support for menstrual management. Students should not have to 'out' themselves to obtain menstrual supplies. Furthermore, to fully support gender-diverse menstruators on campus, ideally, at least one menstrual product dispenser is needed in men's restrooms and at least one men's toilet stall should have a sanitary disposal bin.

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### 5.9 *Free Supplies Around Campus*

While the campus audit revealed the presence of some free period supplies, for example, the student union building, campus security, scattered tables, offices, and kiosks; accessing these supplies requires students to travel long distances across campus or to identify themselves to security. Participants often noted they were unaware of sources of free period supplies or felt uncomfortable requesting them from a stranger or in a highly visible public space such as the central concourse security booths. Existing free supplies ought to be more widely advertised and the distribution reconsidered to address privacy needs.

In addition, the audit revealed the existence of many informal collections of free menstrual supplies provided by individual faculty members or departments. The existence of this ‘underground network’ of free menstrual supplies illustrates (1) the necessity for these items because so many people hold a private stash, and (2) the extent to which women subsidise the institution because it does not adequately support menstruation.

### 5.10 *Taxation*

We found a significant number of campus stores in the Greater Vancouver area still charge Goods and Services Tax (GST) and Provincial Sales Tax (PST) on menstrual products, thereby inflating the prices by 5-12%. In British Columbia, menstrual products have been PST-exempt since November 26, 1971 (Rulings and Interpretations Team, BC Ministry of Finance, personal communication). Canada-wide, menstrual products have been GST-exempt since 2015 when the advocacy group Canadian Menstruators successfully lobbied for its removal. Apparently, many people including store owners, managers, and customers are not aware that menstrual products are tax-free. Post-secondary institutions everywhere should ensure that sales of menstrual products from campus stores are compliant with federal and provincial tax laws.

### 5.11 *Institutional Performance*

The current distribution of menstrual supplies at the post-secondary institution chosen for this study reflects the shortcomings in current legislation as well as entrenched social and cultural values and beliefs about menstruation. Recent years have seen considerable advances in supporting menstruation in public spaces, with the passing of legislation that mandates freely available supplies in restrooms in the K-12 education system in BC, with other jurisdictions following suit. Students’ unions and other groups have started to call for more support of menstruation on campus and elsewhere (BC Federation of Students, 2019; Smith et al., 2020; Douglas Student’s Union, 2020). This study indicates the need for further work to extend policy to other institutions and public spaces. Nonetheless, our results will help support change in other public places where people use restrooms for menstrual flow management, e.g. workplaces, offices, shops and restaurants, community centres, parks, gyms, museums, libraries, arenas, and so on.

### 5.12 *Other Considerations*

This study establishes the extent of support for menstruation at one point in time on a typical mid-size British Columbia post-secondary campus. It illustrates the *status quo* based on current regulations governing restroom facilities. We suspect that audits and surveys conducted at comparable post-secondary institutions would yield similar results.



Interestingly, the notion of menstruation as an individuals' responsibility seemed to be out of step with many study participants' expectations for their institution. Several participants observed that 'they assumed' period products would be readily available on campus. Many expressed surprise upon finding that period supplies could not be easily accessed. Many participants expressed an expectation that menstrual health support is part of supporting 'women's needs on campus,' reflecting changing views and values and the need for institutional change. Such change would be commensurate with institutional support already in place for other human conditions on campus, i.e. mobility, learning, and language challenges.

Some survey participants used the comments section to raise concerns about the generation of waste related to disposable pads and tampons or to express a desire for reusable, sustainable, or organic products to be free on campus. We do not agree. Students will have preferences about the brand, style, and absorbency of their preferred menstrual products and are free to buy and use these products. Institutions have a responsibility to adequately accommodate rather than provide the best of the best. Concerns around waste and sustainability often end up being arguments against freely available emergency supplies. There are many factors that influence how an individual manages menstrual flow, including but not limited to, culture, identity, socio-economic status, comfort, ease, and personal preference. We argue that the easiest way to help menstruating students get back to the business of learning is to put free disposable tampons and pads in restrooms.

### 6. Study Limitations

Washroom facilities at the post-secondary institution chosen for this study conform to current British Columbia building regulations and occupational health and safety standards. Because the chosen institution had not adopted 'pro-menstrual' policies, this study illustrates the *status quo* and the typical range of restroom supports at a mid-size post-secondary institution in British Columbia. The audit documented fixed physical structures, i.e. wall-mounted menstrual dispensers that do not change location day-to-day; therefore, results are accurate for the moment in time studied. The availability of tampons and pads and the working condition of dispensers are accurate for the time of the audit yet are expected to change over time with use and servicing.

Students self-selected into the survey therefore survey responses may not be representative of the entire campus population, i.e. pregnant students, menopausal students, male students, or of all post-secondary students in British Columbia. Survey results are expected to be relevant to other post-secondary institutions with similar student populations. We encourage further research at other post-secondary locations reflecting large and small population sizes and different campus layouts to build on this data set.

The sample population did not include a significant number of trans or non-binary individuals (less than 1%); therefore, results have a limited capacity to speak meaningfully to the experiences of gender-diverse menstruators on campus. The audit results uncover important gaps in this regard and highlight the need to build gender-inclusive menstrual support into new distribution strategies on campus.

Participation in post-secondary education remains a marker of social privilege. As such, this study does not directly reflect or document experiences of period poverty. However, it should be noted that several survey participants commented on cost as a factor in their ability to reliably obtain period products.

Despite the stated limitations, this exploratory study builds a general picture of the availability of menstrual supplies on post-secondary campuses as well as the extent, frequency, and manner in which study participants manage their menstrual flows while on campus.

### 7. Future Research

There are many areas ripe for future research in the Canadian context. For example, more research is needed to understand the needs of gender-diverse menstruators on campus as well as within Canadian society more generally, and would ensure that changes at both the operational and policy levels will support menstrual health for all impacted population groups.

More research is needed into the full scope of period poverty in Canada, both on- and off-campus. Recent publications (Smith et al., *forthcoming*; United Way Period Promise Research Report, 2021b) take steps in this direction. More studies will better assess the extent of period poverty and support systemic changes and programming.

Additional research is needed on the impact and scope of current institutional approaches to menstruation for other campus populations, e.g. faculty and staff, as well as for other experiences that are part of the menstrual cycle, notably pregnancy, the post-partum stage, perimenopause, and menopause. Similarly, research for other public spaces, including but not limited to workplaces, offices, shops, and restaurants will elucidate the impact of existing restroom regulations and availability of period supplies beyond post-secondary campuses.

We recommend research on ways to support students' access to reusable menstrual supplies on campus. In line with participants' comments, more research and technological innovation are needed to develop new and reusable menstrual technologies, including designs that address sustainability concerns and waste generation.

Finally, an examination of menstrual education in the K-12 system is warranted. Current menstrual education in schools focuses on the biological, hormonal, and pregnancy-related issues but does not adequately address the operational aspects of having a period, e.g. how to use menstrual products effectively and safely. We suggest the development of a more robust educational program with lessons on menstrual management (including disposable, reusable, and hormonal options) and practice in an age-appropriate manner. Nor does much of the current K-12 menstrual education present the subject in a positive affirming manner, something that is needed so girls approach this milestone with pride and excitement rather than anxiety and shame. These kinds of changes to the existing curriculum will go a long way towards destigmatizing menstruation and should be provided to students regardless of sex or gender identity, in order to increase knowledge and empathy for others.

### 8. Recommendations

We recommend that Canadian post-secondary institutions adopt a commitment to menstrual health in order to support students and eliminate barriers to education that arise from the poor availability of menstrual supplies. Based on the results of this research study, we make the following specific recommendations for post-secondary institutions:

- i. Ensure all women's, universal, and gender-neutral campus restrooms contain a coin-free dispenser of disposable tampons and pads;
- ii. Replace existing coin-operated machines with coin-free push-button or no-touch dispensers, or modify existing vending dispensers to operate without coins;
- iii. Monitor product levels and dispenser functionality as part of regular custodial maintenance duties;
- iv. Ensure all men's restrooms have a coin-free dispenser and that at least one toilet stall has a sanitary disposal bin in order to support trans-men and non-binary menstruators;

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- v. Revise institutional policies governing restroom facilities to reflect these changes and ensure long-term support for menstruation on campus;
- vi. Confirm that menstrual supplies sold in campus stores are tax-exempt.

For courses with off-campus components or field trips, it is important to ensure frequent opportunities to use the restrooms. A small supply of menstrual products, i.e. tampons and pads, should be added to first aid kits and other curriculum-related materials taken on field trips. For single-day and multi-day field trips to remote locations, for example geology field exercises which usually take place in wilderness locations far from towns, students will benefit from discussions about ‘bush-bathroom’ etiquette and how to manage one’s period while in the woods. Again, having these discussions with both sexes will raise empathy and reduce menstrual stigma, thereby improving the field trip experience for all.

More broadly, a ‘pro-period’ approach might include operational change, awareness campaigns, and funding for more research into all aspects of menstruation. Addressing the availability of menstrual supplies on campus will not only benefit students but will positively impact other members of the campus community, including faculty, staff, administrators, and visitors.

### 9. Summary

This research documents access to menstrual supplies at a mid-size Canadian post-secondary institution and the impact on students’ capacity to pursue an education. The study consisted of an environmental audit of all campus and near-campus facilities in the Fall of 2019, and a survey of 370 post-secondary students between March 2020 and July 2020.

Results show that existing menstrual supplies on campus are inadequate and disadvantage women as well as trans and non-binary students who menstruate. Many dispensers in women’s restrooms do not work. Most universal and gender-neutral restrooms have no dispensers at all despite being intended for both sexes and all gender identities. Pricing is expensive and inconsistent with different prices levied for the same products across campus. Free menstrual supplies on campus are sparse, often located far from a restroom, and not widely known to the student population. Campus stores sell menstrual products with high prices and often erroneously tax these items pushing the price higher. If campus stores are closed, students have a long walk off-campus to buy period supplies from a store.

Study results provide ample evidence that menstrual leaks, surprises, and emergencies are common occurrences. Poor availability of menstrual supplies on campus leads to negative impacts on students and disrupts their participation in education in several important ways. Students report frequent unexpected periods and leaks from over-full menstrual products leading to anxiety and disrupted concentration in class. A surprisingly large proportion of students improvise menstrual protection, for example using toilet paper or paper towel as a make-shift pad. Many students leave campus to go home in order to manage their periods with dignity and easy access to supplies. A significant number of students reported academic penalties because they were late to or missed classes, tests, assignments, or field trips as a result of lack of menstrual supplies.

Overall, this research demonstrates the need for free menstrual supplies in campus restrooms. It highlights the barriers currently in place that limit access to the sparse free supplies that do exist. Our results show the burden and responsibility for menstrual health that is placed almost exclusively on the shoulders of individual students, and the extent to which faculty, staff, and students subsidize the institution.

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Post-secondary institutions should classify menstrual products as ‘essential’ items in restrooms just like toilet paper, hand soap, hand-drying facilities, urinals, and sanitary bins. This approach will build restrooms that support and convenience all the normal, recurring biological functions, thereby improving the campus experience for all menstruators. Eliminating barriers to menstrual supplies will reduce that brand of anxiety arising from having to manage an unpredictable process shrouded in shame and silence. Most importantly, it will improve access to education for all students on campus and positively impact other members of the campus community, including faculty, staff and visitors.

Although this study reflects the unique features of the post-secondary institution chosen for the study, the results are commensurate with recent studies conducted in Canada and elsewhere (Plan International UK, 2018; Plan International Canada, 2019; Kuhlmann et al., 2020; Sommer et al., 2015), namely that students struggle with menstruation, even in relatively progressive and developed countries like Canada. When the right supplies are not available and students cannot properly manage menstrual flows, their education and engagement in academic pursuits suffer.

### **10. Concluding Remarks**

In Canada, recent years have seen important shifts in supporting menstruation in public spaces and schools. The passing of legislation mandating freely available menstrual supplies in restrooms in the K-12 education system in British Columbia has led to growing support for pro-period policy frameworks. Further work is required to extend operational changes and policy to other public institutions, notably post-secondary institutions.

In the time that our group set out on this research project, a great deal has changed in the world of menstrual equity. Governments of Kenya, Scotland, and New Zealand now have or are in the process of developing comprehensive policies to provide free period supplies to students or within public spaces generally. In Canada, and around the world, there is an increased awareness of and willingness on the part of policy makers to include menstruation in public discussions.

Here is an opportunity for post-secondary institutions to take a leadership role in supporting menstruation. This work has long been carried out by students’ unions and other student groups; it is time for senior management and administrators to take up the challenge to ensure menstruation is not a barrier to a full education. We encourage researchers at post-secondary institutions and other venues to use, modify, and adapt the audit form and survey questions (Appendices A and B) in order to collect more data and add to our understanding of this issue in Canada.

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### Appendix A: Restroom Audit Form

Abbreviated Title	Full Name of Title	Comments
Room No.	Room Number	Room number includes the floor and sometimes the wing
Loc.	Location	Campus or Building
AM Time	Time of Audit	Approximate time
PM Time	Time for Second Audit	If applicable, 2 <sup>nd</sup> audit done at a different time of day
Insp. Name	Inspector Name	Initials
Rest. Type	Restroom Type	F (female), M (male), Univ (universal single-stall, wheelchair accessible), GN (gender-neutral, multi-stall)
# Reg. Stall	Number of Regular Stalls	Regular width stalls that are non-WA (wheelchair accessible)
# WA Stall	Number of Wheelchair Accessible Stalls	If Univ (single-stall, WA), this and previous column left blank
No. Urin.	Number of Urinals	Number
No. Sinks	Number of Sinks	Number
Men.Disp. Pres.	Menstrual Supply Dispenser Present	Y/N
Type Men.Disp.	Type of Dispenser	Pull-knob, twist-knob, push-button, hands-free
Soap	Hand Soap	Y/N
Paper T.	Paper Towels	Y/N
No. Driers	Number of Hand Driers	Y/N
No. Gar. Bin	Number of Garbage Bins	Number in the restroom
Con. of Gar. Bin	Condition of Garbage Bins	Empty, used, full, overflowing
Coat Hook	Coat Hooks in Stall	Y/N; coat hooks hold bags and coats when using toilet
Baby Ch. Tab.	Baby Change Table	Y/N
No. of Ur. Scr.	Number of Urinal Screens	Number of splash screens in urinals
No. Puck	Number of Pucks	Number of deodorizing pucks in urinals
Sharp. Dis.	Sharps Disposal	Y/N
Bask. of Men. Pr.	Basket of Menstrual Products	Y/N; this is distinct from a wall-mounted dispenser
Sign/Notice on Disp.	Presence of Sign or Notice on Dispenser	Y/N; college- or university-posted sign; photograph it
Text	Text on the Dispenser Sign/Notice	Can refer to photographs for exact wording
St. of Tamp.	Stock of Tampons	Y/N
St. of Pad	Stock of Pads	Y/N
\$ Tamp.	Price of Tampons	Price in dollars and cents
\$ Pad	Price of Pads	Price in dollars and cents
Tamp. Type	Tampon Type	no Y/N; if one dispensed, then the type/brand is given
Pad Type	Pad Type	no Y/N; if one dispensed, then the type/brand is given
Cond. Disp. (E/M/F)	Condition of Dispenser (Empty/Malf/Func)	Test with coins (Empty, Malfunctioning, Functioning)
If E/M. Reason	If Dispenser is Empty/Malf, state how or why	If no reason, leave blank; can be hard to tell if lack of dispensing is due to being empty or broken
Padlocks	Padlocks on Dispenser	Y/N; if Y, also add the number of padlocks used
Sani. Disp. Bin	Sanitary Disposal Bin	Y/N
Cond. (E/U/F/OF)	Condition (E/U/F/OF)	Empty, Used, Full, Overflowing; take photo of overflowing bins
Liner Pres.	Liner Present	Y/N; the paper/plastic bags lining sanitary disposal bins
Liner Type	Liner Type	Paper/plastic/other material comprising the sanitary bin liners
Sp. Bags	Spare Bags in Unit	Y/N; spare bags should not be stored in the sanitary bin
Vand./Dirty	Notes on if Vandalized or Dirty	For sanitary disposal bins, take photos if necessary
Comments	Comments	Additional comments and observations on any aspect of the restroom or environs pertaining to the focus of study

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### Appendix B: Period Product Access Survey

1. I am currently registered as a student (part-time or full-time) at [post-secondary institution] **OR** I was registered as a student (part-time or full-time) at [post-secondary institution] since August 31, 2015?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

2. I am 18 years or older.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

3. I have menstruated while at [post-secondary institution] campus (either or all campuses).

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

*[Note: If participants answer no to either question, they will be directed to the end of the survey.]*

4. Have you ever **started** your period unexpectedly while on campus?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

(If yes) – What have you done? [check as many boxes as you like]

- ☐ I didn't notice until later
- ☐ I did nothing
- ☐ had a menstrual product with me and went to the campus restroom to change
- ☐ Asked a friend for a tampon or pad (or other menstrual product)
- ☐ Purchased a tampon or pad from a coin dispenser in the campus restroom
- ☐ Purchased tampons or pads from the campus bookstore
- ☐ Went to the Douglas Student Union building to get a menstrual product
- ☐ Left campus to purchase a menstrual product
- ☐ Went home and stayed home
- ☐ Went home to get a menstrual product/change and came back to campus
- ☐ Used toilet paper as a make-shift pad
- ☐ Used paper towel as a make-shift pad
- ☐ Are there other things you have used that are not listed here
- ☐ Yes / No
  - If yes, you are welcome to share with us what they are if you would like to [list as many as you like]

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5. Have you ever experienced a **spill, leak, stain or overflow** of menstrual blood while on campus?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No



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(If yes) – What have you done? [check as many as you like]

- ☐ I didn't notice until later
- ☐ I did nothing
- ☐ Had a menstrual product with me and changed my product
- ☐ Went to the campus restroom and cleaned up as best I could
- ☐ Purchased a tampon or pad from a coin dispenser in the campus restroom
- ☐ Asked a friend or other individual for a tampon or pad (or other menstrual product)
- ☐ Purchased tampons or pads from the campus bookstore
- ☐ Went to the student union building to get a menstrual product
- ☐ Left campus to purchase a menstrual product
- ☐ Went home and stayed home
- ☐ Went home to get a menstrual product and came back to campus
- ☐ Used toilet paper as a make-shift pad
- ☐ Used paper towel as a make-shift pad
- ☐ Are there other things you have done that are not listed here
- ☐ Yes / No
  - If yes, you are welcome to share with us what they are if you would like to [list as many as you like]

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6. Have you ever had to leave class while it is in session to manage your menstrual flow?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

7. Were you ever late for class in order to manage your menstrual flow?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

8. Have you ever been late for an exam/test in order to manage your menstrual flow?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

9. Have you ever had to leave an exam/test in order to manage your menstrual flow?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

10. Has managing your menstrual flow interrupted your participation in other education related activities? [check as many as you like]

- ☐ Presentations
- ☐ Labs
- ☐ Field trips
- ☐ Group meetings
- ☐ Office hours
- ☐ Practices for a sports team you are a member of

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- ☐ Games for a sports team you are a member of
- ☐ Other, please specify

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11. Have you ever missed, had to leave, arrived late for class because you **did not have** the products you require **readily available** to manage your menstrual flow?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

12. One aspect of the research project is to collect stories about student experiences of menstruating on campus. Do you have any stories you would like to share about menstruating on campus?

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13. If menstrual products were freely available across various public spaces, where would you hope to find them? [check as many as you like]

- ☐ Community organizations
- ☐ Transition homes
- ☐ Schools, colleges, universities
- ☐ Public washrooms
- ☐ Vending machines in the street
- ☐ Pharmacies and drug stores
- ☐ Other (please specify)
- ☐ None, I don't think menstrual products should be freely available
- ☐ I'd rather not say

14. In a **typical week** during the semester, how frequently are you on campus?

- ☐ Daily
- ☐ About 3-4 days per week
- ☐ About 2-3 days per week
- ☐ Once a week

15. On a **typical day** during the semester, approximately how many hours do you spend on campus?

- ☐ 1-3 hours
- ☐ 4-6 hours
- ☐ 7-8 hours
- ☐ More than 8 hours

17. Are you currently registered as a student (part-time or full-time) at [post-secondary institution]?

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- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

18. What is your gender<sup>i</sup>?

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Transgender female
- ☐ Transgender male
- ☐ Gender variant/non-conforming/non-binary
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ I'd rather not say

19. Do you have Indigenous heritage?

- ☐ Yes, I have Indigenous heritage  
Can you tell us how you self-define?  
\_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ No

20. Are you racialized as a person of colour?

- ☐ Yes  
Can you tell us how you self-define?  
\_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ No

21. What is your birthdate? [Day/month/year]

\_\_\_\_\_

22. What is your student status at[post-secondary institution]?

- ☐ Domestic
- ☐ International
  - If international, country of origin? (Please choose from the drop-down menu)

23. If you have any additional thoughts or comments, please share them with us here:

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Thank you for participating in the Period Product Access Survey. Your survey is now complete. Click [here](#) to continue to the debriefing form where you can learn more about our study, as well as get access to some additional resources/support if you so desire.

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<sup>i</sup> Future surveys to reword this query: What is your gender identity: woman, man, trans-man, trans-woman, gender variant/non-conforming/non-binary, prefer to self-describe, prefer not to say.