

## **An Open Letter to the Hamilton College Community**

March 27, 2018

We are the parents of the late Graham Burton, a second-year Hamilton College student who took his life in his dormitory room on December 14, 2016. Yesterday would have been his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

The purpose of this letter is to encourage the Administration to take meaningful steps in pursuit of two objectives: to ensure that no other family has to endure what we have experienced, and to secure the wellbeing of its students whose lives might be at risk. We do not believe the College has done enough in the wake of our son's death to safeguard other students. This issue becomes even more pressing when one notes that one of Graham's classmates died tragically just nine months after Graham, on September 26, 2017. That's why we are reaching out to you, members of the College community, in the hope that you will ask the questions and seek the action that will achieve these objectives.

Suicide is a leading cause of death among college and university students in the United States, and many more students attempt or contemplate it. It is essential that colleges, including Hamilton College, put measures in place to identify and assist students at risk.

By way of context, the College states in the "Our Promises" section of its website that it is a community where people "watch out for one another" and "take responsibility for each other." The College also promises that students who exhibit difficulties will be referred to its "Students of Concern" team and will be given extensive, coordinated, and individualized support. We believe the College has failed to honour these promises.

After Graham's death, we were provided with copies of email messages that members of the College faculty and administration exchanged with one another and with Graham during the 2016 fall semester. We learned from these emails for the first time that Graham had experienced significant difficulties starting early that fall, that he had stopped attending his classes and doing his work, and that his professors had repeatedly expressed concerns to the Associate Dean of Students, who was tasked with providing resources and support for students. Unfortunately, Graham did not share his difficulties with us or his friends.

These email messages show that, between mid-October and mid-December of 2016:

- Six academic and administrative personnel, including the Associate Dean, emailed their concerns about Graham to each other on at least 20 occasions.
- Five academic and administrative personnel emailed Graham directly, expressing concern as to his whereabouts and wellbeing.
- Four Academic Warnings were issued because Graham was failing his courses, each one of which should have prompted action.
- Three different professors issued those Warnings, illustrating the breadth of the concern.
- The Associate Dean herself told Graham's advisor (who was also one of his professors) that "He [Graham] is in a bad state..."
- On November 2, Graham's advisor wrote the Associate Dean, saying that he was still unable to reach Graham, and that "Obviously what's happening here is a complete crash and burn. I don't know what the procedures/rules are for contacting parents but if this was my kid, I'd want to know."

Despite all this, we, Graham's parents, were never notified and Graham was not referred to the Students of Concern team or given the support he clearly needed.

In light of these facts, and in pursuit of the two objectives mentioned above, we ask the College to take a number of specific steps that, as far as we know, it has not yet taken. We suggest the following:

1. Establish an independent panel consisting of at least three mental health professionals from outside Hamilton College, with a mandate to devise a "best in class" standard of care for students. We would hope that this standard would include, at a minimum:
  - A clear definition and protocol relating to "Students of Concern," along with measures to ensure that the protocol is followed for individual students. The fact that Graham was never referred to the Students of Concern team, plus the tragic death of another student in September 2017, suggest to us that the College is not effectively identifying and supporting students in distress.

- A mandatory policy and process for parental notification in circumstances where a professor, coach, advisor or other community member has concerns about a student’s wellbeing. Notification should also occur when academic performance, withdrawal from class, or withdrawal from other regular activities indicate a significant change in behavior and, therefore, grounds for concern. The notification policy should be posted to the College website, included in the student handbook, and referenced in a letter to the parents of incoming first year and transfer students.
  - Mandatory annual sensitivity training for all members of the Dean of Students' office including the Dean, Associates, Assistants and administrative staff. They are the frontline personnel responsible for student care and safety. As such, these officials must be acutely tuned to the potential needs of all students.
  - Mandatory annual training by external mental health professionals for all faculty, staff and students. This training would focus on student mental health and wellbeing in general, and suicide prevention in particular. Its purpose would be to instill the idea that no single office or administrator is responsible for recognizing the warning signs of a student in crisis, and that all relevant personnel should know of available support services and how to access them.
2. Establish appropriate disciplinary procedures for administrators who are specifically charged with providing resources, guidance and support for students, and who fail to discharge their responsibilities as set forth in the Hamilton College Faculty Handbook. In Graham’s case, we are particularly concerned about the conduct of the individual who was the point person on the College’s staff who was responsible for receiving and acting on the concerns raised by Graham’s professors. Despite his professors’ increasingly urgent requests for support, his four academic warnings, failing marks in three classes, terrible attendance record, missed assignments, and the concerns the staff person expressed herself, the staff person did not refer Graham to the Students of Concern team, directly connect him with any other resources that would help him or contact us, his parents. On December 12, one of Graham’s professors told the Vice President and Dean of Students that he was still not attending classes and also expressed concerns about the staff person. Graham took his life two days later.

We believe that the College’s acceptance and implementation of the measures noted above would help to better identify students at risk and create a more effective network of support services than is currently in place. It is our sincere belief that Graham's death might have been prevented had the required level of competence and care been displayed by the College and its relevant administrative personnel. Even more, it is our hope that the proposed measures could ensure that students in need receive the care they require and deserve. In this way, the College would be better able to live up to its own promise: “At Hamilton, we value and take care of one another.”

We sincerely hope that the measures noted above will generate the discussion that we believe is required in order to better serve the students of Hamilton College. We believe this is an opportune time for the College

to fully take on these issues as it continues to raise funds and increase revenue in connection with its Strategic Plan.

In closing, we wish to extend our sincere appreciation for the many expressions of support we have received from members of the College community.

Sincerely,

Stewart and Gina Burton