

June 2019



# Student Mental Health at the University of Toronto

*Insights and Data from the Innovation Hub*



## Introduction

Since January 2019, the Innovation Hub has been re-examining the insights and data collected from its previous (and ongoing) partnerships and events in hopes to shed light on potential paths forward regarding student mental health and wellness at the university. Recent numbers<sup>1</sup> show a marked increase in student stress and related mental health challenges over the years; something that Innovation Hub data has also highlighted.

The Innovation Hub was originally created to better understand two questions: *Who are our students? And how is the world changing for them?* In pursuit of answering these questions, the Innovation Hub teams have completed over 300 empathy-based interviews and conducted many additional feedback and data-sharing events with students across the university in the last three years. Working with numerous campus partners and involving hundreds of students as staff and volunteers in its process, the Innovation Hub's work has shed light on the student experience and provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the context in which University of Toronto (U of T) students find themselves.

Outlined here is a summary of the major themes and challenges observed consistently throughout the Innovation Hub's interviews with students. These themes and insights are pervasive throughout the work with students from undergraduate to graduate studies across all disciplines, and have shown to be true across multiple projects with different partners on campus. Possibilities for change that emerge from the data are also offered for further exploration.



Fig 1. Innovation Hub participants engaging in workshops and projects.

## Understanding the Institutional Climate

Many common challenges at the U of T are also found to occur at other Canadian institutions. That said, there are unique factors at the university that contribute to the current climate. With a world-class reputation, U of T has attracted substantial enrolment numbers for both undergraduate and graduate students. Looking at undergraduate enrolment alone, the current population of over 70,000 students outnumbers that of all eight Ivy League schools combined at over 65,000<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, over 90% of students at U of T across three campuses live off campus and therefore have a daily commute<sup>3</sup> with many of these students commuting over 1 hour per day<sup>4</sup>. While the reputation and size of the university community are regarded as strengths, they also contribute to a number of challenges. These challenges have become apparent throughout the Innovation Hub's past few years of experience in student-centered project work and are outlined in three key themes explored in this report.

<sup>1</sup> Refer to "A Growing Challenge" in the email sent out by President Gertler

<sup>2</sup> Based on quantitative data from various sources such as U of T Facts & Figures, NSSE, and other surveys provided by Jeff Burrow, Manager of Assessment & Analysis, Division of Student Life

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> ibid

## Theme One: A Narrative of Excellence

Drawing on the accomplishments of its distinguished alumni, a long history, and productivity and strength as a research institution, U of T has cultivated -and actively promotes- an atmosphere of individual excellence. Inspired by the grand narrative of success attributed to the university, prospective students feel as though admission grants them membership into a prestigious community. While this is a point of pride, it also carries the weight of expectation. Believing U of T to be a prestigious institution home to the exceptional, students feel a unique sense of isolation from their peers when their experience does not align with that narrative. Rather than regarding challenge and failure simply as a lack of knowledge or skill and part of the learning process, it also raises concerns about belonging to the university community. Oftentimes, the reputation that initially drew students to the university becomes a source of alienation and shame rather than pride. Struggling students do not see their experiences and hardships reflected in stories focused exclusively on success. Quotations throughout the report are from different students across a range of programs and study levels:

*"I thought it could be difficult, to [succeed] here [...] when I first saw the Aerospace department - they mentioned on Google that they helped Apollo land safely. They could have been dead, but these professors solved the pressure lock problem in like 11 minutes. That story kind of made me feel like, 'wow, this sounds kind of tough and challenging. I don't know if I can survive'..."*

Reflecting this emphasis on celebrating achievement, students struggle to separate themselves from their work. Students at the U of T tend to privilege grades over other metrics of growth and success. In hyper-competitive undergraduate programs, evaluations of academic performance can feel like evaluations of character:

*"I tend to base my self-worth on my marks, which I know is not a good thing but it's just how I've always been. I strive for excellence, I want teachers to like me, and that has worked to my benefit in that I do get high marks. But it's also detrimental in that when teachers don't like my work, it feels like a personal attack sometimes."*

The intimate connection between a student's academic performance and their self-esteem becomes a source of anxiety as they adjust to the rigors of study at the university level. While class averages offer evidence to the contrary, there is an enduring belief that low grades are an anomaly. Across different programs and levels of study, students consistently feel that they are struggling alone in a sea of overachievers:

*"When I tell my friends "I really have to study, I'm going to fail this course," I mean I really have to study. I'm going to fail this course. Because for them it's like, "oh you've got an 80, you just want a 90". No, I've got a 40, I want a 50. So, sometimes they don't understand that..."*

When struggling with the demands of school or life, students expressed concerns that extend beyond practical exigencies. Eager to maintain appearances to validate their presence in the university, they emphasised competition within their programs. The inability to keep up with the demands of their coursework might be read by others as a lack of dedication or natural talent:

*"But again, falling behind, I cannot take it very lightly - I get very stressed. I don't want to appear as someone who doesn't care. I think I do much more than what others in my program do. I don't have a 5-minute break in my day, but still you don't really see this. I look like someone who is not keeping up and is not good enough in program"*

These tensions are exacerbated by a pervasive sense of uncertainty regarding the future. Students often struggle to see value in their degree in an increasingly competitive job market. Even those who see a more direct path between their course work and life post-graduation often express ambivalence about their future careers. In both cases, students felt that the academic decisions that they made while at the U of T will have lasting impact on their future careers - for better or for worse:

*"I was like really sure what I wanted to when I graduated high school. Very sure. So that was the program I went into and then that wasn't what I wanted! You know, you spend a lot of time feeling like you're trapped in something you don't want to study and you're not being authentic to yourself and what your interests are. And to live life like that for like, long periods of time is like, really...it's not fun..."*



## Theme Two: Finding Community

One of the most consistent and salient themes to emerge was the difficulty of finding community at the U of T. Due to the large student population and the high percentage of commuters, many students feel as though they cannot connect with their peers. This theme works in tandem with the aforementioned theme of excellence, creating a culture wherein students feel like outsiders. The routine navigation of the downtown St. George campus was often described as a profoundly lonely experience, lacking in meaningful human interactions or close ties to other students, staff, or faculty. Recent research suggests that access to social support systems contributes positively to psychological well-being and resiliency<sup>5</sup>:

*"Well, you walk to school by yourself, you sit in class by yourself, you walk home by yourself, you go to the library by yourself... It's very isolating. [...] It's like, okay I have friends...one that lives in Markham, one that lives in Mississauga...it's not like everyone is living around campus. Your classes are huge. They're all over the place [...] You just don't know anybody."*

Within their own faculty and cohort, students are often able to maintain some collegial relationships. However, these relationships rarely extend beyond the confines of the institution. Opportunities for socialization, relaxation, and support typically come from kin networks or friendships that exist outside the U of T:

*"Sometimes I felt I was missing social elements. You know, I am friendly to people, I made friends in law school, but it is not like we socialize [outside of school]. I like to share experiences, but I share experiences with my family more than my class."*

Commuter students face significant barriers to connecting with their peers. This is an issue of special importance given that more than 90% of U of T students commute, with over 50% of those students spending one hour or more in transit a day<sup>6</sup>. Without the benefit of connections made through campus residence and operating on constrained schedules, commuter students have fewer opportunities to meet and interact with fellow students. Even students who are proactive in their attempts to find community on campus struggle to establish lasting relationships with their peers:

*"Yeah, [finding connections on campus] is pretty difficult. So I try to get involved in [...] events outside of my department [...] I try to read newsletters from other faculties as well to see if [there are things] that I would be interested in. So, how do I make connections with people? I think if I see the person more than once at a particular event and then maybe get their contact information and talk a bit more. But for the most part, I probably just talk to people and enjoy their company for whatever time it is, and then carry on with life."*

As coursework intensifies in their later years of study, the limited opportunities students have to find community are further diminished. As a result, communities and friendships established during the first year of study - a period when co-residence in dormitories<sup>7</sup> is more common and course loads are typically lighter - are vital for creating a lasting sense of community throughout students' time as undergraduates:

*"I feel like I've outgrown a lot of the extra-curricular stuff on campus. It was fun in first and second year... I tried going in third year, and .... I couldn't connect with it anymore. And so I stopped going.... the courses get a little bit tougher in upper years because... the class sizes get smaller and you're expected to participate more in lecture, so that was definitely a motivating factor."*

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<sup>5</sup> Feeney, Brooke, and Nancy Collins. "A New Look at Social Support: A Theoretical Perspective on Thriving through Relationships." *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 19.2 (2015): 113-47. Web. 6 Apr. 2019

<sup>6</sup> Based on quantitative data from various sources such as U of T Facts & Figures, NSSE, and other surveys provided by Jeff Burrow, Manager of Assessment & Analysis, Division of Student Life

<sup>7</sup> 72% of first-year students living in residence find community within their residences, based on quantitative data provided by Jeff Burrow, Manager of Assessment & Analysis, Division of Student Life



### Theme Three: Navigating Resources

While U of T is home to an array of student facing services and service providers, many students struggle to access these resources. The experience of navigating student resources can further compound the feelings of isolation highlighted in the preceding sections of this report. This is due to a number of factors including the stigmatization of asking for help and identifying and locating appropriate resources in a highly decentralized campus. Due to the university's culture of excellence, students often feel as though acknowledging that they need support is a failure in and of itself. There is a widely held belief that successful students are self-sufficient and do not have to rely on external aid. When students do engage with institutional support systems, it is often accompanied with feelings of isolation:

*‘Yeah, mental health is something that I’ve had to...mental illness is something that I’ve had to learn how to cope with. And, doing so in a university environment is tough because a lot of the time, it can feel like you’re facing it on your own. Which might not be true, but it can feel that way.’*

When students do realize that they are struggling, their first line of action is often turning inwards or towards external sources before accessing resources offered by the university. This was attributed to a general lack of awareness regarding what resources were available on campus:

*‘I started out just trying to...do my own initiatives like working out, eating well...that was my way of coping at first. Then I actually talked to my family doctor and she was the one who connected me with Accessibility Services and also the [therapy] group, so that’s how I found out about that. I’m not sure if I would have considered signing up for that of my own accord: it was definitely helpful to have that connection made for me.’*

In rare cases, even when students have worked with university services to devise appropriate accommodations, such requests are not always honoured by their professors. This has the dual effect of invalidating the student's struggles as well as making the class less conducive to their learning and success:

*‘I had sent the professor an email outlining my accommodations. I was dealing with full muscle atrophy at this time [so] I needed to have reserved, accessible seating on the first floor. [...] I did not receive a response to my email [...] So, I went up to him in class and asked him what was going on and he told me that my email was very aggressive [...] He was very abrasive and made me feel shameful for [even] asking. He also made it seem like I did not need accommodations, maybe because my disability was not clearly visible to him.’*

Students feeling overwhelmed by the process of locating appropriate resources is also something that is echoed in interviews conducted with student service professionals. In interviews, staff describe an intensely siloed institution with administrative systems that lack clarity. This complexity can make it difficult to direct students to relevant services and personnel outside of the division in which they work. As such, students often encounter a support system wherein they feel they are “bounced around” between networks and services, contributing to feelings of frustration and confusion for both the students and the staff involved and sometimes leads to students dropping out of the process:

*‘I feel that UofT has all the resources, but you don't know where to start. I remember I went to my Registrar for something and she gave me someone else's contact. [...] When I contacted them, they were like, ‘Oh, I'm sorry - I don't specialize in this, but please contact this person’. I was like, ‘okay’, and then this issue was going on for about month before I met the person who I could really talk to.’*



*Possibilities for Change*

While there are challenges that underline the student experience at U of T, the Innovation Hub has also learned about many possibilities for enacting change through its process and the principles that guide its work. While it can always be tempting from an administrative perspective to approach these challenges through added services, programs, and resources, evidence from the data suggests that the longer process of shifting the narrative of what it means to be at U of T through community-based dialogue and solutions will be a more effective approach to the issues outlined above. It is important to acknowledge a few significant components of the challenge:

- 1) ***It isn't just a few*** - Observation through 300+ interviews with U of T students across all disciplines and study levels is that while there are some cases of students facing exceptional challenge, the typical student experience is also characterized by high levels of stress and worry. Students are spread thin between rigorous study, competition with peers, navigation of health and academic resources and the physical environment of the university, and a foreboding sense of uncertainty about the future. The result is a student body that feels tremendous pressure coupled with experiencing barriers, either real or perceived, to accessing support systems.
  
- 2) ***It isn't about more programs and services*** - There are already many programs on campus for students – many are under-utilized while others are perceived by students to be difficult to access. Additionally, many students tell us that there is just too much at U of T and they often hear about services after the period in which they may have benefitted from them has passed. Additionally, the capacity for staff and faculty to offer more programs and services is limited. A more innovative approach is needed.
  
- 3) ***Many students are already solving their own problems*** – Many students operate from a perspective that when they encounter a challenge, they must solve the problem on their own. There is a strong sense of individual responsibility – students feel that their experience is one of individual success or individual failure. As a result, many students will not seek out support for their challenges. How, then, can the administration and faculty empower and support students to be most effective in this process?

The acknowledgment of the above noted themes on campus and dimensions of the challenge help to then frame possibilities for change as outlined in the following table:

Current Environment	Aspirational Environment	Questions to Explore
Students experience fear at the notion of failure or difficulty that unduly interferes with their ability to learn and succeed academically	Students embrace the challenges of an academically rigorous environment and experience failure in the context of a learning process and experience shared by all exceptional thinkers, researchers, and learners.	How might the excellence narrative be broadened to include real stories of failure and overcoming adversity?
Students feel isolated in their struggles and find that the current campus environment presents few opportunities for making meaningful connections outside of their residence or department	Students are given ample opportunities to meet and share their experiences, helping them to build personal support systems but also find comfort in knowing that they are not alone in dealing with challenges	How might the university create spaces where students feel they can authentically share their experiences and learn that they are not alone?
Students feel hesitant reaching out to institutional supports due to feeling that it amounts to failure, that their challenges will be invalidated, or a general unawareness about available resources	Students are readily aware of the university services that are able to support them in times of need and can access them easily. Utilizing these services is normalized as part of the university experience.	How can information about services be made salient to students who often experience information overload via official communications? How can U of T normalize the need for students to ask for help?



## *Designing for Resilience Together*

In working toward solutions to the above noted challenges, there is an opportunity to bring students, staff, faculty, and other community members together to share responsibility in exploring opportunities for change. Taking a community development approach grounded in empathy, listening, and dialogue will not only help to bring clarity: it will serve as a learning and healing process for those involved as they discover that they are not alone. The scope of the challenges before the staff and faculty of U of T extend beyond that of simply administering top-down services and policies. The richest possible future lies in addressing the roots of these issues through new approaches that put students at the centre of the process.

The Innovation Hub has seen first-hand the value in letting students tell their stories; the healing and relief that can happen, and the compassion and understanding that is built. The three years spent conducting feedback events and experience gathering student stories has shown that the Innovation Hub methods and structures work well for exploring students' challenges on campus and helping to uncover the deeper needs that inspire ideas for innovative and inclusive solutions. The Innovation Hub will continue to support communities at U of T by involving student perspectives on mental health, wellness, and their lived experiences at the university.



*Fig 2. Various Innovation Hub events and design thinking experience workshops with students, staff and partners.*

# Contributors



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