



Career Exploration and Engagement: Student Engagement Plan

Themes and Insights: Design Thinking Summary
November 2018



Prepared for the CxED Student Engagement Task Force,
University of Toronto

introduction

In line with Career Exploration and Education's (CxED) goal of learner-centred programming, the CxED Student Engagement Task Force teamed up with the Innovation Hub to identify processes that will facilitate increased involvement of student colleagues in CxED's programs and events. The following report outlines the Innovation Hub's analysis of ten semi-structured interviews conducted by the Student Engagement Task Force over the past months. The interviews focus on the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of staff and student colleagues in relation to collaboration and interpersonal dynamics at CxED. The analysis reveals "needs" that should be addressed to cultivate a sustainable and positive workplace culture at CxED.

The Innovation Hub identified four themes—two for student colleagues and two for staff. **The student colleague themes are *Connection and Care* and *Nurtured Autonomy*, while the staff themes are *Connection and Performance* and *Initiative*.** Each theme establishes a need, and the accompanying insights identify values required to achieve that need in practice.

Personas, which are included at the end of this report, provide a snapshot into the general wants, needs, and experiences of staff and student colleagues at CxED. A persona is a written account (developed from a number of sources) of a character who represents a "typical" experience. The personas in this report are compiled using data from a number of participants to reflect a collection of experiences, rather than any one individual or experience at CxED.

student colleague theme one: Connection and Care

Student colleagues consistently emphasize the importance of connection in feeling cared for and supported by staff members at CxED, both personally as peers and professionally as employees. Most reports are positive, though some participants report occasional negative experiences.

Insights

- 1) **Contact:** Student colleagues stress the importance of regular contact in both professional and personal contexts. Consistent touch points for communication, from work-related check-ins to informal personal greetings, are reported as significant factors in building positive relationships.

Key Data Points

“A lot of things happened that I was not being listened to or supported. These things translated into everyday interaction. One thing I really value is communication. Even the minor stuff that saying ‘Hi’ to people in the mornings really matters.”

“When it came to the work itself, we did not check in regularly. I was only able to give a summary what I was doing, but there was not follow up or questions or discussion on how to grow and improve.”

- 2) **Sense of Belonging:** Student colleagues value a sense of belonging and community during their time with CxED. Many report their appreciation for a culture that emphasizes this, while some discuss frustrations and tensions that arise while searching for this type of connection—either with one another or with the staff.

Key Data Points

“Last year we had two teams—the Resume team and the Career Start team. A lot of them say they don’t know each other. Sometimes they did not participate in the Orientation. They come later and so they don’t know each other at all. They say, ‘We do not know each other at all.’ That’s the worst part I guess.”

“Staff was encouraging, provided me with opportunities within a larger community—wasn’t working in this one silo. Got to know different people and make new connections that I can leverage.”

- 3) **Growth:** Student colleagues consistently speak of the importance they place on communication, and on feeling that the staff are invested in their personal and

professional growth. This investment from the staff, when present, gives students a sense of support and fulfillment in their work and aspirations for the future.

Key Data Points

“Well, she even asked me what I wanted to do with my career; that was really cool, it showed she wanted to get to know me better and actually cared. She asked for my opinions on the project first and asked, “What do you think you can or want to bring to the project?” I felt like there was a lot of open dialogue, and she really wanted to get to know me as a person and a peer—”

“After a long time of job search[ing] I was losing confidence. Because of my disability, I thought I was never going to get a job. [...] In talking to my supervisor, she was able to tell me that I was not doing anything wrong; either the job was not right for me or it was the person who was not comfortable. The responsibility should be on them, if that is the person they are [then] I should not be working with them—which made me feel better.”

student colleague theme two: Nurtured Autonomy

Student colleagues report their desire for ownership, growth, and responsibility in their work at CxED. They place particular emphasis on feeling nurtured and guided when taking on independent projects, and report feelings of either satisfaction or frustration in response to the efficacy and presence of this support.

Insights

- 1) **Balance:** The importance of balance manifests in the student colleagues' appreciation for simultaneously being given space to feel ownership over their projects, and feeling an appropriate and useful level of support from staff.

Key Data Points

"It is very important to get that balance—being far away so that the students feels like they are able to do things they want to do, they can work well, but also close enough that students always feel supported."

"I actually had to work on my own and be the one to write emails and send emails. So it wasn't like everything was done for me. I was provided just enough but not everything so that I became like too reliant on the staff. And I think that gave me distant enough room to grow. And I was provided enough challenges that I was able to grow, while also not feeling like I was left alone and feeling frustrated."

- 2) **Empowerment:** Student colleagues report the importance of having permission and feeling empowered to make decisions and have an impact on their work and projects.

Key Data Points

"I'm graduating soon and I'm leaving the Career Centre and I feel like I haven't had a lot of opportunities to do much, and with this I feel like I've had the opportunity to make a change and impact. Like I could come back and see that I've made a change."

"I knew why I was making the decision I was making so that when I was left on my own, I did not feel I was too reliant on the person because I knew that I had it in me to make those decisions."

- 3) **Learning and Responsibility:** Student colleagues emphasize the value they place on having opportunities to learn, grow, and develop during their time with CxED. Opportunities for leadership and responsibility are particularly important, as is the experience and freedom to learn from mistakes.

Key Data Points

"[Supervisor 1] has nurtured me to have self-reflection and grow. She trusts her student staff to grow: they can grow; they can be educated. They both are very supportive. [Supervisor 2] has nurtured me in my leadership skills."

"I think building confidence has a lot to do with giving the responsibility, also being OK with mistakes happening, which is very challenging when you have a project to work on and you give a part of it away to someone else without much experience, and you may know perfectly how to do it and knowing that the other person taking some parts of it, it may not happen a way you want to."

staff

theme one:

Connection and Performance

Staff comment repeatedly on the importance of interpersonal connection in achieving high performance at CxED. Communication and interaction with students play valuable roles in clarifying expectations and fostering meaningful relationships with student colleagues.

Insights

- 1) **Expectations:** Staff report the value of establishing clear expectations and making mutual efforts to communicate and meet those expectations. They often use the word “connection” in reference to cultivating professional success for student colleagues.

Key Data Points

“Communicating our expectations ahead of time helps. Students have their own routine, and their own schedule, and sometimes they show up at the very last moment and it’s hard to connect with them.”

“For me, it’s up to the student to be excited and up to us to make sure we’re being connectors. We have to ensure they know we want them to have a fantastic experience and that we’re willing to do our part to make that happens, but they also have to know that it’s up to them to bite into it!”

- 2) **Mentorship and Guidance:** Staff consistently express the enjoyment they feel in offering mentorship and guidance to student colleagues at CxED. They value the opportunity to share their skills and offer touch points for student colleagues to rely on for professional development. A number of staff report feeling “inspired” and “proud” to witness the student colleagues’ success and work ethic.

Key Data Points

“We are the helpers—the connectors. I didn’t have that. I was first generation. No one knew how to help me get that and I didn’t know how to ask. I want our work study students to know that they have us.”

“She kept telling me about how helpful all of these tips were and that it was making her realize what she was thinking wasn’t always true. She said she was passing these tips on to her friends. That made me feel nice.”

- 3) **Structure:** Staff express their appreciation of, and desire for, structured communication strategies to effectively connect with student colleagues about work, expectations, and goals.

Key Data Points

“Within this structure it allows us to have more time to do the work, then have the debrief with the student, then go back and do it again. Instead of having someone shadow and not having time for a debrief, it was already built into a structured learning environment.”

“We just need more clarity, and we need students who know to ask their supervisors for clarification. We need more accountability from each other.”

staff theme two: Initiative

Staff appreciation for student initiative is apparent in their approval when student colleagues engage in independent work, take responsibility for simple tasks, and show investment in their time at CxED.

Insights

- 1) **Independence:** Staff remark on the initiative taken by student colleagues and express their appreciation for high levels of professional drive and leadership.

Key Data Points

“You want to be this ... tour guide that can help people find their way. It’s not necessary for every student to have initiative, but it makes it so much more interesting when they do.”

“The Peer asked whether he could try out a different activity, and I replied, ‘Why not—just go ahead and do it.’”

“I don’t want to cast people into a mould, but it can be really hard to find people who have initiative. People come want[ing] to have their hand held.”

- 2) **Responsibility:** Staff appreciate the initiative taken by student colleagues who complete tasks that are more necessary than fun. They consider responsibility as a vital piece of CxED culture and speak approvingly of their “hands-on team.”

Key Data Points

“I want to work with students [who] are authentic—who know that filing that piece of paper isn’t fun, but [who] can respect that they have to do it.”

“We were lucky that we are a hands-on team—that we just get it done! Once we realized that things weren’t going to go to plan, we were able to shift gears and just get it done.”

- 3) **Investment:** Staff express admiration for student colleagues’ investment in their roles. Most negative experiences with student colleagues were related to feeling that students did not want to be at the centre or to take part in assigned projects. Staff value the opportunity to work with student colleagues who go “above and beyond.”

Key Data Points

“But you want to work with the students who do the ‘more’. The ‘more’ is the indication that they are investing in the relationship.”

“My worst experience involved working with a student [who] didn’t want to be there. It felt like pulling teeth. I didn’t want to be a dentist.”

student colleague persona: Max

“I think [what] the system can do is just to make sure you train people well, and not only just training [...] but make sure [to] offer ongoing support and mentorship, offering opportunities to grow as a person or employee.”



I moved to Toronto about a year ago to attend a leadership program at U of T. As a newcomer to the city, I was worried about navigating the job market after graduation. I really wanted to help other students who were in a similar position, so I started working at Career Exploration and Education. Over the past six months, the project I was most excited to be a part of focused on increasing opportunities for racialized students in the workforce. Not only did I feel personally connected to the work through my own experiences as a person of colour, I also had the support of a friendly staff member who guided me through the learning process and gave me regular feedback.

This was a welcome change from my last assignment, where I was left in the dark and didn't receive much support. I wasn't sure what my tasks were, and finding opportunities to communicate with staff was hard. Even though I thought I could do a really good job with the assignment, I didn't know how to apply my knowledge and ended up asking for a different task.

I felt frustrated with the experience because there wasn't a lot of opportunity for connection, which is something that is important to me on several levels. I need to feel connected to my work, my colleagues, and my peers. I remember one time when I first started working here, a student came into CxED to ask for help with one of her school assignments. She got shuffled around from person to person, and ended up being told that we couldn't help her. I approached the student and chatted with her, and it quickly became clear that she just needed someone to talk to. She was stressed about academics and her lack of community as a new student, which I really related to.

I feel lucky that I've been able to find a sense of connection through my work at CxED and collaborating with staff. My supervisor always makes an effort to ask me how I'm doing and what I need to feel supported in finishing my tasks. By checking in with me both professionally and personally—from structured meetings to simply saying hi in the morning—she has helped me get the most out of my time here and connect with my peers, which is what motivated me to work at CxED in the first place.

staff

persona: Olivia

“For me, it’s up to the student to be excited and up to us to make sure we’re being connectors. We have to ensure they know we want them to have a fantastic experience and that we’re willing to do our part to make that happens, but they also have to know that it’s up to them to bite into it!”



I’ve worked at Career Exploration and Education for a few years now and have worked with a number of universities for over ten. I really like my job and would say I’m pretty dedicated to my position and to the people I work with here at CxED. For the most part, I’ve had great experiences with the student colleagues I work with, but recently I guess I’ve been having some issues with a student colleague who keeps not showing up for their shifts. Most recently, at a workshop that CxED put on, the student didn’t show up and it became apparent that none of the tasks that were supposed to have happened before the event were taken care of.

In reaction to the situation, a few of us quickly took on extra tasks and began organizing as best we could. It was really stressful to deal with, but I also felt a real appreciation for our team as I witnessed everyone pull the event together in spite of the confusion. It was pretty frustrating, and embarrassing really, because all these other students were there to attend this workshop and the main person wasn’t even there. If it wasn’t for another student colleague coming in and taking on that extra role, they would have been left hanging. This other student colleague, the one who stepped in, really helped us all out in taking on the extra work.

I think that’s one of my favourite things about working with student colleagues: witnessing their drive and determination with the work. We’re always really busy here at CxED and just knowing that the student colleagues we work with are showing up, ready to take on that level of responsibility ... it really shows that they recognize how much work we all do. It’s inspiring too, you know? Some of them will come up and ask me questions about their career and are really proactive. Sometimes I feel like we can get stuck in routine ... but being able to work with students and see all of the energy they bring to the job can really inspire me.

Every once in a while, there’s a student who doesn’t really show up to work or ends up dropping the ball; sometimes that’s just being a student you know? Being in school and also working is a lot to manage and I get it. I imagine that communication breaks down sometimes too It’s definitely a two-way street with that, but being able to work with these student colleagues who go above and beyond has been really awesome.

conclusion and next steps

The data gathered in this process clearly indicate that student colleagues and staff place significant value on their experiences and relationships at Career Exploration and Education. Considering the emphasis placed on communication, autonomy, professionalism, and initiative by all participants, we present the following questions to guide the next phase of program development:

- 1) How might CxED make it easier and more accessible for student colleagues to “say yes” to opportunities for engagement?
- 2) How might CxED create formal and informal opportunities for communication and connection between staff and student colleagues?
- 3) How does the idea of initiative affect the relationships and experiences taking place at CxED? Can initiative be fostered?
- 4) How is “growth” being defined and incorporated explicitly into the goals of CxED?

Student Contributors

Liza Brechbill, 2nd Year Master of Education, Adult Education and Community Development

Mia Sanders, 1st Year Undergraduate, Women & Gender Studies and Diaspora & Transnational Studies

Danielle Lum, 2nd Year Master of Information, User Experience Design

Irene Duah-Kessie, Master of Science, Sustainability Management

Nicholas Feinig, 4th Year PhD, Anthropology

Joel West, Undergraduate, Semiotics and the Study of Religion



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

For more information, or to work with the Innovation Hub, please contact Julia Smeed at julia.smeed@utoronto.ca or 416-978-8619, or visit our blog at uoft.me/innovationhub