



Student Connection and Engagement at First Nations House

Themes and Insights: Design Thinking Summary
Summer 2018



Prepared for First Nations House,
University of Toronto

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introduction

First Nations House (FNH) provides culturally-relevant services to Indigenous students at the University of Toronto, supporting their academic success, personal growth, and leadership development. FNH staff, noticing a decline in the number of students using their services, worked with the Innovation Hub in Summer 2018 to investigate the reasons for this decline, solicit ideas for enhancing FNH's physical space, and gather inspiration for future programming.

The investigators conducted long-form qualitative interviews with students and staff on the ways that they currently engage with FNH. The goals of this project were to better understand student perspectives on the space, gain insight on the current state of Indigenous student engagement, and develop data-informed design principles for physical and program design.

From the student and staff interviews, **the investigators found that students primarily engage with FNH to access financial and academic supports (e.g., for research and writing), connect with culture, use printers, and attend community lunches. Participants commented on some gaps in service related to FNH's location, physical space, and availability to all Indigenous students.**

In this report, these findings are divided into three themes: guidance and support, community and space, and structural barriers. For each theme, we provide some insights and supporting quotations from the interviews. We conclude with a brief discussion of the project limitations and recommendations for next steps.

theme one:

Guidance and Support

Many students refer to First Nations House as a one-stop hub for basic needs; financial, academic, and cultural support; and guidance on navigating life at university.

Key Insights

- 1) **Resources:** Students appreciate the substantial resources available at FNH, including free lunches, computers and printers, the resource centre, academic and financial support, guidance on applying for scholarships and housing, and help navigating the university bureaucracy.
- 2) **Culture:** Students receive exposure to cultural knowledge through talks with elders and leaders in the community, cultural events, and research services, which allows them to better understand and connect with their studies and community.
- 3) **Relationships:** Students acknowledge that existing relationships with staff members whom they trust has made it easier for them to access services at FNH and other Indigenous student centres.

Supporting Quotations

“I decided to go back [to school] so finances were really a challenge for me. But I ended up getting a lot of support and guidance on where to apply for scholarships I found that was challenging, but I would use First Nations House as my first stop to talk to the financial person.”

“We used to have a lot of drumming once a week and it [coincides] with the Friday lunches, so I remember coming out to the Friday lunches and hand drumming and being able to practice my culture and have that cultural aspect and it was really refreshing. We are busy running around doing all this academic stuff, but to be able to do that, the cultural aspect really made it more open and welcoming.”

“At First Nations House, they hosted an elder from not my community but my nation. He came and talked about the idea of TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada] and just getting to meet him and listen to my language being spoken in a room full of people was the most wonderful experience I haven’t heard anyone speak it fluently in over 25 years. So just to be in this space, this institution, and hear this language being spoken was a very emotional experience. Just overwhelming and beautiful.”

“In first year I felt really lonely. I was older; I didn’t know anybody in the first class I took. I didn’t know one person It was really helpful for me to get to know people. I didn’t know any other indigenous people at all other than my family, a few family members, until I came here. And now I feel really connected to everyone.”

theme two: Community and Space

For many students, it is important to have programming that is reflective of the Indigenous student body, private outdoor spaces to engage in cultural practices, and a connection with the community.

Key Insights

- 1) **Sense of Belonging:** Participants recognize that a sense of belonging and community is necessary to engage with programs, services, and spaces designated for Indigenous student groups. Some students reported feeling judged by others or unwelcome in spaces, particularly in programs and spaces occupied by non-Indigenous people.
- 2) **Outdoor Space:** Students often commented on their need for private outdoor spaces to practise cultural ceremonies, garden, or meditate without being interrupted or policed by the public. Participants reported lack of space as a factor preventing them from engaging in spiritual practices and participating in activities with elders in the community.
- 3) **Capacity Building:** Participants consistently discussed the importance of capacity building in helping students and staff build a stronger, more connected community. They mentioned the need to increase staff positions so as to expand current programming, and to maximize students' agency in doing more for the community.

Supporting Quotations

“So, the first time I went there, I got grilled at the first desk about who I was and did not go there for months I had someone drag me back, and you don't always get a second chance like that, and it takes so much to get over it because the understanding of inclusion and Indigenous identity are fraught with politics and violence, and there is a lot for a student to get over once they experience that.”

“You walk in, there are offices, but there's this big open space where 'okay I'm not sure what to do but I'm just going to sit over here.' There isn't even that at First Nations House, like a clear place where 'oh you can just sit here comfortably.' I think maybe there are some chairs but they're lined up and off to the side. It's like a waiting room, but for what? It's a cramped one. There's nothing about it that feels super welcoming.”

“Having a space to be quiet or maybe reflect or meditate is important. I do wish there were spaces where I could smudge, I don't know if there are spaces where I can. Like I would love the ability to smudge before an exam to centre myself. What I do instead is I just find a quiet space to sit in the park and ground myself. The ability to access land more often would be a big thing. Where it's not just picnic tables but an area designated for quiet reflection.”

“There are some places where you can rent a fire pit but that’s not even ... that’s not private, for one. That’s not great for sacred fires for another. Like actual space where you can do ceremonies where it’s clear ... how you can do that ... and where it’s clear who’s taking care of it.”

“There are a lot of Indigenous students that are at U of T but they do not use the space. So if we had a movie Monday, lunch on Tuesday, Wednesdays we could do drumming and bring the cultural aspect back, and something on Thursdays and Fridays then students would know on these days I could go out and do this, but it has to be more regular programming.”

“U of T still does not have an identity in the Indigenous community because we are doing all these little things and it is focused on a person. Somebody, their aunt or person they meet might say call [someone] about this, but there is no U of T is doing this, and I think that speaks a lot to how we don’t have a community. A lot of people are doing things in silos and unfortunately that is really lacking, it shows that the concepts of Indigenous communities and reciprocal relationships are not internalized.”

theme three:

Structural Barriers

Many participants shared their frustrations with the structure of Indigenous programming and the institution's inability to appropriately respond to the community's needs. Staff are concerned about the ways students can access information and resources, and students question the lack of Indigenous representation in decision-making processes at student services.

Key Insights

- 1) **Funding for Resources:** Participants raised concerns about access to private spaces, lack of accessible elders, outdoor space and its maintenance, and travels for community work. Several students also identified barriers to accessing funding for attending ceremonies and emergencies at home.
- 2) **Access to Information:** Staff participants reported the standardization of student life procedures may prevent students from accessing information on FNH. They also mentioned that FNH does not have a physical space on the Mississauga and Scarborough campuses, leaving some students at a disadvantage due to transportation barriers.
- 3) **Leadership Representation:** Students commented on the lack of Indigenous representation within academic and support services, especially in leadership positions. They do not find the offered supports valuable, because it is unclear who is making the decisions, whose perspectives are considered, and which community benefits.
- 4) **Institutional Responsibility:** Some participants are concerned about the institutional disregard for Indigenous knowledge and values, as seen in programming, financial resources, and academic curricula. Calling back to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)'s calls to action, participants often refer to the university's responsibility to develop relationships with the Indigenous community and to better understand and respond to the needs of the collective.
- 5) **Hours and Location:** Students are unable to utilize the services and resources offered by FNH, because their hours of operation conflict with classes or work, and the building is in an inconvenient location.

Supporting Quotations

“My acceptance into this program, my success in this program, and my success as a scholar is partially due to this other work that I do and all the community work I do. But then to not have that seen or valued or to not recognize that this is how some Indigenous people live our lives and we actually budget a huge amount of money for that We're not all coming in here just trying to figure out who we are. The entire community benefits from us actually having these things and having these experiences and we can't depend on the university to give us our knowledges or our languages.”

“When I worked at FNH, I really struggled with everything having to be ‘student life’, so you could not have something different to connect with Indigenous students because everything had to be standardized. So, you would give them a book and hope they would turn to the page that had FNH and hope that they remembered it. I think that it is a lot to put on Indigenous students to find you and have the wherewithal to know that you might help, go there and face all the barriers that are existing in going there.”

“We don’t tend to see those students as much as our St. George students because we’re just physically far away. It’s hard to get to those campuses and Mississauga is a little bit better because of the shuttle. But the Scarborough students, it’s quite the trek between the campuses we can’t physically be on the campuses because only St. George students can pay for First Nations House, so we can’t really take anything away from the St. George students who pay, but those students can apply for any of our financial aid options and awards.”

“It’s the structure and then the people who end up getting leadership I think. Like knowing that like with the TRC Report and there being more attention and maybe places are tossing a bit more money, that doesn’t make up for decades of underfunding. That doesn’t make [up] for the existing leadership maybe not having the perspective that might be needed in order for it to catch up.”

“The person who is in charge of that program is a non-native person and so for me my first response to that is, ‘What is going on? What is this?’ Whenever I’ve been part of a SAGE network or program in the past, it’s always been all Native people and then some allies that have been doing really critical work around Indigenous Studies, but that just threw me off in the first place. At no point did anyone ask me what I need or what I want as a grad student, and I especially thought that was weird.”

“U of T is just so far behind. It’s pathetic for such a rich university to be chronically underfunding and devaluing, academically, Indigenous Studies or Aboriginal Studies. That department ... it’s not due to the people that worked there or the people who are teaching. They’re doing everything they can. It’s from the top down: it’s been underfunded, devalued, the way it’s structured.”

“If the TRC—and if the institution is paying attention to the TRC, around ‘this is something different here. We have a different responsibility to Indigenous peoples and communities. What does that actually look like?’ It means that things actually look different. It means that the supports that we might need for writing actually look different. Yeah.”

limitations

This project provides a snapshot of the ways in which students engage with First Nations House, as well as some perceived gaps within Indigenous student services at the University of Toronto. It is apparent that students value the space, resources, and community offered by FNH, but they see gaps in services compared to the diverse needs and experiences of Indigenous students. In general, the main factor enabling engagement in Indigenous services and groups is a sense of belonging and community. Such a sense is essential to helping participants successfully overcome obstacles, especially in academic settings. Considering the structural disadvantages often faced by Indigenous students, it is important that students feel represented, welcomed, and accepted. These feelings will allow them to trust in support staff and the institution, and will increase the likelihood that they will access the resources and support services available to them.

Despite the breadth of the findings, the project team is aware that there are limitations to the data.

First, participant selection criteria and interview questions did not account for the voices of many non-Indigenous individuals that access FNH, including alumni, community members and non-Indigenous-to-North-America peoples. The presence of these voices could potentially add rich perspectives and understanding of how students connect with FNH. Second, given the summer timeline and the limited availability of students on campus during this time, the project was conducted with a small sample size and is not necessarily representative of the entire Indigenous student demographic and community at the university. Finally, interviewees were primarily undergraduate students, and therefore the report may not incorporate the more nuanced experiences of master's, doctorate, or other Indigenous students.

discussion questions

The following questions are intended to encourage dialogue at FNH about the implications of this data for future space and programming decisions:

1. To what extent do the themes outlined resonate with your experience working with Indigenous students?
2. Is there a need for more programming that is exclusively offered to Indigenous students?
3. What implications does the data have for the re-design of FNH space? Are there elements of the space that can be enhanced to better meet the needs of students?
4. In what ways might FNH adapt so that more students feel they can access the programs and services that meet their needs?
5. Are there opportunities for FNH to increase collaboration with other Indigenous student services and academic programs to better support the student community?
6. Are there opportunities to increase collaboration with the wider Indigenous community to better support students?

conclusion

The data gathered in this project demonstrate that Indigenous students and staff place significant value on their experiences and relationships not only with First Nations House, but with other Indigenous-led student groups and services. Many students already have a sense of identity and connection to culture. Participants also emphasized that it is important to see their unique needs reflected in their academic studies, student support services, and other social settings. While First Nations House provides a substantial amount of resources and support to Indigenous students, there is still much work to be done for the university to appropriately acknowledge and respond to the community's needs. This may require time to build relationships, create more spaces that cater to Indigenous student activities, and provide non-traditional financial aid options.

Future projects in collaboration with First Nations House will benefit from a broader scope of objectives, questions, and participants that represent the broader student body and community. This may include Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, community members, and senior management involved in decision-making for initiatives that support Indigenous students at U of T. A longer-term study would provide the opportunity for a richer data set and a more well-rounded sample of voices from the diverse Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities at the university.

Student Contributors

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