UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

Creating Community at First Nations House

Themes and Insights: Design Thinking Summary

student life.

innovationhub
deepening collaboration

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Acknowledgment

The findings in this report come from a partnership in which First Nations House shared knowledge with Innovation Hub members and connected them to students who interact with First Nations House and its communities of learning. This would not have been possible without the land on which the University of Toronto resides, land which students, instructors, and staff have learned on, and from, for the last 192 years.

> *"We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land."* [1]

We express gratitude to those who shared their experiences and contributed insights to help understand how to strengthen student engagement at First Nations House. The Innovation Hub will continue to work with students to innovate the student experience on campus by supporting a diverse scope of student, staff, and departmental communities.

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[1] Sourced from: https://memos.provost.utoronto.ca/statement-of-acknowledgement-of-traditional-land-pdadc-72/

Project Background

First Nations House provides culturally supportive student services—including award administration, academic support, and access to Elders in Residence—to Indigenous students at the University of Toronto. In Summer 2018, it partnered with the Innovation Hub to investigate causes for declining student engagement. The investigation revealed, among other insights, desire among Indigenous students for more social and cultural programming from First Nations House.

To further explore this need, the Innovation Hub conducted two follow-up events in 2018–2019. In addition, we took a deeper look into the transcripts collected during Summer 2018, reanalyzing them through a lens of cultural and social support. The analysis sought to answer the question: ***What do students want out of cultural and social programming at First Nations House?***

This report discusses the findings from this inquiry, laying out the themes, supporting insights, and design aspirations that emerged. The insights come from the Summer 2018 data, as well as the 2018-2019 events, which helped to expand the findings and focus on the themes.

In this report, we focus on the importance of community, which we subdivide into three levels of community-based interactions. By considering these different aspects of community, and responding to students' search for them, First Nations House can become a locus that satisfies student needs and better supports the Indigenous community. In general, students want to find a community that genuinely reflects their needs and identities, embraces their whole selves, and develops relations with wider Indigenous communities.

Themes and Insights

The following themes address community on three different levels: community as it **responds to a person's search for authenticity and connection**, as it **relates to each member as a whole person**, and as it **interacts with wider Indigenous communities beyond the University of Toronto**.

Theme One:
Is this Community for Me?

Students want to see a community that is welcoming and a genuine reflection of themselves. These needs can be divided into three categories:

1. The need for physically welcoming space,
2. The need for culturally and socially welcoming space, and
3. The need for space that is genuinely solicitous of students' concerns.

Physical Spaces

Spaces that are physically accessible, at the times when students want to access them, help students connect with the communities in those spaces. Some students say they do not go to First Nations House because the opening hours conflict with their schedules and the location is inconvenient. Even when the building is open, they find that they cannot use the lounge because it is being used for classes. Both staff and students say that the location at the edge of campus discourages "dropping in":

> "I rarely even went to First Nations House. I was working full-time; I am doing [school] part-time. I had no time to go. I knew it was there but the hours are so—they're the same hours as mine …. They suck. When they're open, that's when I'm working. Then I would rush from work to come to the night classes. And they were obviously closed, and they're like, 'Why didn't you come?' I said, 'Well, you're closed; I would have come.' But the hours, they're not open in the evenings or weekends. So I would go to other places like Robarts Library, or OISE or Hart House, any place I know that has extended hours to study or do my homework and all that stuff."

> "That is one thing for sure, [I would like] having a lounge that is always open to us, no classes."

> "I honestly don't see any other way [to encourage students to come] than making sure we have a dedicated space."

> "At least be open [until] 7pm, if not 8 or 9."

"I feel that these resources should be available across campus. There should be more of an ability in more than one building."

"Yeah particularly [if the building] was something central, that's the other thing. In my experience, I can't speak for the students, I think business is a huge part of it, but First Nations House feels super far away. Just having something that is close. 'You know, I have an hour, I want to jump over to First Nations House, or whatever.' That would be how students could be better supported."

Students also feel that they lack permission to use spaces at First Nations House. They see some areas as 'student services space' or 'staff space,' rather than 'student space.' They also want more clarity about the purpose of student space. Some use it for socializing, others for studying, and still others for sleeping. This unclear multi-functionality creates conflict:

"I wouldn't say that [when I first came to FNH] I felt like, 'Oh this is a place I want to hang out.' It's really unclear where to go! It's unclear if any space you're allowed to be in. [...] The times that I have been there since I do feel like I'm sort of … I don't know … a hassle or taking up space, that people are working there and I'm like, 'Oh, I'm in your kitchen ….' It's not clear."

"Whoever planned this place—it wasn't put together very well because it's pretty intimidating. You come in and there's just a wall of office doors you know? It has large ceilings but it's not an open space. It still seems kind of closed-off and I think it can be a bit intimidating for students, especially if you have someone [cold] at the front desk or there's nobody at the front desk. I think in a space like this you really need someone to greet and make sure people feel welcome. A lot of times there's just nobody to do that and then people just stand there. I've seen that so many times. People just stand there and look around and they feel uncomfortable and they just walk away."

"I think that for me, it motivated me to be around other students who are just learning, doing their work. I've been to First Nations House but I find that it's a lot of chatter. So it's like, 'Okay, I don't want to be rude, but I'm coming here to study.' It's always, you know, talking about things in school. But I've come here to do something and I don't want to chat for an hour. There are some students that are there that stay there all the time and they say, 'Hey [name], how is everything?' Then they'll start talking but I feel like, you know, I'm here to do something."

"I would come here to take naps because the couch is comfortable."

"It's nice to come here to kind of have a working space."

In other faculties at the university, staff and student staff credit the regular availability of student spaces with improving the sense of community among Indigenous students and prioritizing their needs:

"The Indigenous students [in our faculty] have their own office […] It's not a program. It is really important that Indigenous students have space. Practically it's a place to hold meetings, relax, chat […] The students have done a great job of hanging up Indigenous art, so it creates a space where they feel comfortable. Over the last two years I've been able to see how that space facilitates relationships that otherwise [would] not be as strong because the Indigenous students don't necessarily have class together even though it's not a huge faculty."

"[In our faculty], the room right next to me is a student lounge, students can always use that space. We've booked time in our larger board room for Indigenous students study space, so they have a dedicated space where they can use that dedicated time that's on the calendar two days a week every week to use the big table and study or do whatever."

Students are attracted to accessible, welcoming spaces that are regularly available and feel explicitly designed for student use. The design of such spaces includes opening hours that accommodate students' routines and clearly marked areas so that students can use the space with minimal conflict. Examining Indigenous places outside of First Nations House could provide specific insights into creating accessible spaces.

Cultural & Social Safety

Students' relationships with their own identity and culture vary widely. It is important for them to feel welcomed in whatever way they identify as Indigenous. Some students expressed a strong connection to their Indigenous identity, and say that the events currently hosted by First Nations House feel 'introductory'. They want a deeper Indigenous presence at Indigenous events:

"I went to this one meeting and I was the only Indigenous student there other than the one faculty member who was chairing it. […] That was my first introduction to 'what does Indigenous programming look like at U of T' is that there aren't a lot of Indigenous people there. That could be okay sometimes, but for sure my first experience with that here was not okay. The things that people were saying, the questions they were asking, just the space that was created there. I was like, 'This isn't for me, obviously and it's really unclear who this is for.' It's not so much about the [organization] specifically because I would say that that's my general perspective on Indigenous programming at U of T. There aren't a lot of Indigenous people accessing it." […]

"It seems so introductory right? People are coming into Indigenous things; non-Native people are coming to Indigenous things to learn more. Yeah. So Native student spaces are not actually for Native students. […] It just feels introductory and it doesn't work for me as a grad student and it doesn't work for me as an Indigenous person."

Some students feel less familiar with their heritage or are just beginning to explore their cultural identity. These students may be afraid to participate because they don't feel

'Indigenous enough', or they feel as through the space is not designed for them based on their unique experience of colonization:

> *"Being a person from multiple identities, including an Indigenous identity, and not being someone who is visibly Indigenous, [I appreciated] just being in a space where I was comfortable and not challenged. A safe space was very integral."*

> *"[Name] kept asking me to come [to drumming]. I was always too scared back then. [...] My grandfather went to residential school .... I couldn't answer, 'Who are you and where are you from?'"*

> *"I am so white and my sister .... I wouldn't go anywhere without my sister to validate my Indianness."*

> *"My family's [from another country]; down there my family isn't considered Indigenous."*

> *"I never said anything [about being Indigenous] in undergrad. People are asking insensitive questions. It's these really intense questions where people don't realize it's a lived experience."*

> *"I know lots of Indigenous students who don't even know [FNH] is there or are afraid to go. They worry about being judged for not being Indigenous enough [...] There's a bit of shade-ism that goes on in the Indigenous community. If you present as settler/white, you're kind of judged. There are Indigenous people that can pass as white because they're mixed, because of colonization. I had an issue with that with another student who let me know right away that she didn't want me there."*

Students are searching for social safety and a place for connection. They want to feel welcomed by the social group and to feel that it is safe to be themselves, without fear of conflict or exclusion. Those who are actively engaged with First Nations House speak highly of the support and active community:

> *"And just to be able to find a space where I can hang out and go do events and do the Friday lunches and meet other students was really important. It was really helpful for me to get to know people. [...] Now I feel really connected to everyone. [...] [My first impression of FNH] felt like that would be somewhere that I could go again and connect, somewhere where I could feel welcomed and would feel like a safe space. I used it for studying occasionally, checking my emails. I knew I could always stop in and have a cup of coffee which was really important."*

> *"I use the space at First Nations House regularly because I feel that it is a safe space. I know most of the students and staff so I usually feel comfortable."*

> *"I think it's a safe space, welcoming space, confident space, supportive space. [...] Shared culture and just a space to relax in."*

"First Nations House [is very effective] because [it provides] a safe space on campus […] a sense of community."

In contrast, those who are less engaged think that the community is too small for social safety. Because of its size, those who do not belong to an existing circle feel like they stick out, or like they are in a 'fishbowl' being watched:

"I think [recruiting largely from [Transitional Year Program] has also led to this feeling for young Indigenous students that you didn't belong there because FNH was for students who were just always talking at computer labs."

"If there aren't people cooking food or hanging out and laughing and talking, why would people come back here? I think that's what's turned people off in that they don't see a whole lot going on and people weren't particularly friendly. It's like any other social hang-out. People will stay if people are friendly and there's something going on. If you feel like there's nothing really going on and people didn't really make you feel welcome, then why would you return?"

"You don't want to feel like it's a fishbowl thing. That's a nasty feeling when you've got eyes on you. […] I have a friend who doesn't come here anymore, not because of a dissatisfaction with service, but because of how small it is. […] It would be really cool if this whole building was an Indigenous space. Realistically then you wouldn't have to worry about seeing one person."

"I was getting lost in negativity again and started gossiping. It's too small a community to get involved in that."

"And there's not that many people around the Indigenous space. Like really not. Like a dozen maybe? I don't know who the regulars are […] but I do think that there's a small group."

"As a non-Indigenous student new to U of T, First Nations House was one of the first sites I visited to attend programming. Though I went to a variety of events in close succession at FNH and introduced myself to those around me, I felt uncomfortable, unwelcome, and intentionally blocked out. After a few more attempts, I stopped attending events. […] My Indigenous friends have confirmed, and I continue to tangibly see, that FNH is a highly exclusive space that very, very few students utilize."

Students want to feel culturally and socially accepted. This feeling depends on an individual's degree of comfort and familiarity with their own cultural identity. Students feel that events should support their personal exploration through supportive Indigenous communities. Empathetic spaces are also integral to support students with fears of not being 'Indigenous enough' or who are locating themselves through their lived experiences. When it comes to social acceptance, small spaces can provide a sense of home, but can also feel alienating to others depending on their needs and connections to community.

Consideration of Student Concerns

Students often take initiative to organize their own social and cultural activities. They do this to provide the cultural and social services that they need without requiring too much staff time, recognizing that First Nations House staff are over-burdened. Students still expressed a need for some staff support, particularly for finding space to perform ceremonies:

"So I never really accessed anything through [the organization] very much and instead I just tried to organize through people that I know here to do things on our own. Basically the point that I'm at now is that rather than trying to ask other people to organize other things that I would like to see happen, I'd rather there be resources for students who want to make certain things happen rather than expecting it of an over-burdened staff trying to do student services."

"But a lot of stuff us students have to [organize]. […] We had almost like a study group going like at the end of last semester. […] One of the things I have suggested were Movie Mondays, getting some popcorn and playing movies all afternoon long."

"Or we need resources to do our own thing like if we want to learn our languages and not just in our classes. […] Like last year and the year before I started doing some organizing with other grad students around doing […] more ceremonies together in the community."

Throughout the university, Indigenous students and staff sometimes feel as if services and programs are not entirely designed for the students. Instead, these services are for the institution to meet Indigenous education and engagement goals. There is a burden on Indigenous students to volunteer for the university communities and do outreach. The burden of performing outreach takes away from their own experience as students:

"I think that currently, there is a real push to have events and to ask Indigenous students to do things to put work on them and I think that sometimes the institution forgets itself in trying to promote itself into doing things for Indigenous students. Actually, it needs to be there for Indigenous students, not asking them to do more to make the institution look good. I think that is an element that is important in any service because students know when they are wanted and safe in a space and I think that is the very basic thing we are here to provide."

"I think there's a lot of experiences that Indigenous students have where if their professor knows they're Indigenous they want them to speak about all things Indigenous in the classroom. So they're taking away from Indigenous students' experience to have to turn around and share their knowledge when it's really the professors' job to do that, by doing their research."

"A big part of my job is to create a space where the Indigenous students don't need to carry the heavy backpack of educating their classmates, the staff, and faculty of issues related to colonialism and residential schools and that type of work. […] Not having to

explain things to your classmates and professors is part of what makes your school experience better."

"As [an] Indigenous student you are not just working to get a degree, you're usually coming out of a household where you are the first person to go to a university, and you're also expected to do a bunch of volunteer work to help your community."

Students want to feel that First Nations House and the wider university community have their best interests at heart–this includes personal growth, a stronger connection with other Indigenous groups at the University, and empathetic approaches so that students feel safe. This means Indigenous students' needs and initiatives are prioritized. Indigenous events and support are provided first and foremost for the benefit of Indigenous students, rather than being a performance for other communities.

Theme Two:
Does this Community Support me as a Whole Person?

The previous theme addressed the factors that make students feel welcome and cared for within a community. Theme Two expands on this by considering **what makes students feel welcomed as whole persons, and why this feeling is important.** Students want to be valued and able to relate to a community on more than an academic level, including on a level where difficult issues surrounding their Indigenous identity can be discussed.

Being supported on a creative, cultural, and personal level contributes to student success. Some students even say that the presence or absence of such support has contributed to their decision to stay in or leave their post-secondary education. To be at their best, they need a space to 'just be themselves' and to express themselves creatively and culturally:

"I had gone to college before and not done very well and just being in a space where I could just be myself in the expression of who I am, be fully myself, and be accepted, is central to why I've done so well at U of T."

"That's like university too. You focus so hard on one little subject area and you're not a very well-rounded person. I saw that happening and that's one of the reasons I left [the first time]."

"[I need to express] creativity [...] as opposed to just being smart and academic."

"Just having that feeling of the first time coming in and having my body relax, I could just be me here and didn't have to prove anything. I could just be myself was so life changing. And I could do it in an academic space. Very critical for me."

"Just being able to do [drumming] here at the university was … it just made it seem less of a colonial institution and more of a space for you."

"Making lunch for students where students can come in and make buttons and kind of socialize and have fun and the academic side is not at the forefront for those things."

Students feel there might be too much focus on academics and professionalism at the expense of comfort and connection in the support provided by First Nations House. This is connected to 'The Importance of Physical Spaces' (Theme One), where First Nations House seems like more of an academic space rather than a social one. The distinction here is that students are considering First Nations House as a whole, rather than logistical design. They would like to see more social events that address them not just as students or even necessarily just as Indigenous, but as people who have broader identities and interests:

"I think there has also been a push to really focus on Indigenous academics and I think that again is isolating for students who just came here because they wanted to study and would like to meet other Indigenous students and like go bowling or hang out and talk. They are not necessarily feeling comfortable to be the voice for Indigenous students but just want to connect with other people they have things in common with. I think FNH could be that space but I don't know that it is right now. […] I think that a lot of the speakers, events are bringing Indigenous academics, writers, and these different people who are well known in the Indigenous academic community, not necessarily known in the regular Indigenous community. When I was a student and we did events, it was like sometimes more political stuff like advocating for something or we did just random fun stuff for students because we just wanted to hang out. There was hand drumming for students to connect to community or culture within the institution and I think a lot of that does not exist anymore, it is now top 5 speakers well known in the Indigenous academic circle."

"There are a lot of things they do not do anymore. We used to watch Simpsons, we would sit in the lounge and kind of chill out and watch Simpsons. That was back when FNH had its students more as a community, now it is just dispersed. It is more as a business, like [name] does the academic and financial advisory."

"Things have changed a lot [from twenty years ago]. Things seem a lot more professional right? Like we would never get away with what went on in those days. […] Sometimes the professionalism gets in the way of actually being personal and reaching out. That's one of the ways that I think First Nations House could, or that U of T in general, could be more effective is being less professional and more social or more friendly or more open."

"Recognize that big parts of their identities are connected to things just outside of their Indigenousness—celebrate their love of video games, Snapchat, or whatever. […] We can't just be there to support the Indigenous part of you, we need to celebrate the whole you in all these ways—spiritual, physical, mental, and all of those things you love in those categories, kittens!"

"You want it to be a place when people feel love, acceptance, appreciation of you when you are chilling after an exam, not a place where you go when you feel bad because again that's just one piece of you and it makes it hard to go back when you are in trouble."

Addressing the whole self means facing and talking honestly about the difficult parts of lived Indigenous experiences. Difficult feelings arise when students encounter topics related to their culture at the University, or when they feel that they are targets of racist or colonial reactions. Students want a place to discuss, process, and share these feelings:

"I went to my theatre class and I said, 'I've been like bawling my eyes out for three days reading about [violence against Indigenous women for class], and feeling for my people

and being angry that this happened. Thinking about how horrible they were to my people. We're supposed to be objective and critical, but how can you do that when you're in pieces on the floor for three days?' So I talked to my professor about that and a couple of students who were in the class agreed. I said, 'Is there a space we can go to? A time we can have? A group we can form of like-minded students who are going through the same thing so we can support each other.' […] So there was a little bit of that happening about a month later. There was a beading meeting where we did beading."

"There's challenges within the classroom of encountering ideas that are a very settler/Western European perspective then wanting to raise an issue with that or just discuss the issue and not necessarily feeling welcome and there's just not a space to do that."

"[I want FNH to say,] 'We're here to acknowledge and support you when you experience [racism] and we're here to help you succeed and hope to change these systems because we're all in it.' That's what I want. I want it to be explicit."

Being supported as a whole person is integral to student success. Although First Nations House resides at the University of Toronto and is available for academic support, students also desire a space that expands into other areas of themselves–their 'whole self'. This means support or engagement that speaks to students' creativity, culture, and need to share lived experiences.

Theme Three
Does this Space Relate to the Wider Indigenous Community?

Students see their experience at the university as being connected to a wider Indigenous network. **They want First Nations House to help strengthen those connections to other Indigenous communities, and to provide a bridge between U of T and outside communities.**

Students experience a meaningful connection to their culture when they speak with Elders, and they wish Elders were available more often. Although students recognize that there are barriers to this based on limited hours, external communications, and capacity, there is a deep need to connect with Elders while they are experiencing student life:

> "It was being able to connect what I was learning in my classroom to real-life experiences. To have somebody describe something, a relationship for example with maple trees, and then to go out into the forest with an Elder talking about how they can go out and listen to the trees and know when they're ready, and actually stand there and listen to the trees. Really it was getting to know other students too, getting to form those relationships and build that community, which was really important to me."

> "I always did enjoy my time spent speaking with [the Elders]. I do however wish that they were available more than once a week at FNH."

> "Currently, [Elders] are very hard to access because of limited hours/limited capacity, so I know that it can be hard to find them. I often hear that friends and acquaintances have not been able to find someone with whom they can speak because those individuals have cancelled their hours and the message was not relayed."

Students also feel that First Nations House is not making use of the wider Indigenous population at the university by having more groups and events run by Indigenous people from other communities. They think outreach could be improved, especially to staff who identify as Indigenous but do not work in Indigenous services, or to students who might be too afraid to approach a First Nations House table at a club fair. They also see Indigenous events across the university being run by non-Indigenous people, which feels inauthentic and reduces trust:

> "I think that what would make or what does make Indigenous students successful is actually them making connections and relationships to other Indigenous folks. Regardless of whether or not it is a faculty member that's in their same program or not, but I think that they have to make the connections because it might be someone who is the same kind of Native as them. So they both might be Cree or something and that's the connection that's going to sustain them and that's the budding for that relationship. So I think that more visibility in that sense of actually bringing together larger groups of people might be something that they can do that they don't necessarily do now. Or like

bringing together staff from other areas of campus that either are Indigenous or maybe their title doesn't have anything to do with Indigenous services."

"I think one of the hardest things … I don't know know what ideas I would have to help them improve; I think the hardest thing is getting the word out. The hardest thing is identifying the Indigenous students and finding out where they are […] So besides like setting up at every possible information fair that students might possibly go to … because that's how I found them. I don't know necessarily what that might look like."

"When I came here as a student and went to my orientation week, they had the different tables out, I was very shy and did not go to any of them. Somebody got me an FNH brochure and even then, I did not really talk to anybody there and I did not feel comfortable going until a friend dragged me there until the week after."

"I'm trying to think of other ways [to advertise] that would be less person-to-person confrontational about you know, you don't necessarily have to gather up the courage to go talk to someone at a table which I think can be really hard for some people to do."

"[I think the most important thing FNH could change is] going out there and trying to find the groups that we're not reaching […] We're not reaching as many as I would like; just a matter of trying to promote the events to encourage Indigenous students to come here and see what we have to offer."

"But the other thing that I think that happens is, or that can happen is having non-Indigenous folks in Indigenous positions, right. So positions that are aimed at helping Indigenous students and you're not Indigenous … when I walk in the room that is already going to create some tension between you and I whether or not I feel like you can really help me."

Students and staff see a need for First Nations House to develop relationships with Indigenous communities and outside organizations. This is often framed as a responsibility to Indigenous communities, given that there are few, if any, preexisting relationships between the university and Indigenous organizations or groups:

"I also think that community could be improved. I think that people really hope that FNH could be the place that brings all these one-off events … and like keep people in line and point out when they are not doing what they should be, point out community representation, bring them out to the community in ways that is respectful and appropriate."

"There is no model to follow because U of T does not have relationships with Indigenous communities. It has hired some Indigenous people, but it doesn't have relationships with communities, so how do they fulfill responsibilities."

"Yeah, like if they reframed it to 'how can they respond to the responsibilities they have to Indigenous communities' then that changes how they think about growing things or changing programs."

"It would also be nice for the community to say like FNH I have a relationship with them, you know that kind of thing. We could be doing better in the community […] [The situation right now] leads to people in all sorts of departments doing different things that make very little sense in the Indigenous community and that doesn't serve anyone."

"So I try to go to community members and ask them what they would like to hear so that the institution isn't just replicating its own people it likes and wants to hear from over and over again, and that we are actually including the voices of the community. So, we have community members coming out to the lectures rather than just having academics of 'people who are wanting to study Indigenous peoples' because without that community representation there will be no change."

"I work with First Nations family services outside of U of T because they have access to Elders, to land, sweat lodges, ceremony. That's what they do. U of T doesn't do that, they are involved in Western education. […] U of T has to be part of the community."

"We spend so much time thinking and staring at the Institution, we [aren't] able to serve the community and I think the pressures within the institution force you to focus on it […] I think it's really exciting for what comes out of what you're doing but I encourage people don't stare at the institution, stare at the community to remind us of why we are doing this and what we can accomplish because I think sometimes the institution makes you feel like you are there to respond to emails or plan events and you can't actually change the world. But I think that if we focus on our young people and the amazing power they have—we can't change the world, but we can be involved in the lives of people who maybe will in the future."

Based on these insights, students express a desire for First Nations House to be involved with a wider scope of communities. This will build trust between Indigenous students, First Nations House, and external Indigenous organizations and communities. By strengthening these broader connections, the needs of both individuals and the group can be met synchronously.

A Model That Works:
Indigenous Education Week

Indigenous Education Week emerged as an example of a cultural event that is working for students, based on their reflections**.** Students were very positive about Indigenous Education Week and the positive feedback extended across the spectrum of students involved: the week met the needs of those with extensive cultural knowledge who feel that many events are too 'introductory', but also those who are just beginning to explore their culture.

From this feedback, Indigenous Education Week seems to be catering to a broad range of needs:

"I think that the Indigenous Education Week that First Nations House leads, and [name of organizer] basically leads, is incredible. Like the events and the things ... like how that week gets curated. The number of things there. If that could be all year, like that quality, attention, and care to what's happening and who it's for ... like 100% then I would feel that First Nations House is somewhere that I'm welcome at. Or is for me."

"I really love the Indigenous Education Week events; it just really gives you an opportunity to hear different people speak. [...] Elders came and delivered talks, and I just found that that's something that you just don't find everywhere. You have [...] people coming from different places and sharing their knowledge. It really helped my education outside of the classroom and connected me to my culture."

"One thing that I really did like [...] was participating in Indigenous Education Week. [...] It has been really informative and my thoughts about what like Indigenous hip hop can look like. It wasn't something that I necessarily knew about prior. So I think it does a really good job pushing forward things that are involved in the art scene [...] It's also been a really good way to get to know other people, Indigenous folks and stuff that aren't affiliated with the university that are in Toronto. So I think that it has helped a lot make different connections even with people that are usually Toronto-based that I wouldn't have known, didn't know otherwise."

Important Connections

A ***connection to the wider community*** and ***access to Elders*** emerged as factors that resonate with students. They feel energized by opportunities to connect to the wider scope of their Indigeneity. Some students also mention that they like having events in a variety of locations rather than just in one place.

These points relate to the preceding themes of community, where wider communities and access to support are important for an individual to locate their own identity while also feeling that First Nations House supports them as a whole person.

The Annual Pow Wow

The Annual Pow Wow is another cultural event that also received positive feedback from students and staff, especially when connecting to their shared experiences:

> "I volunteered for the pow wow, the first one [...] That was fantastic, very exciting. [...] People came from all over to dance, to participate, and the feedback from people attending who were Indigenous, non-Indigenous was fantastic. I can't wait to do this again next year. It was a lot of fun to be so visible on campus, for so many people to attend, it was a wonderful experience. [I felt] included, it was important, just having community is important. It was a big deal."

Students also reflected on how First Nations House could be involved with the planning of the event. This relates to previous insights on connecting to events that are accessible and support an individual's culture and heritage:

> "I think that FNH should be involved in planning the annual pow wow. [...] I don't think it's necessarily all the small things that bring people together, but I think larger events like the pow wow is something that maybe the one student who couldn't make other events could actually get to because it happens on a weekend .... It is just one day, yeah."

An Appreciation of Scale and Scope

Similar to Indigenous Education Week, students appreciate **the scale of the event**, and **how many people from different communities are in attendance.** Perhaps Indigenous Education Week could serve as a model for programming, with a similar type and variety of events being held more sparsely throughout the year. One participant suggests that this could expand the reach of Indigenous Education Week events:

> "But it's only a week. This should be the whole year. [...] It's during class time that these events are going on. Some are in the evenings however, if that was something—that Education Week was stretched out over the semester and another semester of just that information—that works well for the calibre of Indigenous people that come to facilitate."

Design Principles

Based on the themes, insights, and shared reflections on events that are effective at the University, Innovation Hub developed Design Principles that can be used as a "checklist" for increasing engagement at First Nations House. These principles were developed by asking:

How can First Nations House—through its cultural and social programming—be designed with a focus on building community?

A Dual Focus

A dual focus on the *community within* and the *community without* would aid in supporting the existing community at First Nations House, while also building trust and relationships with the broader communities that exist.

The *community within* is the space and feel of First Nations House itself, and how well it provides students with a sense of welcoming, safety, and support. Suggested solutions include:

☐ *Designing for Student Accessibility*

   Is the location accessible for the Indigenous community on-campus (and off)? Do the hours reflect diverse student schedules? Are student spaces open later and on weekends?

☐ *Defining the Learning Environment*

   Are student spaces clearly marked based on the learning environment that they support (e.g., quiet space, studying space, and community)? This might include suggesting types of activities that would be supported in each space, such as group dialogues, meal sharing, or solo study sessions.

☐ *Reducing the "Fishbowl Effect"*

   Privacy and anonymity are valuable to students in shared spaces, and providing these qualities can build trust between students and staff. One way to do this is to ensure hang-out spaces are not surrounded by staff or utility spaces.

☐ *Supporting Indigeneity through Cultural Events*

   Cultural events should clearly reflect the scope of Indigenous identities and levels of cultural exploration. This could include events that are more specific and in-depth, events at the introductory level for individuals who are just beginning to explore their culture, and open events for non-Indigenous students exploring allyship.

☐ *Balancing Academic, Cultural, and Social Events*

Events can also speak to interests that Indigenous students have beyond academia, with a link to creativity, culture, and social gatherings. Cultural events that students have mentioned include hand drumming, beading, and making corn husk dolls.

☐ *Communicating Support and Connectivity*

It's important to communicate to students where they can go for support when they struggle with the difficult aspects of being an Indigenous student at the university. This could be through programming at FNH itself, or through additional Indigenous communities at U of T.

The **community without** is the connection between First Nations House and the wider Indigenous community, both on and off campus. These design aspirations address the desire for First Nations House to take on responsibilities within the wider community, as well as the desire to avoid the social 'fishbowl,' by increasing the community size:

☐ *Engagement through Events*

From the insights, there is an expressed need and opportunity to strengthen engagement with additional Indigenous communities through new events. Involving outside communities will increase capacity at FNH and connect students to more representations of Indigeneity.

☐ *Expanding an Audience*

Event development will also increase the audience at First Nations House. Participants noted that First Nations House can reach out to students in ways that make it easier to engage. The audience can also be expanded by reaching out to more Indigenous staff and faculty who are not explicitly in Indigenous services.

☐ *Transparent Communication*

Finally, students expressed the importance of transparent information on how the university is fulfilling its responsibilities to Indigenous communities. This information can support them in their lived experiences of being students in a colonial institution, and also help them get involved in initiatives to better represent the Indigenous community at the university.

Limitations

The insights in this report drew upon interviews with twenty students and staff members in Summer 2018 and discussions with five participants in 2018–2019.

Although more participants would provide even more perspectives, Innovation Hub designers ensured that the insights reflect common points presented in the data and apply to a significant number of First Nations House users.

Because of the overlap in data between this analysis and the previous report, there is some overlap in insights, particularly those around the need for more welcoming physical space. The reanalysis of data, in addition to the five new participants, provided a more in-depth look into the levels of community and how an acknowledgement of personal identity and accessible spaces supports Indigenous students on a broader scale.

Despite the insights presented, there are always unanswered questions. A useful follow-up could involve asking students what they like specifically about Indigenous Education Week, and which of the various activities they engaged in. Also, it would be interesting to further explore the distinction between the types of speakers, or methods of engagement used by facilitators, to better understand what students like and dislike in these events.

Conclusion

Students want to find a community that welcomes them and genuinely supports their individual journeys. This sense of belonging and support emerges on many levels—on the physical level of having a welcoming, accessible space; on the cultural and social level of feeling accepted as themselves and as whole people; and on the wider level of knowing that this community is doing something for their wider community.

There are ample opportunities for First Nations House to make concrete changes to its current programming and to better serve Indigenous students. Impactful changes might be made based on the insights about engaging with the wider community (using Indigenous Education Week as a model) and how students' comfort level with their Indigenous identity interacts with their sense of belonging at cultural events. These insights are highly robust, and reveal interesting tensions within the Indigenous student population at the University.

Next Steps

Here are some questions to help think through next steps:
1. What would a welcoming community look like to someone familiar with their cultural background?
2. What would it look like to someone just beginning to explore their identity?
3. What would need to be true for FNH to provide social safety to those who feel alienated and disengaged?
4. What services and events might benefit from wider community participation?

By using its cultural and social programming to provide students with a multi-layered sense of community, First Nations House has the opportunity to increase student engagement with its programs and services, and improve the vibrancy of the university's Indigenous student community.

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