

April 2020



## X Marks the Spot

Reflecting on the LatinX Student Experience  
at the University of Toronto

Themes and Insights: Design-Thinking Summary



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## Introduction

The University of Toronto (UofT) is home to students from many cultural groups. Students who identify as Latinx are among them, making up 4% of first-year students and 2% of senior students in 2017.<sup>1</sup>

To better understand the needs of these students, the Innovation Hub partnered with Dr. Berenice Villagómez, the Latin American Studies Coordinator. We used the course LAS 401 (Latinos in Canada: Toronto) to introduce LAS students to design thinking. Through collaborative projects, the students found key insights about Latinx experiences at UofT.

Latinx students use their time at university to explore their cultural self-identity. As part of their exploration, they want to meet peers from similar cultural backgrounds and to see themselves represented in services and programs. Finally, they often work alongside their studies, which adds stressors.

This report explains these themes and brings them to life through personas and design principles. The included recommendations will help UofT departments provide Latinx students with more successful campus experiences.

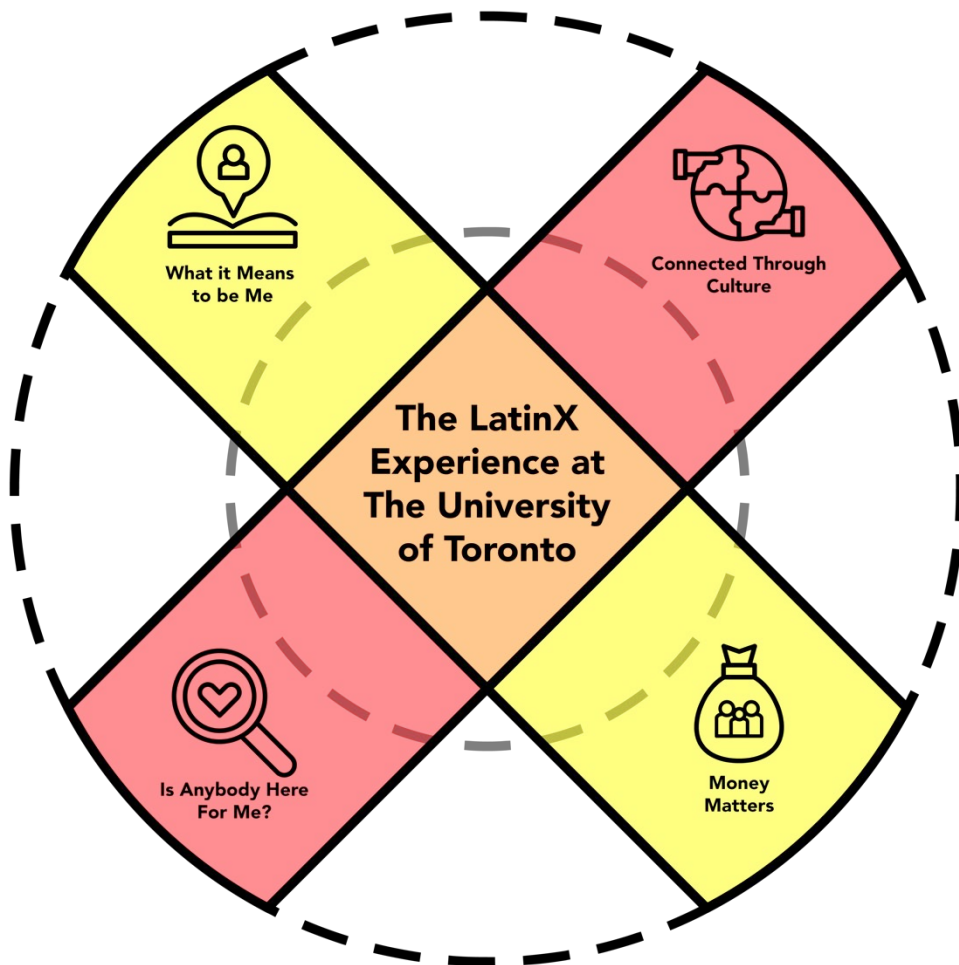
## Methods

The Innovation Hub trained LAS 401 students in empathy-based interviewing. The students then spoke to eleven peers from the Latinx diaspora to learn about their university experiences. They sought rich descriptions, stories that revealed nuances and feelings in Latinx life at university.

The Innovation Hub uses this method of diving deep into experiences, and allowing our understanding of students to inspire design, rather than jumping to solutions. By doing this, we move beyond the *what* questions to the underlying *whys* and *hows*. Thus, we reach insights that might otherwise be obscured by designers' own assumptions.

## Themes and Insights

Through these methods insights were further organized under four key themes: **What It Means to Be Me**, **Connected Through Culture**, **Is Anybody Here for Me** and **Money Matters**. These themes structure the following sections of the report, in which we present the results of our analysis of interviews and additional data.



*Figure 1. Visualization of four themes*

## Theme One: What It Means to Be Me



**For many students, self-identifying as Latinx is a journey.** These students face barriers along the way, stemming from personal doubts and peer reactions. For example, Canadian-born, non-Spanish-speaking students grapple with their “legitimacy.” Many students also face exclusionary assumptions from both outside and inside the Latinx community. There is no single way to be or to look Latinx, but students feel pressured by narrow depictions.

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### I Don’t Know Who I Am

Students feel close to their cultural community and more in touch with themselves when they are strongly connected to their Latinx roots. They can build this connection through music, language, or peer groups. Students with a weaker tie to these elements struggle to make connections and find community on campus:

*“I don’t really know who I am or where I belong [...]. I don’t really feel connected to the student population.”*

*“When I joined the Latino club, I ended up meeting some of my best friends and that’s when I felt like I was a part of something [...]. They gave me a group to belong to.”*

Students build relationships based on shared understandings of their cultural selves. Thus, those who are connected to their culture find relevant support networks.

### Cease to Stereotype

Participants feel hesitant to identify as Latinx, because they encounter negative stereotypes about their culture:

*“When I tell people I am from Colombia, the first thing they think is Pablo Escobar.”*

*“I think I am hard working, and she responds by saying, ‘Of course you are, you are Latino.’”*

When students face stereotypes and suppress their identities, they experience negative mental-health effects, as discussed later in this report. Even when stereotypes are latent, they can still be harmful:

*“I felt that [some student peers] have this idea of me [that I want to steal your man and am promiscuous] because I’m Latinx. I actually think that they think [they] know everything about Latinx people, and like they go by the stereotypes. Which is racializing people, but it was very lowkey. I understood [it] as racism .... But it was not like ‘Oh, you cannot enter [...] the space because you’re Latinx.’ It wasn’t an overt situation; it was more of a subtle one.”*

*“[Y]ou’re, you know, seen as an other. And that’s kind of tied to what stereotypes people have of Latinos [...]. It’s oppressive, that I can tell it’s there.”*

Students want peers, staff, and instructors to sensitively and accurately understand their cultural backgrounds. Then they will feel more comfortable identifying—and being identified—as Latinx.

## Who Gets to Tell Me Who I Am?

Faced with others’ assumptions, students feel that they are not Latinx enough or that they must publicly prove their Latinx-ness. These challenges come not only from external sources, but also from other Latinx-identified students. Since many UofT students are newly exploring their identities, they are especially sensitive to this judgment:

*“Most of the times when I feel hurt and pain connected to my background are when people will [tell] me that I am not Latino, or I am not Latino enough.”*

*“I was born in Colombia, but when people really get to know me and they learn I came to Canada when I was two, they say, ‘Oh, so you are not really Colombian.’”*

To For many Latinx students, university is a time to better understand themselves by connecting with cultural communities. When they feel accountable to peers to prove their Latinx-ness, exploring their identities becomes more difficult.

This finding of cultural self-doubt echoes past Innovation Hub reports. For example, in [\*Creating Community at First Nations House\*](#),<sup>2</sup> we reported that students exploring their Indigenous identities sometimes felt judged for their Indigenous-ness. Across cultures, when students feel that they are permitted to claim their intersectional identities, and that they are ‘enough,’ they grow more comfortable with their cultures and personal identities.



## Theme Two: A Home Away from Home



**Students develop individual and group identities through cultural connections.** They want to communicate their beliefs, values, and customs with others like them.

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### Speaking the Language

When students speak Spanish with peers, they feel more connected to their culture and cultural groups. A shared language gives students common experiences, even when their language skills differ:

*“When I was in this identity crisis, I didn't speak Spanish because I was more ashamed that I didn't know the language well enough. So, I think [my mom] would remind me [...], ‘You got to speak Spanish. How do you expect to talk to people? This is your language too.’”*

*“I love being with my Latino friends and speaking Spanish, because I love feeling like a Latino.”*

For those who don't speak English as a first language, it can be difficult to have discussions and be culturally understood in an English-speaking environment:

*“I feel more comfortable with Spanish speakers [...], because I think for me it's like, well, it's always easier to express yourself in Spanish. So in like in a casual conversation, [it] is harder for me to join or to, I don't know, to tell stories or jokes or whatever. [It's] harder for me to try to express that in English.”*

*“[S]ometimes the accent doesn't come out right. So sometimes it is uncomfortable. And I know some things that I can express in Spanish sometimes cannot be translated into English, so it's not the same thing. And I wouldn't be able to express myself [a] hundred percent.”*

Both native English speakers and English-language learners said that Spanish language immersion bound them to their Latinx communities and identities.

### Places to Be Me

When participants found culturally specific classes, groups, and events, they felt greater ease with themselves. They fostered friendships and improved their cultural understanding. In contrast, participants who weren't culturally connected reported being unsure as to how to access the on-campus Latinx community:

*“I found out about the Latino club last year, because I have taken a lot of Latin American Studies courses and finally decided to join. Taking Latin American studies courses and joining the Latino club has helped me figure out and express my Latinidad.”*

*“I never felt a sense of community with Latinx students. I didn't even know there was a Latin American organization on campus.”*

Students are most comfortable engaging and identifying as Latinx in culturally specific spaces. When they are not aware of such spaces, they become isolated from peer groups and support.

## Missing News, Missing Out

Participants benefited from knowing about Latinx-specific initiatives on campus. Many wish they had found them sooner:

*"I didn't even know there was a Latin American studies program, and if [I] had known, I definitely would have taken courses [...] in my undergrad."*

*"It wasn't until I found [out] about the Latin American studies program that I found out about the Latino club."*

Participants wanted the university to better promote these programs and events to Latinx-identifying students:

*"I feel like UofT has to [do] a better job of marketing and advertising these [Latinx-specific] programs; they don't really tell you about all the programs they have, and it would be really nice if they did something like 'Hey! Here is a new program every day' on their Twitter or Facebook."*

*"A lot of those emails promoting Latin American events and such weren't really sent to me."*

One student compared the sparse advertisement of Latin American Studies opportunities to the copious news about a competitive Humanities program:

*"I feel like [...] the Latin American Studies program is not [as] advertised as other programs like the [competitive, cohort-based Humanities] Programs. You know, like they really go hard with [advertising] all those [cohort-based Humanities] programs. And I think maybe that's because the Spanish Master's is small [...] I didn't hear about it until one of my professors brought it up."*

Latinx students want to get involved in culturally relevant programs and services, but if they do not hear about them, they miss the opportunity to participate. When they compare how much they hear about Latinx programs versus other programs, they conclude that the university does not prioritize their identity group.

## Friends Like Me

Interviewees want to make friends at UofT—especially Latinx friends, with whom they can speak about their common experiences. Amplifying cultural commonalities helps students connect, and makes them feel less isolated on campus, especially as members of an underrepresented group:



*"I'm pretty sure I found out [about a Latinx student group] in my first year [...]—I think even before I came here—because I was so like, excited about [...] making like friends, [...] Latino friends specifically."*

*"Latinos, in general, are more open to other Latinos. You know, it's a kind of, it's a thing where someone says, 'I'm Colombian,' and you say, 'Ohhh, I'm Argentinian.' It's instantly friendship, you know, or at least, not friendship, but it's instantly a smile. So I think being Latino is a way of having a connection with someone. It's a pretty superficial thing, but it leads to better connections with people, I think."*

Students recognized that the Latinx community at UofT is small, making it harder to find cultural peers:

*"It's not like we got [...] a class of, like, fifty people and only three of them were Latinx. There was like, no, only one. [...] Yeah, like I remember the counting of, like, students at [college] and I was the only person, the only Peruvian but [also] the only person like from Latin America, there were no other people ... not even from Mexico, like no one."*

*"I've tried to find them. I don't know who they are. My program released, like the demographics of how people self-identify into these categories. And there's like, you know, less than one percent of each class for the past three years is identified as Latinx, so if you do the math, it's like one or two people a year."*

Participants who struggled to find Latinx social groups thought that their better-connected peers had more positive campus experiences:

*"I think [Latinx students that have found on-campus Latinx community are] more comfortable with who they are. And I think it's because they have more, they have stronger ties to their cultures."*

*"If I sought that knowledge, that community more, I feel like it would help me ground myself in somewhere where I belong .... I feel like I have imposter syndrome, so I feel like I don't belong."*

Latinx students want to make friends with cultural peers, but at such a large institution with small Latinx enrolment numbers and a high drop out rate of this population, it is challenging for them to find each other. When they can connect, they benefit from a sense of community.

## Theme Three: Is Anybody Here for Me?



**Many participants said that they need some type of support during university.** (This need is common among students at UofT, as the Innovation Hub has found in other projects.) They found help to varying degrees. Those who felt under-supported encountered both academic and personal obstacles during their studies.

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### Culturally Relevant Help?

Interviewees felt that service provisions at UofT were anonymous and overwhelming. They talked about negative experiences at various stages of contact:

*“In first year, you're clueless, you don't know anything, they give you a bunch of links and whatnot, but there's no one there to actually help you if it feels very impersonal.”*

*“If it was clear cut and I knew where to go [for accessibility services], and I knew that I didn't have to go through such a long process, I would do it. But then at this point, what is going to be more stressful, handing in my assignment on the due date or, like, waiting for the approval?”*

*“I am very scared of Health and Wellness because I've heard it's not a very welcoming environment.”*

Families' immigration status often correlates to their level of education.<sup>3</sup> For many Latinx students, that means they are the first in the family to attend higher education. Thus, they may miss out on familial advice that other students get about navigating and thriving at university. Even in families with histories of post-secondary education, it is difficult to navigate UofT's sprawling bureaucracy, which is often paired with unclear policies and procedures.

### Does it Have to be this Hard?

Most participants mentioned experiencing difficulties with their mental health while at UofT. At the same time, they talked about a cultural reluctance among Latinx people to acknowledge mental-health challenges. Interviewees said that their self-doubt and imposter syndrome were entwined with their Latinx student identities, and indeed, studies have shown that depression and anxiety are directly linked to Latinx students' feelings of being imposters in higher education.<sup>4</sup> These students sometimes also have a sense of fatalism, assuming that their destinies are pre-determined:<sup>4</sup>

*“It is part of the overall Latin immigrant experience to accept that there are going to be hard times in life and work and in studying, but those are things that you just have to get past, and it's very easy to sort of shove them to the side, but at some point you have to deal with*

*them .... You [as a Latinx person] have the habit of shoving things to the side, and then all of a sudden, you have a panic attack, and all of a sudden, you find yourself struggling.”*

*“We [Latinx people] believe that mental health doesn't exist and if it does exist, it's emotional turmoil [that] does exist; it's this very transient thing that you can deal with [through] prayer.”*

*“In particular with the Latino community, I think that people don't really have these conversations in their families as much as they should, because you are raised with the mentality of ‘you just have to push forward.’ I can speak to that from my own [...] experience because my mom is that way.”*

Latinx students said they felt insecure about their status and successes at U of T. These constant feelings of precarity encouraged high personal expectations and the need to constantly prove oneself to others.<sup>4</sup> These high personal standards exacerbate the cultural stereotypes Latinx students often encounter:

*“[As a Latinx student,] I feel like I have imposter syndrome. So, I feel like I don't belong .... [It's] just UofT as a whole .... ‘I don't belong here; they're gonna find out I'm a fraud.’”*

*“That's when I got really overwhelmed, because it was not only that I'm a first year and I don't know a lot. I felt like other people were more intelligent than I was.”*

*“Every time I have, like, a minor success .... I get an A on an assignment. I'm like, ‘Well, how did this happen? Was it a fluke in a system? Or am I actually not as dumb as I think I am?’”*

When students discussed their mental health, they often said external sources were particularly helpful with managing it:

*“Talking to [my therapist] about my anxiety and her telling me how to control it and where it was rooted in was really helpful to understanding myself and what I need to work on, because it's not only things that, like, are outside; there are also things you have to deal with inside. She was really helpful with that.”*

*“Living on residence, everyone's very stressed and everyone understands what everyone's going through .... Still to this day, [my friends I met on residence] are my family here, and those are the people I rely on when I'm feeling overwhelmed.”*

To Some interviewees preferred Latinx-specific support, though this was not always immediately available and/or came with its own complications:

*“I wish I had something like [the Latinx club's mentorship program for Latin American students] when I first came in, especially because being a Latin American student [at U of T] .... I think it was kind of a little bit challenging at times.”*

*“If I would want a referral somewhere, [my Spanish-speaking therapist based in Peru] would have to be writing in Spanish my diagnosis, but then there is no like way of—like, it's very complicated when you want [to access] Accessibility Services. You have to have you a note from your psychologist, but then because of the language barrier [for my therapist, I] have to*

*go to another one. And that's another process, because you have to go through some [more] therapy sessions so they can diagnose you [in English]."*

Since Latinx-specific mental-health support has not been robust on campus, Latinx students frequently turn to non-university-affiliated resources. There, they can more easily find culturally sensitive and/or Spanish-language resources.

## Breaking Points

Students who faced intense challenges did not seek support until they came close to breaking down. Even when they shared their struggles with others, they often relied on themselves to solve their own problems. The underutilization of support by Latinx people has been reported in other studies and can stem from their feelings that, as an underrepresented population, their needs do not matter:<sup>5</sup>

*"The situation [my sexual harassment on campus by a peer and figure of authority] was very critical .... It was not okay for me to be crying every night .... That wasn't okay. I went to my don, and she was very supportive. My roommate was very supportive, and my other friend was very supportive .... Then I dealt with it myself .... I didn't want to bring in other people."*

*"I didn't have the official documentation that says that I have like a disability, like a mental-health diagnosis that prevents me from like doing certain things. I didn't really think I could have that conversation with professors. [But] I did try, and then once I got rejected, because of the excuse that I was expecting, which was 'you don't have the documentation.' So, take the [late penalty] or don't hand it in, who cares, we don't care, like, life keeps on going."*

A student who was sexually assaulted by a campus acquaintance talked about the cultural shame associated with their experience:

*"[The assault was] very triggering, because sexual assault is something that's very serious in Latin America; that was a very sensitive thing for me to experience."*

In the face of struggle, Latinx students frequently shoulder their problems independently. Without culturally relevant services, they can become isolated while dealing with their challenges.

## A Common Struggle

Participants identified a culture of mutual stress and suffering at UofT, largely stemming from high academic expectations:

*"Everyone's kind of struggling here. We talk to each other about how we are all struggling using this self-deprecating sarcastic humour; it's like, 'Oh, UofT ... U of Tears.'"*

*"I just feel that the issue with UofT is a structural one. It's not that we need more counsellors; it's not that we need more mindful moments or spaces where we can meditate. I think the problem is that there's so much work to do .... It's about changing how you're teaching, changing your expectations."*

*"I still think some faculties, more than others, are trying to produce stress, so that students don't do as well, and only the students that do well pass the second stage .... I don't think that's viable."*

Interviewees feel stuck in an environment that appeared to limit their chances of success. Students react by commiserating with each other, but their feelings of powerlessness also reduce the likelihood that they will push for institutional change.



**Latinx students talked about their families' expectations that they be diligent paid workers.** It is not uncommon that families suffer a shift in economic status to immigrate. Latinx students are encouraged to raise personal finances and ready themselves for high-paying careers, which can place them in a double bind. Future job prospects and higher pay often hinge on students' academic success, but time dedicated to their studies can be threatened by part-time work.

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### Work Harder

Interviewees spoke of explicit family expectations that they work hard. Under these expectations, their diligence would prove their value as Latinx people to an outside audience. This focus on hard work reflects both cultural values and economic necessities arising from marginalization and a discriminatory labour market<sup>6</sup>:

*"My mom is very, very hard working, and she's always put a lot of emphasis on education and working hard, because she's a single mom. The only way that she was able to make ends meet was because she had a career and she has, wherever we lived, [had] to find a job and support us. And so she always told me that I had to study, and that I had to work hard, and I think that's a common narrative within the Latino community; because you're an immigrant, like everywhere you go you're, like, foreign. And obviously there's discrimination to some extent, everywhere you go, that you have to surpass that, to make something for yourself and for your career."*

*"The kind of baggage I have with me, that I should work harder, that I should always be working and always be best at what you do, cause otherwise, you will get cut out. I feel like ... a lot of internal things from my own culture that I bring .... You were born in an educated family and you continue that tradition; I come from education, they [my family] know the importance"*

Latinx students learn from their families to have exceedingly tough expectations of themselves. Such pressures disproportionately burden this student population.

### Class Consciousness

Some participants said that their families faced a loss in social and economic status when they immigrated to Canada:

*"Back home, [unlike in Canada,] you're in this bubble where you're protected and you have everything you need; you have a maid and you have people to cook for you and do your laundry and do all this kind of stuff and you have .... Your parents are giving money, and to me, that's not real at all [resulting in my seeking employment in Canada concurrent to my studies]."*



*“Like, many Latinos I have met here at UofT as well, they also come from, you know, privileged backgrounds back home .... So I, well I kind of lost that through immigration coming here, because it costs so much to get here.”*

*“Well, my mom was a hard worker, obviously, coming, coming to Canada from Colombia, her credentials weren't recognized. So that kind of instilled, you know, hard-working ethic in me. [...] She came from, like, being a super credentialized doctor to being here, where they don't recognize anything. So, she had to go back to school and learn things again. And now just, like, hard work.”*

This loss in status can have ripple effects beyond individual students. It can also alter how they relate to their families locally and internationally, as well as how they engage in social circles.

## A Work-Work Schedule

Many students need to work during their studies, either to supplement finances and gain experience. These dual burdens stress students' schedules, decreasing time and attention spent on their studies and placing pressure on their mental health:

*“[...] I have two [jobs ....] I started working with [store name] and because, you know, recent education cuts, I was like, ‘I need more money.’ So I told my boss, ‘I can work Saturdays.’ Sometimes the hours that you work, like, take away for the time [to work on school].”*

*“I do need a job. It's very helpful to have a good job like this one. In the past, I've worked like two or three jobs at a time to make ends meet. [...] While going to school, I went for most of my degree part time, so that I could work enough to pay the rent.”*

*“I mean, because I am in [business-oriented program], I want to focus more towards, I guess, jobs that are geared towards that. And while I did love working [in a Latinx-specific Work-Study role], I also, um, I wanted to gear myself more towards my field.”*

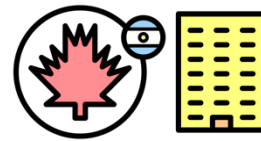
Latinx students commonly work while studying. While they sometimes take this initiative themselves, many are also pressured by cultural and family circumstances, which may contribute to added stress and poor mental health.

## Personas

Personas bring students' stories to life by presenting narratives based on their experiences. Each story is assembled from several interviews, which allows us to offer a collective view of the data, highlighting recurring themes, and to personalize the insights, encouraging designers to take students' perspectives, while maintaining anonymity. We encourage staff and faculty engaging with Latin American-identified students to reflect upon these personas as they brainstorm solutions. Consider how these characters would interact with your ideas

### Alejandro

- **Latino/Argentinian**
- Born in Vancouver, Canada
- Third Year Engineering Student

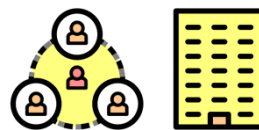


I am a Latino/Argentinian student studying Engineering here at the University of Toronto. I was born in Vancouver, but my family is originally from Argentina. Before coming to Toronto for school, I never really explored or engaged with my Latino identity. In the high school that I attended, I was not aware of any Latinos or people who were from Latin America; most of my friends were Canadian. Although I believed that I had strong understanding of who I was, it wasn't until coming to Toronto that I began to realize that I had another side to my identity. I wasn't only Canadian, but I was Latino. Coming to Toronto and attending a huge university with what seems to be millions of students made me question where I fit in. Although my overall experience at the University has been pretty good so far, it wasn't until second year that I truly found where I belonged.

In second year, I joined a Latino club on campus; it was one of the best decisions of my whole undergrad experience, because I was able to meet other people who identified as Latino. I finally felt that I had met people who truly understood me and my culture. Despite the amazing experience of finding my community on campus, it did come with some challenges. There were many instances where I felt like I needed to justify or prove my Latinidad, because I was white passing, because I wasn't born in Argentina, and/or because I am a Canadian Latino—meaning I'm not a "real Latino." These things really hurt me and made me question my identity. There were many instances where I was not able to stand up for myself and say, "You are wrong, I am Latino." When I wasn't able to stand up for myself, I felt guilty and angry that I didn't have the confidence to say, "I am who I say I am, and I don't need you to tell me otherwise." At the same time, I also felt annoyed that I even had to justify and prove myself to people who are trying to tell me who I am or ought to be. I think that if it wasn't for the Latino group that I joined, I wouldn't have had the support systems that allowed me to ignore those assumptions and fully develop and foster my cultural identity. I think that it is really important to have access to and awareness about these resources early on in your university experiences because it will help you build connections and foster a sense of community as well as give you the confidence and security to embrace who you are.

## Mariana

- **2<sup>nd</sup> Year International Student**
- Part of the Latinx Community



I came to U of T with high expectations of immersing myself in a challenging and exciting academic environment. Something that I did not expect however, was how hard it was going to be to make friends in my classes. Anytime I would talk to someone it felt like they just wanted to talk about our coursework and were not interested in being my friend. This led me to feel very lonely and like I didn't really belonged here. I began to doubt myself academically as well. Luckily, I live on residence, here I have been able to meet some of my best friends who have supported me through everything.

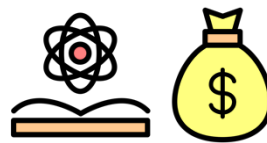
Another thing that I was not expecting was my journey with mental health. During my first year of studies, I began to develop anxiety. The new environment, the academic pressure of getting a 4.0, and the heavy course loads led me to feel very anxious very quickly. I also very quickly learned that advocating for my mental health was not as clear cut as I thought. Although some professors were empathetic to my situation, they required official documentation from Accessibility Services that I did not have. I felt discouraged, as I was in the process of acquiring an official diagnosis with my therapist and registering with Accessibility Services, but I still had to drop some course because I could not cope. To make matters trickier, my therapist is based in my home country, which means that for official diagnoses to be accepted here in Canada, there is another long bureaucratic process of document translation and/or seeking English treatment and thus documentation that I have to go through. I remember at one point I realized that finishing my assignment on time would give me less anxiety and stress than having to wait for all my documentation to be processed.

I am very lucky to have my therapist back home. My friends have told me some horror stories about their experience with accessing mental-health services on campus, and about the process of acquiring documentation. I know the supports may exist, but the stories and my own experiences really scare me—I have heard about long wait times, rude staff, and impersonal support.

It is tough living away from home for the first time, especially when you have to deal with major life events alone. I had a big fall out with one of my closest friends and felt a lot of isolation and anxiety as a result, I had to find a new community! Thankfully, I met other Latinos through some of my courses and campus organizations and was able to form friendships there. Being a part of a Latinx community has made the world of difference for me. I feel like I have a safe space where I can truly be myself and find support amongst people that really understand the nuances of my experience

## Felicity

- **7<sup>th</sup> Year Undergrad Student**
- Full-time Student and Works Multiple Jobs
- Values Familial Financial Responsibilities



I am an undergrad student, in my seventh and final year, studying in a science program. I have relied partially on my parents, OSAP, and multiple part-time jobs throughout my university career in order to support myself. Because having a good quality of life is important to me, I made the sacrifice to do most of my degree part-time so I could have the time to work, pay my bills, and enjoy life.

While my parents supported me in my first year of university, I no longer rely on them and currently rely on OSAP to pay my tuition and my current job at the university to pay for my rent and other expenses. Sometimes, I do get a little surprise cash gift from my mom that shows up in my account, however, because of my familial financial responsibilities, that money tends to go towards them.

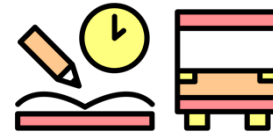
There have been times where I was not going to make ends meet with my work and OSAP. It was then that I applied for a bursary from my college, and I received the full amount. I believe I was lucky in that regard, as I hear many students do not receive the same support from the same institution. I know the money is there to assist students in financial need; however, it doesn't appear accessible to many other students.

Growing up, both my parents and grandparents, their friends and people they surrounded me with were in academia. This had an impact on me as it shaped the views of my future to be something similar, like to attend school and become a professor. However, growing up with educated parents didn't mean we were well off financially; it was not until years later that my parents have become more stable as they settled into their chosen careers.

I understand that my financial state has gone through ups and downs throughout the years and will likely continue to do so as I pursue my educational career into my Master's, PhD and hopefully, a career. Financial security is important to me; I keep in mind that earning potential has a strong correlation with the level of education one has in my field.

## Emilio

- **Latino student and Works Part-Time**
- South American Immigrant
- Lives at home with Family, Commutes to School

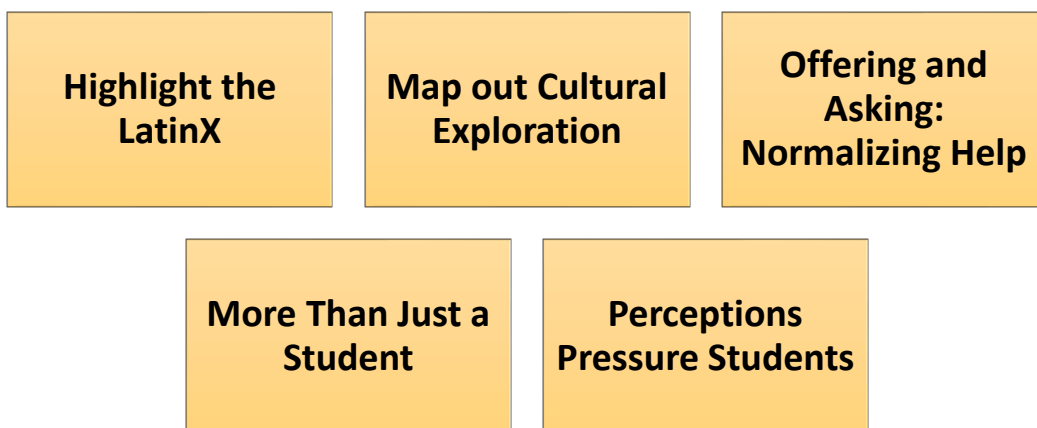


I was born and raised in South America before moving to Canada with my parents and brothers. I currently live in the Greater Toronto Area and commute every day to come to campus. I love studying languages and I hope to pursue a career where I can use the different languages I have learned. Both of my parents attended university back home, so it was natural for me to follow their footsteps. They have always supported and encouraged me to pursue my dreams and I am very thankful for that. Coming from a Latino family, I have learned from my parents' work ethic, which makes me an ambitious and excellent student. Sometimes, being an overachiever takes the best of me, and I have difficulty accepting failure. In first year, I was failing a class, but I told myself that I had to keep trying, "I have to be the best!" When I decided to drop the class, I was afraid to tell my dad, but all he said was, "Oh, that's not working for you? That's OK." I was very surprised by his reaction, and it relieved the pressure I was feeling.

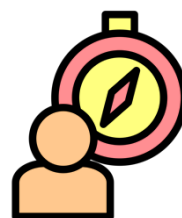
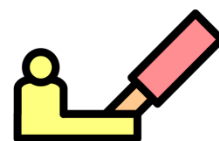
Sometimes, I find myself comparing my grades and progress to other students' and I find it hard to keep up. I also have a part-time job I do on evenings and weekends, which is great since I can earn my own money. But because I live far from campus, when I take the Go Train to go back home, I am exhausted, and I cannot do all of my assignments. For me, it is important to have a job, because I provide partially for my family. Even though we come from a privileged background back home, when emigrating to Canada, we lost the financial stability we had. In my community, it is normal for sons to be providers for their families. I feel pressured to contribute to my parents' well-being, and I would like to relieve them from the stress that they have. Finding the balance between university and work is really tough, but I want to support them like they have always supported me. I think one of the most memorable moments of university for me, as a Latino student, was to meet a librarian who was from the same country as me. I was very impressed by his journey, and it made me realize that I can make it, just like he did.

## Design Principles

The principles presented here are based on the above detailed themes and insights. They provide guidelines for supporting Latinx students and suggest challenges to keep in mind while prototyping solutions and refining designs.

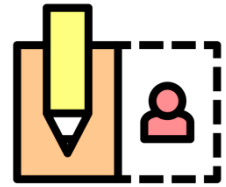


- 1) **Highlight the LatinX:** Make Latinx services, spaces, and people visible in the UofT community to foster connectedness and intercultural competency and create a sense of belonging for Latinx students. Although it is important to recognize diversity among the Latinx diaspora, it is also crucial to encourage a group identity so Latinx students can stay connected and feel supported while at UofT. It is particularly important to promote, in this group identity, the variety of the diaspora to celebrate all Latinx identities.
- 2) **Map out Cultural Exploration:** Latinx students' diasporic identities are specific to their lived experiences. Each person has a different depth of connection to their Latinx roots. Expand opportunities for Latinx students to engage with and learn about their cultural selves, so they can increase their confidence in and relations to their ethnic and cultural backgrounds.
- 3) **Offering and Asking–Normalizing Help:** Mental health is rarely discussed in Latinx families, discouraging students from naming and seeking support for the challenges they face. Institutional attention to the ways in which Latinx students conceive of, respond to, and manage their mental health is essential for ensuring these students' success whether through co-curricular offerings, health-and-wellness programs, or in-class engagements. Encouraging culturally nuanced help-offering and help-seeking habits on campus can do much to support this student population.





- 4) **More Than Just a Student:** Many Latinx students identified a cultural pressure to display a strong work ethic as well as a loss in economic status at their and/or their families' immigration to Canada. This can result in their taking on paid work—often multiple positions at once—at the expense of their studies and co-curricular engagement, something which could be alleviated by increased bursaries, flexible course deadlines, and employment opportunities on campus. As Latinx students often juggle competing, pressing priorities, attention must be paid to their lived realities.



- 5) **Perceptions Pressure Students:** Latinx people are often depicted in stereotypical ways and in discussion can be described using cultural tropes. Students of the diaspora are negatively affected by this monolithic portrayal which can influence how they ask for and perceive seeking support on campus and how they are taken up when utilizing services. Expanding depictions of the Latinx community will encourage structural changes and culture shifts in service and program provision.



## Design Checklist

We present some concrete items to consider when designing programming, spaces, and resources for Latin American-identified students. They suggest methods for fulfilling the student needs discovered through this project.

### 1. **Highlight the LatinX:** Is Are Latinx identities and interests intentionally highlighted to the wider U of T community to expand attention to this group?

- ☐ Create targeted programming and gathering opportunities for Latinx students regardless of discipline, for example peer-to-peer mentorship, and actively advertise these across UofT's social media
- ☐ Better resource and advertise Latinx organizations and groups on campus and how to find them, particularly for incoming undergraduate students
- ☐ Survey and collect data on Latinx students and their background particularities and make this available to relevant offices
- ☐ Promote Latinx individuals and offerings on campus through mainstream communication channels
- ☐ Offer cultural competency training specific to the Latinx diaspora

### 2. **Map out Cultural Exploration:** What opportunities are we making available to Latinx students to explore and embody their cultural selves?

- ☐ Resource and host Latinx cultural and language events
- ☐ Promote (inter)cultural engagement and inclusion on campus, particularly related to the Latinx diaspora
- ☐ Develop mentorship programs with Latinx staff, faculty, and alumni
- ☐ Expand notions of who represents the Latinx diaspora and celebrate this diversity in marketing, services, etc.

### 3. **Culturally Competent Care:** Are programs and services reflective of the needs and interests of Latinx students, particularly as it relates to their maintaining positive mental health?

- ☐ Engage with and clarify the heterogeneity of the Latinx diaspora when leading programming, offering targeted services, etc.
- ☐ Train staff and faculty on Latinx students' unique needs and cultural contexts
- ☐ Hire Latinx student employees, staff, and faculty in all levels and positions

### 4. **Work/Life Contexts:** Are we being responsive in our policies and programs to Latinx students and their unique work/life contexts?

- ☐ Develop and equitably promote financial resources specific to Latinx students, for example bursaries
- ☐ Train faculty and staff to understand and respond to Latinx students' challenges related to work/life balance and finances, for example through flexible course deadlines and programs outside of regular work hours
- ☐ Develop targeted programming for Latinx students encouraging balance to support those who have internalized potentially unhealthy relationships to work

## “How Might We” Questions

How might we increase the cultural competency of the U of T community as it relates to bettering the experiences of Latinx students?

How might we welcome the Latinx community to express their cultural selves on campus?

How might we facilitate the creation of a community for Latinx students to feel safe and culturally connected?

How might we celebrate and expand the representation of the Latinx diaspora on-campus?

How might we develop services that account for the pressures Latinx students face in and outside of the university?

How might the university expand opportunities for Latinx students to learn about Latinx-specific initiatives and services on-campus through all stages of their degrees?

## Limitations and Next Steps

There are limitations to the data and findings in every project, and it is important to consider how the analysis may fall short or require follow-up. Suggestions for next steps recommend inquiries or actions that may be incorporated into future work related to this project.

### Limitations:

This data pool is most representative of the undergraduate Latinx student experience at UofT, particularly the experience of those at the St. George campus. While it is uncertain how these results extrapolate to the graduate experience or the satellite campuses, we anticipate some overlap, since we identified fundamental rather than campus-specific issues. The data sample also did not include a strong representation of LGBTQ+ and/or disabled Latinx students, intersectional identity groups for which further research is recommended. As well, it did not engage with prospective Latinx students or those who dropped out of their studies at UofT, another area that requires further attention.

### Next Steps:

To mobilize and respond to this report's insights and improve the on-campus experiences of Latinx students, we recommend:

- ☐ Circulating this report to relevant UofT offices and stakeholders
- ☐ Engaging with and implementing the design principles
- ☐ Engaging current Latinx students in discussion about their peers' retention at and attraction to UofT

Each of these steps will move us further towards creating spaces that truly meet students' needs.

## Conclusion

This project captured key insights about the campus experiences of Latinx students. The design principles identified by respondents include increasing the profile of Latinx people and programming, deepening pathways for Latinx students' cultural exploration, developing culturally competent services, and training staff and faculty to better understand Latinx students' work/life contexts. Interviews with participants illuminated design principles which can guide initiatives to better the Latinx student experience at UofT. While the identified themes and insights stand alone, they also interlock, interacting with each other to affect each Latinx student in unique ways.

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