

[Interviewer: When do you feel truly good, and in-the-moment? “I feel like that when I play the piano.... I can have that feeling, I can concentrate on one thing. For example, when I am travelling, I focus on travelling. When I play piano, I concentrate on piano. It’s kind of like, you have fewer things to bother you and [can reach] the state that makes you feel good.”

“There’s a book called... ‘Message in a Bottle’ by Nicholas Sparks. It’s very sad. [...] I like the sense of faith and myth in it. It makes me question free will versus [destiny]. Like basically, it makes me question, ‘Do things happen for a reason?’ It makes me question the meaning of life, [like] is there meaning behind everything? Or do we make that meaning? Or do we make those choices? And we find meaning in them. So, it’s like [the idea of] human choice versus things out of your control.”

“[Video games are] a great, great way to detach myself from my life for a while. So, living someone else’s life... a more thrilling one. I can stop thinking about the things that worry me for a while.”

“Also I like movies because... I like connecting movies to reality and taking lessons from them and [thinking about] how it can be applied to everyday life, and I try to see the purpose of the movie. I like action movies, sometimes comedy, and rom coms too. Those makes me happy.”

“I like painting; I love oil pastel. You know that standard between drawing and coloring? So in the past, I [started doing] oil painting [with a kit] purchased by my grandma. [...] That is something that I stopped doing [because of school], and I think it affects me because it is something that I enjoy and something that I use to express myself. Once I stop it’s like, [long pause] it makes me feel like something is missing. So that’s something that I need to go back to.”

“I went to Hart House every single day. Either on the track or in the weights room. Or, doing one of their drop-in classes? I loved the Zumba classes. [...] So, I went there all the time. I went to the Athletic Centre sometimes, and oh! Hart House’s [art workshop]! I tried to go there as often as possible because I found that doing some form of artistic activity was like, really helpful to my mental health.” – ***Student data from the Trademark Licensing Project (2018–2019)***

Theme Four: Barriers to Engagement

While students are generally receptive to the programming, services, and opportunities offered through the Multi-Faith Centre, they also note that numerous barriers prevent them from engaging as regularly as they may like. While some of these barriers were acknowledged to be unavoidable, others were regarded as small oversights that could be easily amended in the future.

Insights

1) Anti-Proximity and Awareness

Most students noted that the physical location of the Multi-Faith Centre is an obstacle in engaging with the programs and services offered there. Students often discover the centre through external touchpoints, such as online, third-party events, or flyers for programming. Even once students learn about the centre, they often find that the remote location prevents them from attending regularly. Thus, when students do make use of the space and programming, it is usually the result of intentional planning centred around a specific event, rather than out of curiosity or spontaneity.

“Okay, so before going to university I was, like, doing research online; I found the Facebook page, and that’s how I heard about it for the first time. As a Jewish student, I knew about the Hillel building already which is the space for Jewish students on campus. But I was wondering if there was a separate space in general, and that’s how [I] found this.”

“Facebook is my big source. I find that most of the events are posted, so I check it regularly. Sometimes I get emails. I don’t know who sends them. I don’t remember how I signed up, but I get a bunch of them. The MFC is far from my home department (OISE) so I don’t come here much unless there is an event.”

“And the second reason [I don’t use the Centre] is I...I don't often see newsletters or flyers mentioning any events at the Multi-Faith Centre. Like, I don't even know what kind of events they have, when they have [them]—I actually never heard of it before I joined [campus group]. I didn't even know the building I was attending class in was called ‘Multi-Faith Centre’ [chuckle].”

“Logistically, it's in a very weird place on campus—the MFC, like near the forestry building. So, like, I don't know where this is? And also—every single time I come here—I go on Spadina, and I’m like, ‘Oh, I can’t enter this way.’ I have to go the completely other way [to the other entrance]. Like, it's not so accessible.... you have to know what you're looking for in order to find it, which is maybe not the best idea for a Multi-Faith Centre?”

2) Service Design and Programming

While the Multi-Faith Centre privileges the notion that all faith-based students are welcome to use its programs and services, some aspects of their design (e.g., food provided, spaces used) make certain students feel excluded based on their faith or level of background knowledge.

“I have been to one event. It was advertised as an Open Mic Night [but] turned out to be Christian-based. And so that was a bad experience. I wasn't expecting it to be Christian and nobody had advertised it as a Christian thing.”

“A lot of interfaith, multi-faith work is like, when we say that we're all doing the same thing. [A clear example] was last year, there was a talk about Christian-Jewish dialogue, and it was in a church, and according to Jewish law—like one way to follow it and is what I do—I can't go into a church, so I couldn't go to the event.... And I'm sure it was an oversight; I'm sure it wasn't done in any malicious way. But I think that sometimes we get caught up in like, 'Let's all try and be the same because we're all faith-oriented,' as opposed to saying like, 'We have our differences and like, we should get along.' Like, we really do have our differences...”

[Interviewer: Did the MFC events meet your expectations?] “The ones that I went to, for sure. They were catered by a kosher caterer—that's because it was a Hillel event as well. Like, I know I'm complaining a lot about food like, yeah—it's important. And if food's going to be the thing we're all bonding over, as well—like this Muffin Madness thing they have every Wednesday—then it is important that everyone can eat. That's where my expectations have not been filled, because I cannot eat that. And I don't want to feel bad, like the whole point is that this space is supposed to not make me feel embarrassed about what I believe in.”

“And there's another reason [I] haven't said: it's because, well, I just feel like most of the events are for religious people. I mean, I do, I don't really know anything about the events. I'm just...just guessing based on its name. I'm not like completely not interested in religion. I have taken a course on religion before and I like to know something. But I just feel like I prefer to attend maybe academic events with people like me, people who don't have any background knowledge to most religions. So I would feel safer, I would, I wouldn't feel like I don't know what they're talking about.”

[Interviewer: What changes would you like to see in events?] “More information. If background information can be provided, it would be better. [...] For example, if this workshop is about [Islam], if other students are not from the background, [then] they would require more background information to help them get more out of the event. Sometimes I find it a little harder because they assume you know many of the concepts and give detailed examples. [...] I guess the best way to do that is to not assume that everyone knows the basic concepts and do a quick survey to identify different knowledge levels and separate people into groups or have someone who knows a lot to give them background information. [...] It sometimes makes participants feel awkward because they don't know what to say.”

3) Accommodating Spaces

Between the design of the Centre's main space and the prayer rooms, students often feel that the physical space is not accommodating to their individual preferences. This leads them to use other spaces on campus for prayer, work, and leisure.

"It's been interesting.... I don't know how I feel about that yet. Because I'm praying with many different types of people in one space, which I'm not used to. It's just like, there's more thinking that has to be done in a sense because I have to be, like, more on "guard"? Like, even just to pray upstairs, like, I had to do a bit of research and figure out if it was okay for me to pray in the same spaces as other people who are praying to other gods...and like, I don't know if the MFC is aware that I'm doing all that math before I show up."

"There are all these things that I have to think of before I go in there. Like, I have to figure out where east is, like, there's like so many things that are like—in [my faith] building, it's just painted much better for me. [...] Yeah, so that's there. And then also, it's like, clear which direction [of where to pray]. There are prayer books that I can use instead of using my phone. Like, there are certain things that just provide that comfort rather than here...."

"And like, I'm not someone who particularly cares about [aesthetics], but like, this would turn me off. I mean, you could see, like, it's not the most colorful place. Like, it's all stone.... It's like a weird way to have a building...kinda prison-like? [laughs] So maybe that could be fixed."

"I find the space a little bit confusing. The first time I walked in there, I couldn't see any signs. I couldn't find the room I was going. And I walked into a stairs and I was...I walked upstairs, and I was locked in the stairs in the building. And I find it really annoying."

But what do students want to see in spaces?⁷

When reflecting on what students value in spaces on campus, a number of points reoccurred across responses:

- **Comfort and Familiarity:** Students value spaces that provide comfort, privacy, and a sense of "hominess."

[Interviewer: What would you like to see in an ideal space?] "Like a comfortable sofa?"

"If I want to be relaxed or cool [down], I feel like any space that can make me be alone helps me."

"As long as it is quiet, and it is not a new space.... [I would like] a familiar space for me that can help me be calm and quiet."

- **Natural Elements:** Students like spaces that bring aspects of nature inside, as they find them calming and relaxing.

⁷ Many of these insights align with earlier work done by the Innovation Hub as part of the "Chill Spots" project, investigating what students would like to see in campus spaces. If interested, please request a copy of the project report from Julia Smeed.

[Interviewer: What do you like about the meditation room?] “So, the wall is covered in like green plants and has like gentle running water down the wall; and I have a lot of experience in water. I've played water polo and done competitive swimming, so I am water sensitive. When I hear the water I feel at home.”

“In spring time or early fall, I like going outside like, let's say between UC and Convocation Hall, sitting in the big group on the grass. It reminds me of mindfulness when you are actually appreciating the moment.”

- **Access to Food:** On the level of convenience and comfort, students value spaces that either give them immediate access to food and drinks or are close to cafes/cafeterias.

“And maybe some snacks...and drinks”

Accessible, good design, nice to have a door that's open, and a café right across [From interview notes; student did not want to be recorded.]

4) Realities and Responsibilities

Even when students feel motivated to engage with the resources and services provided by the MFC, they often find that ongoing responsibilities and busy schedules get in the way. This tension is often compounded by the location of the Centre, which requires students to invest travel time on top of the time they would spend participating in programming.

[On events that are supposed to be calming] “I feel like there are other things to disturb you [when you] go to the event, like jobs. It is nothing about what the school can do. It's about what the reality is.”

“I find that the reason I don't use [the] Multi-Faith Centre is that it's really far, and I am too lazy or tired to go there for an event after a day of classes. If I see an article or a video on Facebook that can help my meaning-making process, I will be happy to watch that.”

“I think it was just a little lower on my priority [list]. I had a bunch of things on my plate. And I kind of...I'm interested in learning a bit more about what [the] Multi-Faith Centre [offers, and about] other religions. But I guess I'm just trying to figure out my time-management and my schedule, right?

[Interviewer: ‘What are some examples of higher-priority things?'] Well, like applying for jobs for the summer right now, school assignments, and just trying to maintain friendships that I have right now. Yeah, and yeah, cooking at home [chuckle], grocery shopping, and all that stuff.”

“[...] Because commuting takes so much time [and] since most commuters are not that close, it is hard to use all the campus resources. [The] school should make resources more available to students or more accessible.”

Personas

Rebecca's Story

- Highly devout and observant of faith-based restrictions
- Regularly attends programming offered through the MFC
- Domestic student



“I think that sometimes we get caught up in like, ‘Let's all try and be the same,’ because we're all faith-oriented—as opposed to saying like, ‘We have our differences, and we should get along.’ Like, we really do have our differences.”

I first learned about the Multi-Faith Centre when I was doing some online research prior to coming to U of T and wanted to know about prayer spaces on campus. Some of the panels sounded really interesting to me, so I ended up attending them and found them to be really engaging and eye-opening. I especially appreciated the ones that had break-out sessions afterwards, since they allowed me to engage with different people and learn from them in a conversational way. It was a really refreshing change from learning from a textbook!

While I do appreciate the opportunity to learn about different faiths, I do find some of the interfaith programming to be uncomfortable. For example, there was a candle-making session for students who observe solstice-oriented holidays. I wanted to participate, but I couldn't since my religious law says I cannot help others worship gods other than my own. Another example was a session meant to open dialogue between Christianity and my own faith, but I couldn't attend since it was hosted in a chapel and I'm not supposed to enter such faith-specific spaces. I do understand the desire for interfaith connection and religious pluralism, but I wish we could acknowledge our differences rather than lumping us all together and implying we're the same.

I also found that my dietary needs aren't well-supported here, which is discouraging as the Centre is usually really careful about catering food that everyone can eat. My religious restrictions mean that I can't even eat at the weekly Muffin Madness. It's hard to find food that I can eat downtown, so it would be nice if the MFC was better about providing such options for me and my faith-group.

While I learned about MFC when looking for spaces to pray, I ended up preferring to pray at my own faith centre. I do end up praying here about once a week because it's more convenient, but it can be uncomfortable since I have to use the same space as other, different-faith students and some of my prayer verses can get pretty loud. The small space also means that I can't pray in a group, which is always preferable according to my religious law.

All in all, while I do appreciate the Multi-Faith Centre and its mission, I feel like there can be improvement in certain areas. That's why I'm happy that we're having this discussion right now!

Wenqi's Story

- Practises faith, but not strictly or regularly
- Regularly attends programming offered through the MFC
- International student



“Facebook is my big source. I find that most of the events are posted [there], so I check it regularly. Sometimes I get emails. I don’t know who sends them. I don’t remember how I signed up, but I get a bunch of them. The MFC is far from my home department so I don’t come here much unless there is an event.”

When I first moved to Toronto, I wasn’t sure what to expect in terms of pursuing my faith. Back in my home country, there are temples pretty much everywhere so it is really easy to practise prayer, even if most people just attend during holidays. Because temples are harder to find in Toronto, I was really excited to learn about the Multi-Faith Centre!

I first learned about the Centre when I found a workshop about mindfulness being advertised on Facebook. Since mindfulness is something I find very important on the levels of spirituality and wellbeing, I decided to attend. It ended up being a great experience! The workshop had invited a yoga instructor who tied the tenets of mindfulness back to Sikhism, which was very cool because I never realized that concepts important to my own faith could be found in other religions as well. From then on, I stayed up-to-date on Multi-Faith’s programs and events by monitoring Facebook and signing up for the mailing list.

I only wish I could come to the centre more frequently.... It’s on the opposite side of campus for me, so I usually only come by when I have plans to attend an event. When I’m feeling really stressed, I do sometimes make the trek to use the study space. It’s always really quiet and calming there—perhaps because so few people know about it?

While I find the people who host and attend events are extremely nice and willing to share, I did wish that events were a bit more clear about the expected level of knowledge for participants. I’m obviously very interested in learning about other religions, but sometimes I will attend an event and feel scared to ask questions since everyone seems more knowledgeable than me and I’m afraid of saying the wrong thing.

Nadia's Story

- Non-faith
- Does not regularly attend MFC programming, but is interested in it
- Out-of-province graduate student



“I'm very drawn to other people who are mixed race and their experiences in life. [...] It took me until I was in undergrad—other than my sister—to meet other people who were half-Asian, or ‘half-this and half-that’, and have life experiences based on being visibly *something*, but not anything anyone can recognize. And that's something I've been drawn to repeatedly as an adult, is just reading other people's experiences.”

I'm pretty new to Toronto, so I'm really interested in meeting new people. That said, I'm not exactly an extrovert, so I find social events to be kind of intimidating. I like the idea of mindfulness or de-stressing workshops, since they provide a space and reason to meet new people without being explicitly about religion. While I do find value in building friendships with people different from myself, I am a bit wary of participating in faith-based events since I'm not religious and I'm worried that people may try to pressure me into converting. It would be cool if there was more programming that got people together to talk about meaningful things without having it be all about religion.... I would also be interested in programming that is based on cultural identity rather than religious identity. As someone who is half-Asian, I'm really interested in meeting more people who are like me and who share some of those unique experiences.

I find that the U of T campus is pretty isolating. It's so big and can be confusing to navigate. I think I would be a lot more likely to attend MFC programming if it was in a more central location, but they can't really do anything about that.... If anything, I think that events can be a bit better advertised so there's more awareness about what is available. I can't speak for undergrads, but it would be cool if there was a welcoming package or something for incoming students. Or even a visible representative on orientation days.... I think it took me a full year of being on campus to even realize that we had a Multi-Faith Centre. Even then, I found it by accident! One of my department events was catered by VEDA, and I thought the food was really good. I recognized the logo as I was walking by the Centre, so I went in to get some curry and only then did I learn about the MFC.

Implications: Design Principles

The results of this project have a number of implications on future design of programming, services, and spaces at the Multi-Faith Centre—as well as other student-facing services at the University of Toronto. Based on the insights gathered from this project and from secondary literature review, the design team proposes the following model as a guide for supporting the spiritual and holistic well-being of students across campus.



“Does this program help students feel a sense of community and belonging? Does it help inform the way they make sense of the world around them? Does it help them cope with or mitigate stress and negative experiences?” In considering how a potential program or service may have implications within each sphere, service providers can better engage with students in meaningful participation that supports their overall well-being.

The following are some of ways to apply this model when considering programming and services specific to the Multi-Faith Centre:

Community Membership and Belonging

The Multi-Faith Centre features a lot of programming and services that are meant to cater to students regardless of their particular faith associations. However, some aspects of program design result in students feeling unsupported or excluded. Examples of things to consider when planning and designing events:

Dietary Accommodations

- Does the food provided at the event cater to the unique dietary needs of all students attending? Are there mechanisms in place for students to share their concerns regarding food options or to request special accommodations?

Event Space

- Is this event being hosted in a space that is welcoming and accessible to *all* students attending?

Target Demographic

- Is this event explicitly (e.g., closed programming) or implicitly (e.g., hosted by a certain faith group) targeting a certain type of student?

Expected Level of Knowledge

- Does active participation in this event pre-suppose a level of knowledge or familiarity with the topic?

Frameworks for Understanding the World

Students value programming that allows them to better understand the world around them, whether that is through broadening their horizons or deepening their knowledge on a specific topic. However, this learning is best pursued in ways that diverge from the typical classroom and allow for students to pursue knowledge in “everyday” ways.

Interactivity and Social Learning

- Is the workshop in a panel or lecture format? If so, is there an opportunity for discussion among participants and guests?

Relevancy and Interest

- Is the topic relevant to current events or issues? Will engaging with this topic help participants make better sense of the world around them?

Ability to Cope with Negative Experiences

The University of Toronto is a highly stressful environment. Between school, work, and other extra-curricular commitments, students often feel they lack the energy or motivation to attend additional programming if they think it will not be engaging or instrumental. Consider how programs could mitigate this feeling of “overload” by appealing to relaxing or positive emotional experiences.

Room to Breathe

- Are there opportunities to engage students with programming or spaces that are aimed towards destressing or having fun?

Return on (Emotional) Investment

- If students are purposefully engaging with stressful or negative experiences, are they benefitting from the exchange via strategies or mechanisms for better coping or emotional regulation?

Access and Awareness

While it is not possible to make the location of the Multi-Faith Centre more accessible to the larger campus, there are opportunities for extending the reach and awareness of programs and services through other methods.

Building Presence

- What are some methods for making programs and services more visible to the U of T community?
- Examples include social media (Facebook is working well), flyers/posters, welcoming packages to incoming students, orientation representatives, etc.

Building Out

- Are there opportunities for partnering with or hosting events in more centralized spaces on campus? For example, panels hosted in partnership with Hillel were well-received by participants.
- How can such partnerships be used to target students who may require such faith-based access and support?
- Is there viability in offering programming online, so students can engage on their own time?

Building Within

- Are there opportunities for participating students to comfortably provide feedback about a specific service or event? Are there mechanisms in place to take such feedback into consideration and implement changes for future services or events?

Conclusion

Through this project, it was discovered that students find opportunities for making meaning across many spheres of their lives. It is interesting to note that, when asked directly about where they make meaning, participants were often unable to provide a clear answer. For example:

“A meaningful experience I’ve had? [long pause] It's really hard to define meaningful. I mean, I've had a lot of memories that I cherish. But it's so hard to decide whether I should call them meaningful.”

It took further probing and discussion for them to identify aspects or experiences in their lives that they felt gave them a sense of meaning, purpose, and identity. This pattern reinforces the idea that most students do not locate meaning in a clearly-defined form. Rather, when given the chance to reflect, **they are able to identify a sense of meaning and fulfillment in their everyday experiences, whether that is spending time with friends, learning about the world, or reading an interesting book.** For this reason, the design team suggests a *holistic approach* to helping students through this process. In supporting students and their needs *across multiple spheres of life*, the Multi-Faith Centre can provide a space for community, understanding, enjoyment, and spiritual well-being:

- **Community and Belonging:** How can the Multi-Faith Centre support students in finding a meaningful sense of community? How can diversity and religious pluralism be embraced in a way that acknowledges difference comfortably and safely?
- **Finding Purpose and Understanding:** How can the Multi-Faith Centre provide opportunities not only for spiritual practice and reflection, but for pursuing personal growth through challenge and exploration?
- **Pursuing Positive Emotional Experiences:** How can the Multi-Faith Centre use existing spaces and programs to help students engage their love of learning through dynamic experiences, or to approach deeper questions in a low-pressure environment? Is there viability in providing a space for students to just relax, destress, and have fun without engaging in structured programming?
- **Barriers to Engagement:** How can the Multi-Faith Centre make its programming and services more accessible to the student population?

By considering each of these questions when designing future programming, services, and spaces, the Multi-Faith Centre can strengthen its existing connections with students of all faith backgrounds and increase engagement with students who are new to the Centre.

Limitations

While we attempted to recruit student participants from a wide variety of faith backgrounds, many faith groups remain unaccounted for—most notably, Muslim and Hindu students. This is particularly concerning because Muslim students were noted by MFC staff to be regular users of

the prayer space and would therefore likely have unique insights to offer regarding the Centre and its services. Also, Muslim students represent a large proportion of the student body, yet they do not have their own dedicated faith centre. Especially in times of growing Islamophobia,⁸ it is important for Muslim students to have access to a central “safe space” for practising prayer, sharing their experiences, and building community solidarity.

Discussion Questions

- How can existing partnerships and resources be leveraged to fulfill the faith-based needs of students who may otherwise not be well-represented on campus? Would this, in turn, impact how the Multi-Faith Centre allocates its own resources for meeting such needs?
- How can the Multi-Faith Centre balance students’ desire for safe spaces for self-exploration and building relationships with the opportunity to broaden their horizons and prepare them for engagement in a religiously pluralistic society?
- How can the Multi-Faith Centre design interfaith events so that students can engage safely but meaningfully with current issues and conflicts? Is it possible? What would need to be true in order for such an event to be successful?
- How can the Multi-Faith Centre make its spaces, services, and programs more appealing and approachable to students who do not identify as spiritual or religious?
- What are alternative options for engaging with students and supporting their growth and understanding without investing in programming they may not have the time for?

⁸ <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/islamophobia-canada-muslim-students-share-their-personal-experiences>

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Student Contributors

Danielle Lum,
Team Lead
2nd Year MI Student,
Faculty of Information

Joey Youssef,
Team Lead
PhD, Anthropology

Liza Brechbill,
Sr. Research Assistant
2nd Year MA Student,
Social Justice Education

Caroline (Youran) Shi,
4th Year Undergraduate,
Psychology

Effie Change,
3rd Year Undergraduate,
Psychology + Physiology

Fatima Ahmed,
3rd Year Undergraduate,
Psychology + Statistics

Matthew Lowe,
1st MHI Student,
Institute of Health Policy,
Management, and
Evaluation

Mihn Nguyen,
2nd Year Undergraduate,
Statistics + Comp. Sci.

Therese Elkhoury,
2nd Year Part-Time
Student

Xinyi Shi,
3rd Year Undergraduate,
Finance and Economics

Yuchen Wang,
1st Year MI Student,
Faculty of Information



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