



# New College Dining Hall Redesign

Themes and Insights: Design Thinking Summary  
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# introduction

University of Toronto Food Services asked the Innovation Hub to develop insights to inform the redesign of the New College Dining Hall, also known as the Audrey Taylor Dining Hall. The current dining hall design includes several hot and cold food serving areas, as well as a cafeteria style–eating area and a raised stage. Food Services would like the redesigned hall to offer students an improved space that supports their dining needs.

Together, we worked to answer the following question: *“How might the New College Dining Hall be redesigned to offer an innovative and multi-use community eating and social space for students and staff?”* The Innovation Hub aimed to discover how students are using existing facilities and what they would like to see in the redesigned space—while also identifying features that would make the space more functional, comfortable and welcoming to students. We developed recommendations for how the space can attract and meet the needs of U of T’s diverse student body and what sort of meal plan would best suit the students and staff who utilize the New College Dining Hall Services.

For this project, dining hall staff and students—and students who ate at other dining halls—were interviewed. Our team analyzed these interviews thematically to identify the recurring themes, narratives, and underlying needs. We paid particular attention to tensions that arose between the narratives that students and staff shared in their interviews, finding that they offered many insights. The key themes that emerged from our work **included a need for comfort, communication and community, collectively referred to throughout as the three C’s**. This report describes each of the themes using key insights and quotes pulled from the qualitative interviews. In addition, the themes are further explored through user personas and a design checklist.

# theme one: Comfort

Feeling secure and respected is of high importance for both staff and students. A clean and “homey” environment is essential for students to enjoy their meal break and have an appetizing experience.

## Insights

- 1) **Aesthetics:** Students and staff appreciate spaces that resemble cafés or home environments rather than institutional dining halls.

### Data Points

*“It could be a little less institutional feeling.... It could be ‘homey-er.’” – Staff*

*“There was like art and stuff like ambient music.... It made it feel ‘homey-er.’” – Student, about a different dining location that they liked*

*“Plastic cups vs. actual dishes...reminiscent of something you would have in your home.” - Student*

*“I like the big windows. And that the ceiling is very tall. I like basically the style.” – Student*

*“There is a tree in the dining hall. And that’s cool.” – Student*

*“[We] like to eat on the Wilson side just because, one, it’s bigger, but two, it’s also, it looks more lit, so it looks more welcoming, whereas Wetmore seems more like, almost like a [lonelier] place because it’s so dark.” – Student*

- 2) **Cleanliness:** Having a clean space to eat is important for hygiene and to enjoy your meal. It improves a space’s ambiance and increases functionality. If the dining hall is going to be used as a multi-purpose space, it is important that it be comfortable and clean.

### Data Points

*“Sometimes it can be dirty, so you can’t really do work.” – Student*

*“I would redesign the colours; [they] give the perception that the tables are dirty.” – Student*

*“It would be nice if there was a place to wash your hands in the dining hall.” – Student*

*“Staff shouldn’t be cleaning up after you. Like, we’re all adults, we’re all in university. You should just pick it up.” – Student*

- 3) **Power of Choice:** Students and staff want respect and security. Agency over their meal choices is particularly important to students. Additionally, the convenience of easily accessible—and healthy—food is beneficial for busy students. Students want to use the dining hall at their own pace and to have the flexibility to either stay for a long time or quickly eat and leave. In summary, students want to feel in control of what, when, and how they eat.

### Data Points

*“Most of the time I wake up too late for breakfast.” – Student*

*“I think [it] would be good if they had more options for items you could take out.” – Student*

*“[The to-go lunches are] the same. Every single month...I actually think that to-go meals are something that a lot of students here would appreciate—not just for lunches, but in general to have the option to not eat in the dining hall.... It kind of sucks, when you’re, sick to then have to go into a busy dining hall.” – Student*

*“It’s convenient for the life of a student, but it’s not convenient for a healthy lifestyle.” – Staff*

*“If I were to eat [the food we serve daily], I’d be 100 lbs heavier.” – Staff*

*“I’m a vegetarian and so that is really a problem.... I think they’re doing a little bit more for options where you can prepare your own food and kind of decide what goes into it, so that’s been really cool.” – Student*

*“I like having complete ownership over what goes into it—what things I like, what things I don’t like.” – Student*

# theme two: Community

A dining hall that encourages student engagement and socialization can strengthen the community at New College. Many students and staff expressed interest in creating a space that serves as a multi-purpose location where students can do more than just dining.

## Insights

- 1) **Socialization:** With their busy schedules, students often take advantage of their mealtimes to socialize with their friends. Designing a dining hall to facilitate socializing was a recurring topic of discussion throughout the interviews.

### Data Points

*“I actually liked going to the dining hall; it’s like a family.” – Student*

*“The long tables...I think it would be nicer to have more like café-style stuff, like something that’s a little more [natural], like how people eat with their families and when they go out...a variety of table sizes.” – Student*

*“Most of the time I interact with people there.” – Student*

*“New College is generally a very antisocial residence.” – Student*

- 2) **Versality:** Both students and staff expressed interest in designing a space that – in addition to dining – can be used for other activities such as studying or socializing. The current meal plan discourages multi-purpose use of the dining hall and restricts the number of students who can utilize the space.

### Data Points

*“If you want the space to be used for more than food, then the ‘all-you-can-eat’ meal plan doesn’t really facilitate that.” – Staff*

*“I personally don’t study there because it’s pretty loud.” – Student*

*“I like studying in coffee shops and stuff like that, so I think I would study there if it wasn’t so busy.” – Student*

*“Well, for me, it’s everything. Yeah. I study there. Most of the time I don’t have any time to call my parents. Most times, when I call them, I eat.” – Student*

*“I often did use almost all my meals, but I was [also] buying groceries outside, which sucked because the New College Dining Hall is pretty expensive to have a meal plan at, so I was like spending money on top of that.” – Student*

*“Because it is ‘all-you-can-eat’ style, you can try everything a little bit and then decide what you want.” – Student*

*“You can’t swipe into the same mealtime twice. Which didn’t work very well for me, because I worked a part-time job at a restaurant [that restricted my eating window]...so I would have to spend [Flex bucks] to re-enter the dining hall.” – Student*

*“I think the ‘all-you-can-eat’ style is very good if you don’t go every day.” – Student*

*“It [would be] nice to have the option to get like a salad or just to get a small amount of food so I didn’t have to swipe and count that as a whole meal.... I could just get a muffin” - Student*

*“My friends who are [New College students but not residents] and who have class there [can’t use the dining hall].... It’s not a great option to be unable to eat in your own college.” - Student*

- 3) **Engagement:** Students would like to be more involved with their meal preparation and have more influence over the menu offerings. Despite various efforts, currently students feel that there is not a lot of student engagement in the meal planning and dining hall activities. Students value partnership: they want to feel supported in their studies, and the atmosphere of the dining hall can help implement this notion of partnership. The students view the dining hall as a “homey” environment rather than a restaurant—and some of them report feeling patronized when staff dictate exactly how they should be eating.

### Data Points

*“That would be really cool, learning to cook from the chefs.” – Student*

*“The student engagement at New College is incredibly poor.... There was a points system, they had challenges...but no one participated in the challenges at all.” – Student*

*“Something that...may get more people interested is if they take people to different parts of the city and source the materials with the person and then bring them back and then show them how to make the dish.... As an activity taking people and teaching them how you can source the ingredients from different kinds of places and then coming back and making a meal would be pretty fun.” – Student*

*“I don’t think they have much incentive to make their food better or provide better service, because first-year students are forced to eat there, so it doesn’t affect them.” – Student*

*“Even if the plate is not ours, sometimes the cafeteria workers near the entrance tell us ‘you need to clean it up’...but it’s not ours.... And we’re like ‘fine.’” – Student*

*“But sometimes, you want to cook by yourself and they are like, ‘Oh you need to put this and this,’ and I’m like, ‘I know!’ I’m not going to burn everything.” – Student*



# theme three: Communication

Our work pointed to a disconnect between what the students want and what the staff believe that the students want (and vice versa). This was partially driven by a lack of communication between the two groups. We found the quote “treat others as *they* would like to be treated” reflective of the current divide. The interviews showed that the personal beliefs of both staff and students often bias what they believe that the other group would like to see. More direct or indirect communication regarding dining services would be helpful. Students have expressed interest in participating in events hosted by the New College Dining Hall, but many of them are unaware of these activities.

## Insights

- 1) **Feedback:** The lack of communication between students and staff was revealed when both parties expressed conflicting ideas about each group’s desires. Staff clearly wanted to hear student feedback; however, students often expressed that they either felt uncomfortable providing that feedback or lacked the means to do so. Additionally, staff often had a preconceived idea of what students wanted to see in the meal plan, food options, or space design, whereas students expressed different interests. There is an evident disconnect between what the staff believe the students want and what they actually want.

### Key Data Points

*“Feedback to us is a gift, so anytime we get it, we try to act on it.” – Staff*

*“I don’t feel like they want to receive feedback; I’d feel kind of like an asshole [if I told them what I thought].” – Student*

*“I’m trying to push through new ideas...introduce some cultural diversity.” – Staff*

*“[International students] get [Chinese food] where they come from, [so] a lot of the time they want Western style food [from the dining hall].” – Student*

- 2) **Promotion:** Many interesting services are offered through the dining hall for New College students (as well as general U of T students), but interview participants did not seem aware of them. Increasing promotion and public awareness of these events could benefit both parties. Students expressed interest in participating in these organized activities, even if they were not aware of them beforehand.

## Data Points

*“Just like the old TV show the Iron Chef.... They have a box of ingredients that they don't know what they're heading into.... None of them have any formal training, but we do like 8 weeks of prep with them here.” –Staff*

*“No, I haven't heard about any of [the 'Iron Chef' competition]. ... I think it would be really cool.” – Student*

*“I'd be interested in cooking for ourselves [and learning] some recipes.” – Student*

# persona one: Neilani's Story

- 1<sup>st</sup> Year Undergraduate Student
- New College Resident
- Recently moved to Toronto
- **Need: Socialization**



*“Most of my socialization happens at the caf... ‘cause if you’re in residence, you see your neighbours, your friends all at the caf and you sit with them, talk with them.”*

*“New College can be a very antisocial residence. ... [I think] there is a disconnect between the two residences.”*

I just started studying at the University of Toronto this year. I didn't know very many people coming to this city, but I'm a social butterfly. I can quickly find my way around, and I've made a ton of new friends here at the New College residence. I got involved in many extracurricular activities, ranging from intramural volleyball to being a member on the resident council. I live on the Wilson side and I have found the dining hall is so important in instilling a sense of community among me and my floormates. With my busy class schedule, cramming in studying in between lessons and volleyball games, the only time I have to socialize happens to be while I'm eating my meals at the dining hall.

The dining hall is sort of a social hub, central to the residence building. It has the potential of bringing the two separate sides together. However, because of the current layout, I really feel like it propagates a disconnect between the Wilson and the Wetmore residents—we don't really interact with each other...which is too bad, since I really like to take advantage of my free time to socialize with people, and I would love to make new friends!

## persona two: Khan's Story

- 1<sup>st</sup> Year Undergraduate Student
- New College Resident
- International student
- **Need: Individuality**



*"I've never felt that [the chefs want to hear feedback]. It is more like, 'Thank you for the food you prepared; I appreciate that.'"*

*"There's really poor labelling of allergens."*

*"One thing that I find lacking is the amount of protein you get if you are vegetarian."*

*"You need to wait a long time to get vegetarian food."*

I'm a New College Resident, living alone from home and in a different country for the first time. It has been a huge transition from me, both culturally and socially. I don't have my usual group of friends to lean on, and I found that I really miss having my family around. Some of my favourite memories from my childhood are associated with sharing a dinner meal with my parents and sister. Entering the dining hall brings a pang of homesickness, but I've learned to fight that off and surround myself with all the new friends I met this year.

One of the things I continue to struggle with is my dietary restriction: I'm vegetarian and I have a serious peanut allergy. I don't want to start a fuss and annoy the chefs with requests for better allergy accommodations, but I wish that the food was labelled more accurately and that speaking with the dietician wasn't so complicated. The lines for the vegetarian options are always long, but they're worth the wait because personally, I find the food to be a lot healthier too. I would love to provide feedback, but I also worry that the chefs aren't interested in hearing my suggestions. I also find it incredibly inconvenient that there is no bathroom, nor any bathroom passes—I don't always remember to go before swiping my card and entering the dining hall. The staff are usually pretty accommodating and allow me to leave, but it's just annoying having to make sure that they remember me when I get back; it would be so much easier if there was just a bathroom in there.

## persona three: Miguel's Story

- 1<sup>st</sup> Year Graduate Student
- Knox College Resident with NCDH meal plan
- Has an inflexible, busy schedule
- **Need: Convenience**



*“Breakfast is my favourite meal of the day but... when I come back [from class], they already stopped serving breakfast.”*

*“It was really inconvenient, because sometimes I would have to pay to enter.... I would have swipes left for the week but I would have to spend money on my flex dollars which I could have spent on snacks.”*

*“Wetmore is really dimly lit. A lot of people, instead of going to Wetmore, they like to eat on the Wilson side just because, one, it's bigger, but two...it looks more welcoming, whereas Wetmore seems...[lonelier] because it's so dark.”*

I'm a graduate student, and I don't actually live in the New College building—I live at Knox College, but I have an “all-you-can-eat” meal plan from New College Dining Hall for the year. However, I find that the meal schedule isn't accommodating enough for my busy schedule. I usually have to get to class early every morning, so I don't get to have breakfast, which is too bad because it's my favourite meal of the day. I wish that the mealtime intervals were longer. I also find it inconvenient that I have to use my flex dollars if I want to enter the same mealtime interval more than once. Sometimes, I have to have a late lunch and an early dinner because of my lab schedule, and when that happens, I can't use two “meal swipes”—I have to pay for the second meal in flex dollars.

Since I'm a graduate student, I don't interact with the New College residents that eat here.... But socializing isn't a huge priority for me. I'm more concerned with just having a good dining experience and leaving. I really wish that the facility was more “homey”—it's so dark on the Wetmore side and the layout is very institutional-looking. I feel really tense when I'm ushered through while waiting to be served food.

## design checklist

These criteria emerged from the interviews conducted with students and staff. Each of these elements helps support cafeteria users and meets their needs according to the themes of comfort, community, and communication.

- The dining hall is open and spacious
- There are a variety of seating options and styles
- The space accommodates eating, socializing, and studying
- There is more flexibility in purchasing options (e.g., “à la carte” offerings accommodate students without meal plans or who do not want to opt for “all-you-can-eat”)
- There is greenery or other elements that contribute to a warm and “homey” atmosphere
- There is bright, preferably natural, lighting
- The colours contribute to a clean-looking environment
- Food waste is reduced by using smaller plates
- Everyone’s allergies and dietary restrictions are accommodated
- There are more opportunities for students to share feedback

# conclusion

Through this work, it became apparent that the staff providing food services at the New College Dining Hall are concerned with students' comfort and well-being. On numerous occasions, they alluded to adopting the role of caregiver and wanting to provide students with a "homey" environment. However—through our analysis—we noticed various tensions in the data. We saw that there are conflicts between New College students and staff: a disconnect exists between what the students want to see in their dining experience and what the staff think the students want. Through our thematic analysis, we uncovered three main themes that can help with planning the New College Dining Hall redesign.

- 1) **Comfort:** Referring to both the physical and social environment. The students and staff want to experience a sense of comfort when they enter the dining hall, reminiscent of a home-like space.
- 2) **Community:** Dining is a social experience. With their busy schedules, students often find that they need to take advantage of their mealtimes to socialize. But designing for a community is tough: not everyone uses the space for the same purpose. Designing a multipurpose spot that can accommodate different activities could facilitate this transition.
- 3) **Communication:** Encouraging more transparency between students and staff is important in ensuring that the redesign and future operations of the dining hall reflect everyone's needs.

The themes and insights were personified and presented through representative student personas, and we included a design checklist of items that were repeatedly mentioned throughout the interviews.

Future steps include continuing to involve students in the redesign process and sharing the data with other groups that may benefit from these findings. When commencing the redesign, it is important to think about the implications of this data. Are there elements of the space that can be enhanced to better meet the needs of comfort, community, and communication for students?

# Student Contributors

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