



Student Persona Compendium

Revised June 2019



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Introduction

The Innovation Hub

Situated within the Division of Student Life, the Innovation Hub is a student-led initiative that collaborates with partners in the university community to research and ideate innovative strategies for improving the student experience. We seek out student, staff, and faculty perspectives—with a particular focus on students' lived experiences—in order to inform the development of new or refined concepts, systems, and practices. Drawing upon design thinking, integrative thinking, ethnographic practices, and empathy-based research, we help connect members of the UofT community and provide opportunities for all of us to grow and build solutions together.

Since our launch in May 2016, the Innovation Hub has conducted over 400 in-depth, empathy-based interviews with students, staff, and faculty on the St. George Campus. As opposed to traditional quantitative data reports, these interviews have generated numerous insights and recommendations that look beyond statistics and numbers, drawing upon the extremely diverse lived experiences of members of the UofT community.

The Power of Personas

As part of our methodology, we often feature personas in our data presentations and final research reports. User personas are hypothetical representations of a product or service's intended users. While they are “fictional”, personas are data-driven entities based on user research, providing a vehicle for considering the wants, concerns, needs, and motivations of different use groups¹. Whether anonymized versions of full conversations or composites of several dialogues, **personas provide detailed descriptions of experiences without stripping them of the context, emotion, and thoughtful reflection that comes through in an interview.** For this reason, personas have become a powerful tool of the Innovation Hub, working to destabilize a traditional focus on quantitative data, and engaging project stakeholders in an empathetic understanding of their users.

This document serves as a compendium of all the personas that have been generated through Innovation Hub research since 2016. They are organized chronologically and by research project.

¹ Data-driven personas as explained by Brad Nunnally and David Farkas in *UX Research: Practical Techniques for Designing Better Products* (2017)

Access for Every Student (2016-17)

Access for Every Student is one of our five domains of innovation- research initiatives co-created through community consultation in the Innovation Hub's first year. The domains articulate a vision of change that drives our work—in an ideal world, UofT would be a place where each domain's aspirational goals are fulfilled for every student. *Access for Every Student* focuses on creating accessible digital & physical spaces, addressing financial barriers, supporting under-represented & diverse populations, navigating institutional structures, deepening participation & engagement and improving financial literacy.

Alex's Story

- 3rd Year Sociology Major
- International Student
- No longer feels safe on campus



"I think a lot of students with mental illnesses are afraid to go to accessibility services..."

I'm a trans student who found community at UofT through a social justice club on campus. But after a year or so the club's leadership changed, and the group began to espouse alt-right values. Threats of physical violence were made towards me because of my identity, so I left the group and lost the community I thought I'd found. I tried to reach out to staff about the hate speech that was on the club's Facebook page, but I was told that in order to move forward with my complaint I would need to compile evidence on my own. Tired and overwhelmed, I gave up. I started to feel a lot more stressed, and less and less safe on campus. One day at Hart House, I saw the club there for an unrelated event. I had a panic attack. I remembered how difficult it was to change my name, having to explain the protocol to those in charge. I was afraid. I registered with Accessibility Services. Given the mounting stress, I asked for an extension on a paper. It was denied, and so I had to work with the registrar to get it pushed through. It's a long process and, in the meantime, the course was not counted towards my total course load. I lost my financial assistance. I returned home for the summer (I'm an international student) and I wasn't sure if I would be able to come back in the fall. I spent my summer making calls to my department and various offices, but the process moved at a snail's pace. Luckily, I was able to register for the fall session thanks to money I had saved up, but even now my financial assistance is still in the process of renewal.

Osmond's Story



- Mature student; 4th Year Sociology Student
- Works on top of attending school full-time
- Part of a peer mentorship program

“The university needs to save these students. It’s because of financial needs that they drop out.”

I’m 26 years-old and a fourth-year student specializing in sociology. As I enrolled as a mature student, I had some difficulty adjusting to student life and connecting with my younger peers. I was also very concerned about keeping up with my studies, since I had been out of school for a number of years. This anxiety was only made worse since I’ve also had to work upwards of 30 hours a week to help cover my living expenses. I worked full-time for several years between high school and university, so I’ve been living on my own and didn’t want to go back to living with my parents after returning to school full-time. Even though I’m on OSAP and received a small bursary, it’s been really hard balancing school work and paid work. I even know some students who were forced to drop out of their programs because they weren’t able to afford their tuition and living expenses. Since joining my college’s peer mentorship program last year, I feel as though I’m more connected to the student community, but I still struggle to make connections when all of my time is divided between school and work.

Fostering Connectedness (2016-17)

Another domain of innovation explored in the first year of the Innovation Hub, *Fostering Connectedness*, focuses on nurturing international engagement & intercultural understanding, cultivating relationships, increasing peer connections, building & connecting communities and working across difference.

Fabian's Story

- Graduate student studying Semiotics
- Commuter student
- Out-of-province student



"I'm quite quiet when I get to a new place, I generally hope that someone will come up and talk to me."

I graduated from a university in my home province and decided to come to UofT to pursue my PhD. When I got here, for orientation, I didn't connect. It was too massive, and I didn't know anyone and was too overwhelmed to talk to new people. Everyone attended orientation in huge groups. I was from a small department and felt like I just didn't want to be there. At my previous university, I knew everyone and never had to deal with this feeling.

I thought I was just going to concentrate on my research, but when I started, part of me wanted something else. I found that I liked teaching and helping others. I started subscribing to newsletters and finding things to get better at helping teach students. I went to places where I could get advice and had lots of commonalities with others. I felt most connected when I was given the role to go and talk to others who I felt were going through something similar to me. It was nice being able to finally find a community, but it was something I had to do on my own.

Lucy's Story

- 4th Year Psychology Major
- Commuter student
- Lives in Toronto



“...the focus on academics leaves little time for people to make meaningful connections.”

I do not feel connected to the University of Toronto. St. George campus is so large and has so many domains of study that it's difficult to find a sense of community with shared interests and values. The university has a very strong focus on academic performance- this leaves little time for people to make meaningful connections and this focus can foster a feeling of competition between students, making relationships more strained. The focus on academic/research excellence is how the university markets itself, it focuses on its prestige and rankings rather than community.

I have several friends who are transfer students and they all felt more connected with their previous institutions. Places like Western seem to have a strong sense of community and really strong branding. I was told that at other southwestern Ontario schools, “the community comes to you” - it was easy to feel very connected and students were proud of their community. At the University of Toronto it's hard to see/feel a community. UofT has Boundless posters/ banners but who relates to that? The only time that me and my friends felt proud of UofT was when comparing prestige between universities. We're just here for a shiny piece of paper. Once you have it you don't look back.

The lack of community also affects my interaction with faculty and staff. For example, when I used services like the career networking provided by Student Life, I did not feel like a “valued customer.” There was no relationship; it was transactional only. This likely occurs because the staff have to deal with too many students, if you return for additional help, you see a different service provider. Regardless, this feeling negatively impacts the sense of community at UofT.

Sarah's Story



- English Major
- Domestic student
- Highly involved in clubs and co-curriculars

"I think connections with strangers, even for a brief second, is what I consider connection to the university."

When I arrived at UofT, I joined clubs and was involved! Connecting to UofT students and making friends is best done through club engagement and co-curricular activities outside the classroom – that worked for me for my first two years! During my third year I became more involved with an off-campus church community and went on exchange as well. Upon returning I wasn't inclined to get involved in the way I was in my first two years. I stayed in touch and somewhat connected to those friends I made during my first two years. My community was mostly defined outside of the university.

There are so many opportunities to connect on campus, if I get out of my comfort zone, to find different kinds of people, talent, and personalities; I know I am not the only one of my kind! I am a picky friend-maker as I prefer to observe others over time to determine if there is a match in terms of trying to be friends. At this point, I think connections with strangers, even for a brief second (as I will smile at them!), is what I consider connection to the university. In terms of connecting to professors, administration, and students, I'm not the type to reach out as they are busy and I'm quite shy around strangers.

Tasha's Story

- 4th Year Human Biology Specialist
- Transferred from a southwestern Ontario university
- Commuter Student



“With the clubs that I’ve ben part of, it doesn’t feel that it matters [to] anyone if I show up or not.”

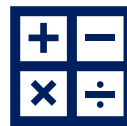
I started at a university where community came to me. I didn’t have to wonder where students lived - everyone was nearby. I simply existed and the outcome was me feeling very connected. I transferred in third year because of my program of study and the prestige of U of T. In my third year, I lived close to campus but I wasn’t connected to anyone. Now, I live more than an hour away but I feel much more connected because of the groups I connected myself to. I felt my mental health was negatively affected when I wasn’t connected, and it’s been better because I am seeking out opportunities to connect. I’ve chosen clubs and groups that I have an interest in, but there are many barriers to being able to participate, like timing and the expense of transportation. And I just don’t feel like I really matter.

Future-Ready Students (2016-17)

The third of our five domains of innovation, *Future-Ready Students*, believes in preparing students for a changing world, increasing work-integrated learning, expanding mentorship opportunities, leadership development, career exploration and development and fostering lifelong learning.

Danny's Story

- 3rd Year Mathematics Major
- Immigrated to Canada five years ago
- Moved from Victoria, B.C.



"While I am certain that working hard will pay-off, there seems to be some many different directions and I really don't know which paths to take."

I came to Canada when I was grade 8 and spend almost five years in Victoria before being accepted by UofT. I can still remember the day when I was informed of my acceptance. I was so proud. During then- similar to many peers my age graduating from high school, I never thought too much about things outside of my own little bubble of life.

First year was hectic. It was a completely different environment, away from home. I barely knew anyone. I had to adapt to the new environment and take care of myself. I quickly realized academic life wouldn't be as lax as it used to be in high school but I didn't know how to transition smoothly. I suffered a bit, but luckily, did gradually get better.

However, what became gradually frustrating was this growing sense of becoming lost. I start to question things beyond just taking classes. U of T is a gigantic school. Thousands of students cross the campus every single day; many of them look so determined yet others look so lost too. I belong to the latter. Influenced by many around me, I start to think about things like "getting prepared for job force" and "how to cultivate a pretty resume".

Honestly, I don't care so much about actually landing a job. What I care more about is how to become adaptive of the real world outside, after I graduate. But because it's such an unknown realm out there, and I don't know where to start preparing, all the anxiety coalesces into the single "job preparation" thing.

I also care about cultivating myself as a person. While I am taking all these classes, I doubt if I am that much a different person from whom I was in high school. "Have I really matured?" I wonder. University career is supposed some of my most formative years. And I do not it to come to waste.

Isabella's Story

- 5th Year Life Sciences/Anthropology Major
- Lives in Mississauga
- International Student from Romania



"I'm happy and grateful that there are things in the first year that help you a lot that helps with your future career path."

I am a 23-year-old University of Toronto student from St. Michael's College. I'm in my fifth year studying Life Sciences at the St. George Campus. I live with two roommates and commute in from Mississauga. My Dad lives in the GTA. I came to Canada five years ago to go to UofT. I'm incurring a huge debt load as an international student.

First year was stressful – it was the worst year of my life – it was an experience that I had to go through to know who I am – I had to go through that to know that I'm okay right now. I wanted to talk to my professors, but they have huge classes, so I visited my Registrar and TA's for help in first year. I got good grades back home, and had a less rigid way of testing than at UofT. My TA said "just study". I felt lost and stressed. I remember going to Convocation Hall in my first week. It was isolating – there were thousands of students in first year. I wondered if I was the only one feeling this way. Med school is my Plan A, but I need a Plan B as well, which was really confusing and my grades were falling.

As part of my orientation as an international student, I was invited to join the First in the Family Peer Mentor Program (FITF), which I did in January of my first year. I feel that I am here today because of this awesome opportunities to meet other people and network.

I'm still figuring out my Plan B by talking with my mentor. I thought about going to grad school to give me more time, and also learned about the Professional Experience Year Internship Program (PEY), through an engineering student, but found out I didn't qualify as an international student. I got a job as a Career Centre Work Study Student in third year and learned that the creativity, confidence and leadership skills I was developing on the job are even more important than my GPA according to employers. I also learned how to find a job, which I didn't know before. I speak with students who want to attend Career Centre workshops, but there is a lot of competition. I feel lucky to be here.

I thought school would help me figure out what I liked to do – I'm ok that it didn't. I now live with roommates that I met in FITF. They are figuring out as they go. One roommate just graduated and got her first job through a friend at the movie theatre where she worked, who introduced her to someone who hired her as a temp at an insurance company. As soon as she got there, she found mentors and even mentors others. If I don't go to grad school, I'm going to do something like that.

Sobechi's Story



- Health Science and Mental Health Studies
- Lives in Markham
- Based at UTSC, but attends UTSG for varsity athletics

“The university should have stuff telling us about grad school; people are often not aware of future opportunities like grad school; [like] looking for internships on what to do with [your] major, [I’m] not aware. I need to find it on my own.”

I’m a 19-year-old UTSC student in my second year studying Health Science and Mental Health Studies. I’m a varsity athlete and live in Markham, so I and regularly commute downtown for 4:30am practices.

Academically, it is very good at UTSC. Adapting to it was very easy for me – I have so many resources around me. I have a learning disability and I feel more comfortable talking about it now.

I’m anxious because I don’t think enough about my future. It’s my fault, I know that the “future is now” and I should be thinking about it already. I have five sisters and they were set, they went to grad school. I haven’t thought about it. Ideally, my main goal is to help people. Initially I wanted to be a doctor but read about med school and knew my GPA would be too low. I was going to be a neurologist but I’m not smart enough. I’m not sure what I want to do. Maybe be a clinical researcher, but I’m not sure how to find jobs in that field. I want to find a way where medication is the last resort in terms of mental health.

I think that the way clubs are promoted is not effective. If we don’t see the importance of them, we are not going to pay attention. If they said, this is your future and how you will get to where you want to go – we’re here for you; we’ve been there, we’re ready to help.

Integrated Learning Experience (2016-17)

Integrated Learning Experience is a domain of innovation that focuses on fostering academic & co-curricular connections, facilitating experiential & immersive learning, generating purposeful in-class engagement, equipping faculty with information to support students, encouraging self-directed learning and increasing online learning options using educational technology.

Dao Zi's Story

- 1st Year Health Sciences
- International student from China; completed high school in British Columbia
- Lives in an on-campus residence



"The content of my courses doesn't seem connected. And even when there are connections, you have to be the one to discover them for yourself."

While I graduated from high school in British Columbia, I've only been in Canada for a few years and still find it a bit of a culture shock. This is especially true for instructional styles- Chinese and North American styles are so different! While I have good relationships with most my instructors, they don't seem to be aware of the way that these cultural differences affect me- or other international students.

Based on my time here, it's also become clear that Chinese and Canadian students have different motivations and expectations for success. Because of our cultural focus on personal reputation and family pride, Chinese students tend to more strongly value high grades and opportunities for future careers or grad school.

While I usually focus strongly on school, I do find some time to relax and socialize. I find it easiest to maintain separate contexts- I try to limit my time in the library and classroom to studying and learning, but my residence is a place for having fun and forgetting about academic responsibilities.

David's Story



- 3rd Year Computer Science Major
- Commuter Student
- Not involved in extra-curriculars or student groups

"It was vicious cycle; the more I struggled, the more I doubted myself and the more it disengaged me from the learning component."

I'm a third-year computer science student, but I find the program to be extremely overwhelming. I was stronger in humanities-based subjects in high school, but I figured that computer science had better career prospects. The most frustrating thing is feeling like nobody wants to take the time to help me. I used to participate a lot in lectures, but recently, one of my professors has been unreceptive to my questions. He'll tell me to learn the material on my own (I'm trying!) or he'll imply that my question is "silly." This has been really discouraging to me, and I find it even harder to trudge through the workload or take extra time to figure out challenging concepts.

Leonard's Story



- Humanities PhD Student
- Married
- Works as a TA for undergrads

"I just want someone to say it's ok if you go another route post-graduation."

I'm a doctoral student currently working on my thesis. I completed my earlier degrees at other Canadian universities, so I'm fairly new to Toronto and I'm having trouble finding a sense of community. I'm used to knowing everyone in my department, but UofT's competitive environment means that there's some tension- we're basically competing for the same funding and jobs. The environment can become outright toxic, so I've started to work a lot from home but it's hard to stay focused. I feel like a big part of my crisis is the uncertainty of what I want to do after completing my PhD. Academic postings are really hard to come by, so I wish I could discover more job opportunities that my degree could lead into.

The one part of my position that I really enjoy is working as a TA for undergraduate students. I really enjoy teaching others, and I also find that I can connect with other TAs who feel similarly. Training events are often interdisciplinary, so I can meet graduate students outside of my own department. Before found this part of the community, it felt like my wife was the only person who would listen to me about my doctoral concerns!

Sue's Story

- 2nd Year Master of Education
- Mature student
- Indigenous background and very involved in the community



"When I'm put on the spot in class as the 'token Indian' and expected to provide explanations to others in class...like I know everything."

I have a hard history. Originally from western Canada, I was a victim of the "Sixties Scoop" and taken from my family, rotating through the foster care system until I was sixteen. Reading and writing were my escape, and something I practiced daily from a young age. I worked as a freelance writer before deciding to pursue a post-secondary degree. Starting with the Transitional Year Program offered through UofT, I got my foot in the door and when on to complete a Bachelor of Arts. I'm now in the second year of my Master of Education.

UofT gave me a unique opportunity to reconnect with my indigenous heritage. Being forced to grow up according to "Western" cultural norms, I never had the chance to learn about my culture or my people. This changed when I started studying here and met others with similar stories. First Nations House became my refuge, and I became re-entrenched in my heritage. I now write regularly for indigenous magazines and newspapers across Canada. My main struggle now is communicating the experiences of my people to non-indigenous Canadians. I'm often asked my opinion on this and that, but people never seem to like my answers.

Tessa's Story

- 4th Year International Relations and Political Science Major
- Transferred in 3rd Year from a university in Nova Scotia
- Lives near campus



"People assume you have knowledge about the institution. It's hard to admit that you don't and to find ways to learn and connect"

I originally came from a much smaller university in Nova Scotia, so studying at UofT has been a bit of a shocking experience. Even though my academic credit transferred seamlessly, my personal adjustment hasn't been as smooth. Compared to my old university, UofT is like a city. It feels impossible to develop awareness about all it has to offer, so I feel limited in how connected I can be to the campus or my college. I feel as though I missed a lot of opportunities to meet people and get involved, simply because I didn't know that the opportunities existed in the first place! One frustrating example is that I couldn't participate in a community-engaged learning program that's affiliated with my program, because I only found out about it after it had started. It's been hard, but I guess the transition has forced me to grow as a person and become more self-reliant.

Whole Student Development (2016-17)

The last of the five domains of innovation, *Whole Student Development* prioritizes cultivating mental, physical & spiritual health, building self-efficacy & self-motivation, fostering resiliency & self-care, identity development and the development of meaning & purpose.

Tao's Story

- 1st Year Nursing
- Lives on residence
- Racial minority and LGBTQ+



“By engaging with others who did not share my same values, thoughts, and feelings, but still engaging with them helped break down barriers and helped build my confidence.”

Coming into Toronto and living on residence, I wasn't sure what to expect or how to open up to people. I found myself being more comfortable socializing with other people of colour. I tended to avoid socializing with white, non-queer people because it felt like we had no points in common- nothing clicked.

I spent all of high school hiding my sexual orientation. I grew up in Mississauga, so it's not the most open-minded. When I moved to Toronto, I decided to be really open about who I was. While I haven't had many bad experiences with expressing myself, there have been moments where my orientation and sex-positive attitude have created uncomfortable moments with the people around me. I've found this especially with the staff at my residence. Being that university is often a time where young people are coming into their sexual identities, I think they should be more open to discussion about it.

Other than that, I've found residence life to be really good for me. I was super shy at first, but I really grew from the experience. It forced me to interact with people and experiences outside my comfort zone, slowly building my confidence. My residence Life Coordinator was especially helpful, since she would listen to me and help reframe my insecurities into strengths. Generally, I feel like it was a very comforting environment- I could mostly be myself and feel like I wasn't judged.

Zack's Story



- 6th Year History and Political Science Major
- Commuter student
- Has accessibility needs

“You kind of get stuck in this rut early on of getting occupied with the school work, where you don’t have time for clubs or you don’t have time to go see a career counsellor even, you should start that early but most people start looking at that in the 3rd or 4th year, or when they’re in crisis mode.”

School has been really hard for me. Because of accessibility needs and mental health issues, I’ve only been able to manage about two courses per semester and I’m taking forever to graduate. I don’t mind going at my own pace, but I feel like it’s a source of judgment from family members, other students, and even university staff. I used to do well academically, but then I was accused of plagiarizing in an assignment when I missed one reference. It was really harsh, and everyone treated me like it was intentional or like I was being too “cavalier” about my studies. They said that if they ever caught me in a similar situation, they would kick me out of UofT. It was actually pretty scarring. Now I’m terrified of handing in work – when I’m able to, it’s severely compromised and now my grades are barely scraping by. It’s really demotivating. I’ve been doing CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) with Health and Wellness, which has helped with my self-esteem, but I realize not everyone has been able to take advantage of the resources available to them.

Global Experience Project (2017-18)

The *Global Experience Project* was a research initiative to better understand how experiencing life abroad can impact students. A major insight is that even though every student was confronted with challenges and difficulties at some point in their global experience, they still label that experience as 'positive'. These findings were presented to the Vice President & Vice Provost of International Student Experience, and the Senior Director of Global Learning Opportunities & International Student Success.

Sui Ching's Story

- 2nd Year Masters Applied Science
- International student from China



"Spending time with friends lets me feel less stressed. When you meet those people you know you aren't the only person faced with this kind of problem."

I'm doing my Masters in Applied Science. I was really nervous when I came here last September because I thought I was going to be alone, and I'm insecure about my English. In lectures I rely on the slides/textbooks which I can look at when the class is over, but it's really hard to keep up in group discussions with native English speakers because they speak so quickly. I feel insecure about messing up what I'm going to say, so most of the time I don't say anything. I dreamed about going abroad to study since my first year in undergrad—I realized that I couldn't just give it up because of the change in language. Before coming to UofT, I would watch TV shows to try to improve my English and pick up on cultural norms, but it's much different at UofT than in a casual setting like in "F.R.I.E.N.D.S". Luckily, I'm not alone. There's a big Chinese student population here and I've made some really great friends. It's kind of the best part of being here because we spend a lot of time together. Whenever I get too lazy to study they encourage me to give up watching TV. Instead, we like to explore the city, so after studying during the weekdays I usually hang out with them and explore different restaurants and spots in Toronto. It's my motivation to work hard—every Monday I start planning where we should go on the weekend. I was really close with my parents before I came here, but last semester I spent less time talking with them over the phone. They have never been abroad before so they don't really understand why I'm not doing incredibly well already...I don't tell them the negative things that happen, only the positives. I want them to know that they made the right decision by sending me here. That's why my friends are so important because I can be honest with them and they understand what I'm going through.

Evan's Story

- Graduate student
- International student
- Went on exchange in Mexico



"I was excited because it wasn't something that I've done before, so that newness was accompanied by excitement."

There were seven of us in a cohort, three of us were international and the other four were domestic. There was this one day when we decided to go to a cleansing ritual. And I still remember thinking that we were really lucky to be on this land and camp on it. There was absolutely nothing man made on the horizon and all our attention was on the fire and the water. There was a small cave, big enough so that you could go in it. We would go one by one around the bonfire, while the person in charge would be chanting the words for the cleansing. Every time someone went into the cave, we would take a really hot rock from the fire and put it into a small hole in the ground and eventually that would steam up the cave, because it was a small cave, and we would say something about feeding mother earth. We were all sweating tremendously by the end and then ran into the ocean. And I just remember feeling so much energy that night and that was one of the most magical things I've ever experienced. The people I was with really helped me open up, seeing them be so open and free almost gave me the permission to act similarly. Another great thing about that trip was that I felt like it was ok to explore who I was when I was learning Spanish. Like the environment, and immersing myself in that culture encouraged me to express myself and be vulnerable. I remember thinking that learning the language was kind of life changing. I had been learning Spanish in classrooms for ages and I didn't feel like I had grasped it at all, but when I was there and I had to speak Spanish in the community I felt like I was creating like another me.

Laksha's Story

- 4th Year English and Linguistics Major
- Attends UTSC
- First girl in the family to go abroad



"UofT has abroad seminars for parents so that helped both my mom and dad to be more confident in letting me go."

I'm a fourth year Undergraduate at UTSC, studying English and Linguistics. Ever since I saw young and saw the movie Atlantis I've wanted to become a Linguist, that's why I'm so fascinated with traveling. My family immigrated to Canada from Bangladesh when I was very young, but I'm actually packing for China, which will be my first international trip since moving to Toronto as a child. In Grade 12, I went on a five week trip to Quebec to learn French. It was my first time away from home, and five weeks is a long time! I was homesick in the first week and I didn't know how to cope. I told my mom I wanted to go home, but she said that if I started something I had to finish it. So now that I was basically stuck in rural Quebec, I had to find a way to cope. Before Explore I would have never thought that my way of coping was to do work and learn new things, basically keep busy. By the time the second week rolled around I was getting more involved and realized that I LOVED it, everyone was so nice, if I didn't have a plan of something to do at night or during the day there were always a group of people around that would invite me to go do different things with them. Looking back it was life-changing. In my family it's religion over culture, whereas with a lot of my friends its culture over religion. In my religion I'm allowed to learn wherever I want as long as it's in the search of knowledge. To convince my dad to let me go abroad, I had to reason that the only way I could learn Chinese really well, is if I was actually in China. I knew he would need a lot of convincing, and if there was a way to tear the idea down he would. So I just didn't tell him until I had already applied and my VISA had been accepted. I'm actually waiting to hear back from another exchange to Singapore and haven't told him about it...yet. I'm going to be the first girl to go abroad in my family, although my uncles/cousins have gone abroad, none of the girls have. I find it really empowering, and I tell my sister that although I'm the first, I won't be the last, I'm really trying to encourage her to seek out international opportunities. My friends parents are also very strict, but they want to have international experiences too, so they use me as an example of why they should be able to go. I found that UofT's abroad seminars for parents really helped my parents be confident that letting me go was the right decision. Aside from learning Chinese I'm looking forward to the different cuisines, and I was really interested by Peking Duck and I always thought that I won't be able to taste it because it isn't Halal, but I was looking at travel blogs for Hong Kong and was surprised at how many Halal restaurants were across Asia. So I'm really excited to try out Peking Duck!

Gabe's Story

- 4th Year Law Major
- Domestic student
- Frequent traveler



"This trip was very influential for me, it changed the trajectory of what I wanted to do."

I'm a fourth year undergraduate, studying Law. I've had quite a number of global experiences. The first one always stands out—I think I was the most nervous for it because I wasn't sure what to expect, especially because China is so far away. I remember going on a day trip to yellow mountain. On the bus ride there I was with my friend Kelly and we started talking to a guy next to us from Belgium and he spoke French, Spanish, and Mandarin, and I happened to speak French and Spanish while Kelly spoke Mandarin. The fact that we could switch languages made me feel very worldly! It's easier to talk to people on exchange than at UofT, because you can kind of just assume that everyone is there to have an experience and that experience is always better if you have people to talk to. This trip was very influential for me, it changed the trajectory of what I wanted to do in regards to studying Chinese history, I took more courses on China, like Chinese history and Chinese relations, I also took courses to work on my Mandarin. It's funny because going on the China trip was such a fluke, I was checking my email one day and my College said that there was a scholarship—I think it was due the next day. I was tired of being a camp counsellor so I sent in my application and got it. One of the best parts about these trips are the reunions that happen afterward. I've gone to New York, Lausanne in Switzerland, Houston, and Toronto to reconnect with friends I've made on these trips. I've really learned how to see people for who they are as people, and not make snap judgements, really hear people out even if I don't agree with them. On a trip to Japan there were Americans who were Trump supporters from the Bible belt. Elections only come once a year and the rest of the time they are just normal people, so I just try to be as accepting as I can in the moment with them. It's started to come more naturally to me.

Transforming the Instructional Landscape (2017-18)

Transforming the Instructional Landscape is a large-scale redesign initiative being carried out by Academic and Campus Events. The Innovation Hub was fortunate to be brought on as a research partner for the project, which will continue for throughout the 2018-19 Fall/Winter term. These personas are the result of user research conducted during the 2017-18 academic year, during which our team determined that students have strong attachments to space on campus, both because they recognize the importance of thoughtfully managed space to the learning process, and because of the way memories are associated with certain campus spaces.

Chun Yin's Story

- 4th Year Applied Science Major
- Domestic student
- Has problems focusing in class



*"I really didn't like Con Hall
- that place was always
cold. Temperature is a big
thing for me because I'm
usually cold and that space
is just too big."*

I am doing my Bachelor's in Applied Science here at the University of Toronto and I am in my fourth year. During my time here, I have come to realize over the years that my favorite study spots and classes have been in some of my favorite classrooms and other spaces around campus – and I don't think this is a coincidence! For instance, I really like to study at Gerstein on the second floor – it's sunny and spacious and quiet but not quiet to the point where people stare at you if you flip a page – and the temperature is perfect. There's a heater and a ventilator so it doesn't get stuffy, and there are lights and outlets on individual tables. Some of my worst memories of classrooms had to do with the temperature of the room, believe it or not! I recall when I had to write exams in rooms that are really cold. It made it much worse. I was in Sid Smith and brought a sweater and had to put it over my face because it was so cold! It's always the little rooms that have weird temperatures because they don't regulate it. Really large rooms can get drafty like the giant University College rooms on the upper levels. I also remember one classroom that always had uneven temperatures in St. Mike's. It's right by Alumni Hall. I had a bunch of classes there on the third floor and the temperature was never right. On hotter days, we would open the window and it was so hot. It made it so hard to concentrate! It was a tight classroom with not enough room to move around. I have realized that it is important for me to have the right temperature in class – not too cold or too hot – where I am comfortable enough to focus, yet not so comfortable that I fall asleep! Call me Goldilocks.

Irwin's Story



- 4th Year Pharmacology Major
- Domestic student
- Prefers discussion-based classes to lectures

"I really liked to be seated in groups - or just not in rows, you know. Sitting in rows with your fold-up desks make you feel like a number in a class."

I am majoring in pharmacology with a minor in economics at University of Toronto and am now in my fourth year. I have always got the most out of a class from the discussions with my classmates and the professor. I want to learn from the interesting discussions we have in class rather than being taught like I am just a number in a big class. I hate fold-down desks. When the tables are stuck to the chairs – it's so annoying because it's hard to get in and out of chairs during a class. You distract everyone around you as well. When we break into a discussion, it become difficult to move through these stuck chairs and tables, and you're trying to form groups but just end up turning around to the face somebody and it turns into such a hassle. I like those hexagon tables – I love them. That kind of arrangement is just so conducive to my learning. When the chairs are not fixed, I get the freedom to move around and easily connect with someone. When you're in a more interactive learning environment, we are all making eye contact so no one has to raise their hand and the discussion feels more natural. It also helps to be able to see everyone you're in class with- it helps you keep engaged and participate. If I am sitting in a row, and someone sitting behind me participates, I just zone out. I can't concentrate on what they're saying. Over the years, I have realized I have learnt most through discussions and interactions with my peers. I want to be an active member in the classroom, not just a passenger!

Nanaka's Story



- 3rd Year Economics Major
- International student
- Wants a “real university experience”

“I wanted the University of Toronto experience – like Harry Potter!”

I am an international student in my third year studying economics at the University of Toronto. When I first visited the campus with my parents, I fell in love with the old buildings. We don't have anything in this style back home. It reminded me of something I would see in the movies. I wondered what it would be like to attend classes in them. As a student, it turns out attending classes there is pretty great! In fact, it is one of the most memorable parts of my experience here. I can send photos to my friends back home and they can't believe I work in such beautiful old buildings. The classes themselves are quite cozy too. This is especially nice in the winter, though they can get drafty around the windows. Usually buildings like Old Vic have really large windows, so the rooms are well lit without fluorescent lighting. I love the décor- the book shelves, paintings, and leather furniture. Some rooms are outfitted with newer furniture as well. When I first arrived here, I remember meeting with members of the first club I joined in the classrooms at University College. When I walk past front campus, I have fond memories. We live off campus now, but this is where we bonded. Seeing University College in pictures online brings back those memories too. It's nice to think that, 10 or 20 years down the road, these buildings will still be standing and my memories will come rushing back whenever I see them. I think I'm quite fortunate to have gone to a school with this sort of history. Now, I'm making my own history here too.

The Resilience Project (2017-18)

The Resilience Project was completed as part of a partnership between the Innovation Hub and Health and Wellness. Our goal was to better understand what resilience looks like at the University of Toronto, and what is being done to support it. Speaking with students from a variety of backgrounds, our team determined that resilience appears as self-management skills and critical self-reflection, both of which can be honed through participation in much of the extra-curricular programming available on campus.

Chelsea's Story

- 3rd Year Women + Gender Studies Major
- Domestic student
- Racial minority and has a disability



"We need to make U of T a safe space for minorities and those with accessibility needs.

As a minority with accessibility needs, I don't feel as safe as a lot of other students do."

As a student who is both a racial minority and has a disability, I feel more aware than most about the resources available to UofT students. While they certainly exist, there are some substantial barriers to accessing them. Being sick in itself is a barrier- you're probably exhausted and going through a lot, it's hard to find the time and energy to reach out to accessibility and get the help you need.

Another big barrier is how receptive your support system is to accommodations. Most my professors have been understanding, but one professor had a very hostile attitude about it. My first email to him was straight-up ignored, then when I asked him about it in-person, he stated my email was too aggressive. He was very abrasive about it, and I felt ashamed for ever reaching out to him in the first place. I wouldn't be surprised if the "aggressive" perception was inspired by my racial identity.

The main thing that gives me strength at school is making connections with my cultural community. It lets me know I'm not alone. We discuss things that happen to us, and think about ways that they can be prevented. It's usually an emotional process... The only thing is, I'm still hesitant to talk about my accessibility needs. One time, I tried talking to a friend about it, but her reaction was very dramatic and almost fearful. It was really uncomfortable for everyone, so I've taken to keeping quiet about that aspect of my life.

Iman's Story



- 1st Year Mathematics Major
- International student
- Afraid of going outside his comfort zone

"If I was more aware of the resources on campus, I would've had it easier, but everything was intimidating. I just wasn't aware of a lot of these resources. We never had anything like those where I'm from.."

I'm an international student, so not only I am new to UofT, I'm new to Canada and its culture. Overall, it's been a tough transition since everything is so different than what I'm used to. Back in my home country, resources simply didn't exist for students in the way they do here. Because of this, I really don't have a good idea of what's available to me. The thought of reaching out and asking for help is embarrassing and intimidating, especially since I usually stick to studying by myself.

One of the biggest challenges has been dealing with the way that credits and grades transfer internationally- I was recently told that my grades from back home weren't good enough to keep me enrolled in this one course. The course is required for my program, so I didn't know what I was going to do. I eventually went straight to the department and argued my case. They let me re-take the course, and I was able to pass.

Even before that, I had a difficult time adjusting to the newness of everything. I failed a midterm in a different course, which was the point when I really started questioning my decision to come to Canada. My residence situation wasn't much better, since I found my roommates really difficult to live with. Eventually, my don helped me get involved in a reading week community service program, which let me connect with people outside class and residence. That experience inspired me to apply for a work-study position so I could continue working with my new friends.

Hannah's Story

- 2nd Year Master of Science
- Domestic student
- Values health and balance



"I needed to learn to make parts of my life that I thought were secondary to school work (like physical fitness) my focus. They are part of the process of learning."

I'm a graduate student pursuing my Master of Science. While I love learning and get excited about scientific discovery, my confidence took a hit after entering graduate school and messing up an experiment. I was threatened by my supervisor with being fired because of the mistakes I made in collecting data, so I became very self-conscious about what I did- I often felt judged for those mistakes. I used to pride myself in my academic work, but it's been hard since I've felt really underrecognized and underappreciated since that incident. I wasn't quite sure how to better my relationship with my supervisor, but I was told there are tools and resources available.

After that period, I started really getting in health and fitness as a way to deal with my negative emotions and regain some control in my life. I could channel my energy into manageable outcomes. I feel like it really helped my confidence. Since I live on residence, I'm pretty familiar with the fitness facilities and resources available to students, but I'm not sure everyone else is as knowledgeable.

I feel like focusing on fitness and making friends helped me realize a more intrinsic sense of competence and self-worth. I'm not as reliant on approval from my supervisor or other people in authority. Having something else to focus on when school wasn't going well reminded me that challenging times were just temporary setbacks- not reflections of my worth. My new confidence also helped me repair my relationship with my supervisor, who is now a mentor-figure to me.

Transforming the Instructional Landscape (2018- 2019)

The Transforming the Instructional Landscape Project had its third year of project work for the 2018-2019 Fall/Winter session. The project expanded to having two new forms of connectivity in relation to the themes and personas reflecting on Student and Instructor experiences.

Student Persona

Anton's Story



- Third-Year Engineering Student
- Classes in Galbraith, Bahen, and Sanford Learning

"Learning is a dynamic, interactive process for me. I can't sit at home and work out of a textbook. I need to ask questions and to discuss my ideas with others."

I'm a third-year Engineering Science student. Most of my classes are in Galbraith, Bahen, or Sanford Fleming. Learning is a dynamic, interactive process for me. I can't sit at home and work out of a textbook. I need to ask questions and to discuss my ideas with others. This is an approach I want to apply across a variety of contexts, from larger lectures to small, discussion-based classes. I'm willing to try new thing in order to improve my classroom experience. For example, unlike most of my classmates, I take notes with pen and paper. Many of my professors have explicitly said that students learn better without electronic devices. I like to believe this is true. Writing things out by hand helps me with memorization and I'm not tempted to check social media or respond to emails during lecture.

Classrooms where I can focus on the instructor and on my peers- not on a screen- draw me into course content. I'm easily distracted, so I try to position myself in a way that won't draw my attention to other student's screens. When I take my seat in class, I unpack my textbook, notebook, graphing paper, ruler, and calculator. With the tiny writing surface attached to individual chairs, the only hope I have of accessing all this equipment during class is if I stack them on top of each other. My classroom routine is like playing Jenga. Constantly switching between my textbook, notebook and graph paper means pulling one from the stack and placing another on top. I spend most of my time just making sure my belongings stay off the floor. When I finally get everything in order, the professor has already moved on to his next slide before I can ask further questions.

In spite of my best efforts, it's hard for me to be an active participant in class. I ask questions frequently. In my elective course, held in a small room with 15 other students, this is not an issue. The class itself is held in the basement of New College. The seats are mobile. We can

reposition ourselves so each meeting of our class feels intimate. I talk to the professor not only about course content, but also about personal development. In larger classes, I don't feel this level of connection. I speak quite softly, so audibility is a major issue. More than one professor has asked me to sit closer to the front because they find it difficult to hear me. I've tried to move closer to the front of the room, but the low seats in these tiered classrooms but a lot of strain on my neck. I have to crane my head upward to see the projector screens. That neck pain is aggravated during tutorials. Clustered around desks with my group mates, I have difficult repositioning myself to get a clear view of the TA. It feels like I'm constantly fighting against the layout of my classrooms.

Student Persona

Erin's Story



- Second-Year Computer Science Undergrad
- Classes in Convocation Hall, Ramsay Wright, and Bahen

"I constantly feel like my presence is inconveniencing those around me; like the room itself is drawing attention to each of my movements in a way that makes me feel uncomfortable."

I am a second year undergraduate studying Computer Science. This semester, I am taking a course in Convocation Hall, one in Ramsey Wright, and three classes in Bahen. My home is out in Scarborough, and the commute can be a real time sink if the weather is poor or if there are disruptions on the TTC. One time, as a result of one of these disruptions, I was 30 minutes late to a lecture in Bahen. The seats in the room are arranged in long rows and there's absolutely no space between them to move around once everyone is seated. I had to take the stairs up to the aisle in the middle of the room to the sole seat I saw floating in a sea of students. My face went red as I apologized and pushed my way through, hoping I didn't hit anyone with my backpack or coat until I finally reached my destination. For some of my classes, I don't even have this option. I end up sitting on the floor.

I have one instructor who is the biggest stickler for lateness. Sometimes he'll shame students in front of the whole class. It's obvious when people come in late because the door is loud and positioned right at the front of the class. I know it's disruptive and I feel tremendously embarrassed. I'd rather wait out in the hall until break than draw attention to myself like that. I have similar experiences during class. There is no elegant way for me to exit when I need to use the bathroom, to remove books from bag, or to take notes by hand. I constantly feel like my presence is inconveniencing those around me; like the room itself is drawing attention to each of my movements in a way that makes me feel uncomfortable.

As a commuter, I always bring a ton of equipment with me: a laptop, my notebooks, my lunch, sometimes my gym clothes. When I don't have time to go to my locker, I end up lugging it all with me to class. I understand how embarrassing it is to push through crowded rows of students, so I'm keenly aware of how inconvenient it must be for those around me when my belongings occupy so much floor space. In Con Hall and Ramsey Wright, there's no alternative storage options in the classrooms. Even if there were a place to stow my things, I'd feel wary leaving them out of sight. I think this semester, I might give up on bringing my notebooks- even though I prefer to learn by writing things down- to save myself the hassle. These issues just add to the anxiety I already have with my coursework and being a commuter.

Student Persona

Haesun's Story



- First-Year Undergrad at Rotman Commerce
- Classes in Rotman School of Management; collaborative and lecture-style classrooms

"I feel like my issues are relatively minor and, as a result, I'm a bit shy about asking for assistance ... I'd rather not go to accessibility services and my professor if possible."

I am a first-year undergraduate studying commerce. In large rooms with mumbling students, rustling papers, and clacking keyboards, hearing the instructor clearly can be a struggle for me. I use a voice recording device which I position on a table near the lectern at the start of every class. This way, I can review the lecture afterwards in the quiet of my dorm room. This is an imperfect solution. As the instructor moves throughout the class or plays a video, the recording quality declines significantly. I am a fan of larger lecture halls that are wired for sound. When the instructor uses a microphone, I don't have nearly the same difficulty following lecture content.

I feel like my issues are relatively minor and, as a result, I'm a bit shy about asking for assistance. Though they might be able to come up with an effective accommodation for me, I'd rather not go to Accessibility Services and my professor if possible. I've been fortunate to take classes with dynamic, animated instructors that bring these lecture halls to life. Many of my courses have smaller tutorial or task-oriented sections, and in these cases my experience with classroom space have been mixed.

I have one section in a collaborative classroom space with large tables and mobile chairs. These rooms are ideal for group work. My classmates and I can organize our material in the centre of the table and speak eye to eye. If we encounter any issues, we can flag down the instructor and speak to him directly and show him our outline. These spaces can get quite loud when students are left to their own devices, an issue which is exacerbated by my hearing issues. Sometimes I feel the instructor is too "hands off" when it comes to classroom management here, making it difficult for me to follow my group's conversation and contribute to the work.

These are relatively minor issues compared to those I have in similar, group-work focused sessions held in rooms with fixed seating. These are clearly meant for small, lecture style classes. We can't pivot in our chairs at comfortable angles for conversations. The desk tops are too narrow to use as a shared workspace as well. I can imagine myself having small tutorial sessions in these rooms where a discussion is led by the T.A. and our focus is drawn to the front of the class. Assigning a class where close, collaborative work with other students is critical to a space like this doesn't make sense to me. I wish my classes were given space based on our needs so we could make the most out of it.

Instructor Persona

Theresa's Story

- Associate Professor
- Teaching two courses per semester;
Lecture style classrooms



"I spend a good deal of time trying to develop lecture plans that incorporate collaborative learning. But every day there was a new problem..."

I am an associate professor. I teach two courses per semester in a variety of spaces across campus. The size of the courses - about 200 students each - is large enough that it restricts the types of classrooms available to me. I am often assigned older lecture style classrooms where I struggle to incorporate collaborative learning activities. This year I was assigned to teach in an old physics classroom that seemed to originally function as a demonstration laboratory. There was a lab bench at the front with a bunch of piping running to it. The fixed seating allowed little room for the students and myself to maneuver. This classroom was a problem from day one. The space is not accessible as you have to walk upstairs- then downstairs- to get to the seating. I immediately started receiving feedback and complaints from students struggling to get into the room. The lack of space between students made the midterm exam a nightmare to proctor.

Lighting is a consistent issue. For example, I would like to turn down the lights near the screen to prevent glare and make it easier to see. At the start of the first class, my students helped me hunt for a switch. The only one we found was loose and didn't seem to control anything. Normally it is not a big issue, but one day we came into class and there were no lights on at all! None! We made it through using the light from laptops and cell phones. The audio-visual equipment in this room has also been a challenge. Videos project on the screen, but there is no sound. I tried playing the video files on the teaching station and running it through my laptop with no success. By this point, the class was already running behind and I didn't want to call and wait for support staff. We had to improvise. I took the mic that I used during lecture and put it right next to the laptop speakers. The timing between the sound and video was obviously a bit off, but it worked well enough. I sent an email about the situation after, but it continued to happen throughout the semester. The laptop-mic hack was a lecture-saver.

I spend a good deal of time trying to develop lecture plans that incorporate collaborative learning. But every day there was a new problem, a curveball that threw off my game and forced me to improvise. I am frustrated because I feel like I'm expected to plan for every contingency instead of focusing on what I am really here to do: teach.

Instructor Persona

Ashik's Story

- New tenure track hire
- Teaching in various classrooms; lecture and collaborative



"We are performing every time we walk into class. When that performance fails, because of technology issues or space limitations, it is very stressful..."

I am a new Assistant Professor, tenure stream hire. I was excited when I was offered the position but, coming from a research heavy institution, I felt I needed a bit more classroom experience before I could be truly comfortable lecturing at a school the size of University of Toronto. I am very interested in incorporating new teaching techniques and technologies, but I find there are many roadblocks. For example, I never know where I will be teaching. I can create a teaching program that incorporates collaborative activities, but I may be assigned a large lecture hall where it just doesn't work. Even when the physical space is appropriate, the equipment may fail. If there is an A/V problem and I cannot complete the activity, I end up having to deliver a standard lecture. The prospect of speaking for two hours without adequate preparation sets me on edge. As a result, I always end up developing a backup plan in case there is a technical issue, effectively doubling my workload. Students tend to think that lecturing comes very easily for professors: that we just show up for an hour and talk. In reality, a huge amount of effort and emotion goes into teaching. We are performing every time we walk into class. When that performance fails, because of technology issues or space limitations, it is very stressful to maintain composure and think quickly on your feet to keep the class going. The 'lecturing professor' is a persona that takes a lot of energy to maintain. It is tiring at the best of times, but exhausting when there are unforeseen complications.

On top of teaching, I also have professional considerations. I am a new professor and my progression is partially tied to my teaching evaluations. Ideally, I would like to flip a class. I would incorporate an online lecture component and make classroom time fully collaborative. I know that many students are very keen on sharing ideas in this sort of environment, but such a change from the traditional lecture style can be difficult for others. In a traditional lecture, students know what to expect and how they are going to be graded. In a collaborative classroom, the expectations are not as familiar nor clear cut, which can lead to anxiety. As an instructor I learn from iteration: I redefine my goals for the class week to week and semester to semester. I often learn the most from my failures. But in my new and somewhat precarious position, I am always walking a fine line between my desire to provide an innovative and collaborative learning experience, my emotions, and my need to meet criteria that are central to advancing my career.

Instructor Persona

Karishma's Story

- Associate Professor, Teaching Stream
- Teaching in Myhal 150



“Myhal 150 has an array of features ... that seem well suited to my strategy. These positive feelings are tempered by concerns regarding classroom management.”

I am an Associate Professor, teaching-stream who has been assigned to teach in Myhal 150. Upon seeing the space for the first time, I felt a mixture of excitement and fear. When I was planning this course, I had imagined something that oscillated between lecture and groupwork. I wanted students to share their findings with one another and generate new ideas through group discussion. My role as the instructor would be to bring these individual discussions back to the group. In a typical classroom, this would involve me arranging the furniture into discussion groups, assigning students to a team, wading through the room to listen in and jot down notes, then reconvene the class for discussion that I would mediate and supplement with prepared talking points. Myhal 150 has an array of features like ready-made group seating and desktop microphones that seem well suited to my strategy.

These positive feelings are tempered by concerns regarding classroom management. I worry that I won't be able to hold the attention of students- especially those seated at the back- when the furniture invites them to chat freely amongst themselves. Managing the microphone queue, PowerPoint, screen sharing with students- there is so much to do beyond conveying course content. While the classroom feels like an easy space to move through and spend time face to face with students, the sheer number of students it houses makes this sort of close connection difficult to perform consistently. With a TA or two to help manage the classroom, I think it would be feasible, but we simply don't have the hours for it.

I can see potential in this space to fundamentally alter my teaching approach. My anxiety stems from a lack of experience working in similar classrooms. Becoming familiar with the equipment is only a partial solution. I feel like I need new techniques and strategies to effectively manage this classroom.

Family Care Office (2018-2019)

The Family Care Office at the University of Toronto offers support for University of Toronto's students, staff, and faculty for any family care related issues. For the Fall/Winter term of 2018-2019 the Family Care Office partnered with the Innovation Hub to research and collect data and information about the experiences of students with family responsibilities. With a focus on student parents, this research study will serve to provide the Family Care Office with reliable and definitive data about the tensions and barriers student parents face at U of T.

Suzy's Story

- Graduate Student with a young child



"I wish that student parents were more visible on campus, since my unique challenges as a parent and student aren't always recognized..."

I'm a PhD candidate in the social sciences at University of Toronto, with a 2-year-old child. I have the support of my partner who works full time, as well as other family members who are able care for my young daughter sometimes. I was unsure if I'd be able to come back to work from my maternity leave last year, since I've been having difficulty finding a subsidized daycare space. I had put my name on the list as soon as I became pregnant. Luckily, things worked out and I was able to find a space at a daycare near campus.

Most weekdays, I drop off my daughter at daycare and I work on my research during the day, while my partner works outside. I also have TAing and RAing responsibilities. In the evenings, I find it difficult to do any additional work after myself and my partner feed our daughter and play with her, so work time is limited to what I can do during the day. Sometimes on the weekends, my sister or partner can take care of our daughter, which helps for some precious hours of work time. I can't even imagine if I didn't have a partner ... and family support. Even with the support of my partner and family, I feel a lot of time pressure and stress with balancing my research and domestic responsibilities. Although I am productive during the day, I am not able to meet strict deadlines like before. My advisor has been understanding of my family responsibilities, but I still feel guilty for my loss of productivity and often feel like I should not disclose the fact that I have a child to colleagues and professors – I don't want to make excuses. If my daughter gets sick and I need to stay home, I need to make informal arrangements with other TAs to cover classes.

I wish that student parents were more visible on campus, since my unique challenges as a parent and student aren't always recognized on campus or understood by my family. I feel like connecting with other student parents and building community would be helpful to find "support and guidance" as a student parent.

Ananya's Story

- Single mother
- Part-time student



“Over the years, I have learned to manage my time more efficiently and balance various commitments but doing it all alone is still a major source of stress, and has negatively impacted my mental health.”

I’m in a professional, course-based master's program at U of T; I’ve been in the program for 5 years. I am a single mother with a 4-year-old and an 8-year-old. While my children see their father every other weekend, I bear most of the parenting responsibilities. I also commute from Oshawa to attend classes downtown.

Due to many responsibilities, I am only able to attend school part time - taking one or two classes a semester. As a part time, rather than a full time, student, I am often not able to access financial resources that would make life easier, such as a student discount for the train.

Bearing the majority of childcare responsibilities, along with my schoolwork and commuting, creates an extremely busy and tiring schedule for myself. At the beginning of my studies I found it especially difficult to finish final assignments due to unexpected things that would come up, such as my children getting sick. Over the years, I have learned to manage my time more efficiently and balance various commitments but doing it all alone is still a major source of stress, and has negatively impacted my mental health.

I have found mixed supports at the University. I’ve taken advantage of some of the supports the Family Care Office offers, such as their webinars, and have found them very helpful. However, within my own faculty, I have not felt supported. One professor mentioned that they were not going to “cut me any slack” for being a student parent when I could not complete an assignment. There was one time where I could not provide the requisite documentation to prove my child was seriously ill, which led to me failing a course and setting back my part-time studies.

Despite the difficulties that I’ve faced as a single student parent, I have learned through my studies how to manage my schoolwork along with my family care responsibilities so that unexpected events don't become "crisis situations". I have been motivated to persevere throughout my Masters. Ultimately, I will be able to obtain better employment that will help both myself and my children.

Nikita's Story

- International Student
- Experiencing barriers to their education as an international student-parent



“As an international student, I find that having children is much harder to manage than if I were a domestic student.”

I moved to Toronto, along with my husband and two daughters, almost five years ago to start a PhD program as an international student. My husband and I only learned about the waitlist for daycare when we arrived in Toronto, so my husband decided to delay his studies and take care of the children while I focused on school. But even when our daughters got into daycare, we found it very tough to adjust. They were having a hard time at daycare as they did not speak English and were not used to the food. Mornings would start with them crying and not wanting to go to daycare, and most days would end with more crying. This was the most challenging time for both my husband and me as we both felt very guilty for putting our daughters through this ordeal. I'm often unable to focus on my work because I'm constantly worried about my daughters and I couldn't sleep or study during this time. Thankfully, after a few months, they began getting used to the daycare and now happily leave the house every morning.

As an international student, I find that having children is much harder to manage than if I were a domestic student. Not only do I have no family support to rely on, but I feel obliged to maintain full-time status because it's confusing how the different benefits and policies change if I drop to part time. This was particularly challenging for our family when we had our third child during the third year of my PhD program. To maintain our subsidies, I could only take a one-month maternity leave and found it very difficult to place my one-month old baby in daycare. Since then, we've adjusted to a new routine and I have become an expert in time-management. However, to be able to manage all of my studies along with the shared responsibility for house work, I often find that I need to wake up very early in the morning to get some work done before sending the kids to daycare and leaving for work myself. This leaves no time for my husband and me to take care of ourselves or do anything together.

Although we make ends meet, financial constraints have placed a lot of limitations on our time and ability to seek external support. We don't have any family to help with the childcare, and we can't afford to pay for baby sitters or any domestic help. We don't have any time for rest.

New College Dining Hall (2018)

New College Dining Hall and the Innovation Hub partnered together in the 2018-2019 academic term to work towards answering the following research 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 goals of the Innovation Hub’s research 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.

Neilani’s Story

- 1st 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 and 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!

Khan's Story

- 1st 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 in 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 is usually pretty accommodating and allows 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.

Miguel's Story



- 1st 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. 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 meal time intervals were longer. I also find it inconvenient that I have to use my flex dollars if I want to enter the same meal time 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.

Multi-Faith Centre (2018-2019)

The Multi-Faith Centre is a service provider under the Division of Student Life that aims to “[support] the spiritual well-being of everyone on campus and provide opportunities for people to learn from each other while exploring questions of meaning, purpose and identity”². In order to better understand how their services are currently being used by students and identify opportunities for improvement, the Multi-Faith Centre partnered with the Innovation Hub over the course of the 2018-2019 academic year in order answer the following questions:

- What are students thinking and saying about the MFC?
- How can the MFC meet the spiritual needs of all students in their search for meaning, purpose, and identity in everyday life?

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

² <http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/mf>

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 do 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



- Practices faith, but not strictly or regularly
- Regularly attends programming offered through the MFC International student
- Domestic 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 practice 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 tenants 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 a 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 weary of participating in faith-based events since I'm not religious and I'm worried that people may try and 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 I learned about MFC.

Trademark Licensing (2018-2019)

In the fall of 2018, the Trademark Licensing office contacted the Innovation Hub with an opportunity for continuing and expanding the research undertaken in the previous summer. The research question that they wished to explore was “what are the ways that pride in the University can manifest in students’ lives?” In order to answer this question, our team conducted a series of long-form, empathy-based interviews with students over the course of Fall 2018/Winter 2019 to better identify how school pride is formed at the University of Toronto. The team then analyzed the data to uncover recurring themes and insights. Insights from these interviews can be categorized into four over-arching spheres across the student experience: Academics, Social, Wellbeing and Future.

Pertaining to each of these spheres is a specific theme that summarizes trends in the student data, which we have identified as key to defining a student’s experience at U of T and drives their sense of institutional pride.

Maurice’s Story

- **Major:** Psychology (originally Computer Science)
- **College:** Trinity
- **Hometown:** Montreal, Québec



“My transcript is a bit all over the place... I mean I never thought I’d see a C on my transcript but here we are.”

My older sister also came to U of T, so she gave me a few tips. She insisted that I should join as many small groups and classes as possible. I’m pretty outgoing, so I didn’t worry about that, but I listened to her because she made it sound so urgent. I signed up for a First Year Learning Community and a First Year Foundations “Ones Program”. I’m glad I did. Especially the Ones Program, it was interesting, I got to delve into subject matter I never would have had a chance to discover. And I was surrounded by really high-achieving students who inspired me. I’m still close with some of them today. I’m glad I took that initiative in first year because I never lived on residence, so there weren’t as many opportunities for me to meet people. My sister also told me to join Trinity, and I’m not really sure why...It’s pretty and stuff but I’m not a fan of that social hierarchy they’ve got going on.

Okay, so I originally wanted to major in Computer Science and minor in Psych, but I just missed the cutoff. I was really sad, I had no idea what to do next. I had spent so much time studying for that course and I got an A...just not an A+, you know? I spoke to my registrar and he asked me if

I considered Psychology. Initially I planned to minor in Psych, and I was taking a bunch of those courses for fun really. I was at the top of my class there, and he said it's so competitive but I meet the requirements so I should try it. So things flipped and I enrolled in a Comp Sci minor.

In third year, I stopped caring about my grades quite as much...I met all the minimum requirements, but beyond that, I decided it was up to me how hard I would try in each course. So if I liked the professor or thought the subject matter would be relevant later, I'd push for that 90%. But if the course was just to meet a requirement, sometimes I wouldn't try as hard. My transcript is a bit all over the place... I mean I never thought I'd see a C on my transcript but here we are. Health and Wellness offered some group therapy sessions on coping with stress, and this helped me to get some perspective there. Obviously, not getting straight A's anymore was a difficult adjustment for me because I was always one of the "smart kids". If I can't claim that identity anymore then who am I? Anyways, in the group, I realized I wasn't the only one questioning my worth in this way, and the facilitator suggested that I was maybe internalizing too much self pressure. And its true, I don't need U of T to tell me who I am or what I'm worth. Now I spend time on what matters to me, and I have more time to do things that matter. This year, I am mentoring first years, working out most days, making time to see my friends and have a relationship, watching documentaries and reading, and I am teaching myself some German, and I feel great! I'm not just ticking off boxes towards my degree anymore, I am learning for myself.

I think I'm doing pretty well now, but the hardest part has probably been explaining myself to others- especially my family. My sister is now in Law School at U of T, so that makes sense to everyone. But I kept getting questions like "What are you going to do with a Psychology degree?" and the answer is I'm not entirely sure. I can think of why Psychology is important in society, and how it fits with Computer Science, but when I try to explain it, I get a lot of blank stares. The worst part is I don't even want to go to grad school or anything, so that doesn't even give me time to stall and figure things out. But...I trust myself to figure it out soon. Over the summer I am doing some research in Germany with a professor. It's funny because, like I said, my grades are nothing special, and I heard that as an undergrad you're never going to get any hands-on experience without a 4.0. But, in a moment of self confidence, I applied anyway. So many of my friends applied to this position because the prof is really great and her research is cool and innovative. I got an interview, and I was scared that when she took another look at my transcript she would realize she had made some mistake. But instead we talked about everything. She seemed impressed that I am trilingual (and teaching myself a fourth language), and as the conversation progressed, she realized I had done my own reading into that area of Psychology. I am ready for an adventure!

Dorothy's Story

- **Major:** Accounting
- **College:** University College
- **Hometown:** Hanoi, Vietnam



"... I feel so much more motivated overall now that my whole schedule doesn't revolve around academics."

I think my biggest struggle in university was with my mental illness. I was hesitant to tell anyone about the way I was feeling, and just tried my best to cope with it on my own. But after moving so far from home, and having less time to rest generally, it was getting worse. Brianna was always there for me, and she gave some helpful advice. And then my parents came to visit over Christmas break, and we went to see a doctor. When the doctor asked "Is there a family history of depression", my father hesitated before saying "not diagnosed"³... Things got a bit better after I found the right medication for me. The doctor also referred me to accessibility services.

I guess it's my fault that I didn't make that many friends at first. I didn't actually expect to stay in Toronto for long, I was looking into transferring schools to be with my boyfriend in New York, but that plan didn't work out. I was also a bit stressed about getting work experience as soon as possible so I would be qualified to be able to stay in Canada after graduating. I was initially hoping to reduce my course load to help me with stress, but at accessibility services I was advised that this may disqualify me from getting a work permit later. Anyway, I failed MAT135 in first semester and ever since then, I was just afraid of failing everything. And I fainted right before my first ECO100 test and that didn't go so well either. My registrar helped me to switch to the easier math MAT133 for the next semester and that was better for me. Now that I think about it, I understand that there was help available and I should have tried to access it sooner. But every time I didn't understand something, I would try on my own to figure it out, and then I'd move onto something else and tell myself I'd come back to it later. These days, I probably use the economics aid centre more than anyone, and I've already been to my professors' office hours many times. I especially like the aid centre because it reminds me that all the students here are asking for help, it's not just me who is missing something. I think about it differently now. Getting help means I am smart, not stupid!

During Reading Week, I was able to visit New York, so that was a lot of fun, but I realized I can't spend 4 years here and not even give Toronto a chance. So, I decided to try to make some friends. I used to do yoga, dance, or painting every day back home, but somehow I thought I would have to give these up when I got to university. Now, at the beginning of every week I check how the Hart House workshops can fit into my calendar and I go as much as possible and I'm starting to see some familiar faces and talk to some people. The first few times, I made Brianna come with me, but now I don't want to bother her too much because being a Physics genius is a full time job. Anyway, I feel so much more motivated overall now that my whole

³ <https://thevarsity.ca/2018/07/06/op-ed-why-all-families-should-have-the-talk-and-i-dont-mean-about-sex/>

schedule doesn't revolve around academics. And, I still call my parents once a week and video call my boyfriend every day, but it's not the only thing keeping me going anymore.

Oh and this is kind of random but it was SO COLD this winter. I wasn't used to it at all. 10 degrees is cold for me, so imagine how I felt when it feels like -35. One day after class, I had to take the subway straight to the shops and use my emergency credit card to buy all new winter gear so I wouldn't freeze to death on my way home. I got a new coat, boots, gloves...everything! My parents weren't pleased at first, but they understood.

Brianna's Story



- **Major:** Engineering (switched to a Double Major in Math and Physics)
- **College:** Innis
- **Hometown:** Hamilton, Ontario

"So, a lot changed after that first year. Mostly with my academic program, and just, like, my attitude towards everything."

Chapter One: First Impressions

I'm not sure if University of Toronto was the right choice for me. I mean, I definitely don't regret it. I learned a lot about myself here, met a lot of cool people. And the direction I'm thinking of going with my academics, like, I'm not sure if I would have found it at some other school. But it was quite a journey...a difficult transition and maybe I wasn't always the most informed. I found a letter I wrote to myself in the first week of classes for my First Year Learning Community...here, take a look. I told myself I wasn't supposed to open this until I was wearing my iron ring from the Engineering department, but ...oh well.

Dear Brianna of the Future,

Fourth year? Wow, congratulations, you must be so successful now, right?

You should be proud of me, I've been socializing so much in the past two weeks. Right now I'm in FLC, I also went to orientation week, and I'm trying to organize an event to get my floormates together. It's really exciting living downtown, and I hope to experience it as much as possible before things start to get crazy with school. I mean, I already have three quizzes this week.

Everyone seems really cool and friendly here, and they want me to have a good time and ask questions and everything. You should apply to be a FLC mentor next year, or an Orientation Leader! They said you don't have to be super outgoing or anything to get the role...

Okay, I have to go...See you on the other side!

All my love,

Brianna of the Past

Okay, obviously, I didn't end up becoming an Engineer, but I'm sure Past Me would understand! Anyway, I remember that time so clearly, it was exciting but also super overwhelming. I enjoyed being a part of everything, especially the parade through Toronto, that was so cool. That's also where I met Dorothy, who became one of my best friends. We were paired together for an activity. Also my FLC mentor Maurice was awesome. Like, I don't keep I touch with him or any

of my FLC group anymore, but they were friendly faces on campus. Also he was there for me when I had some serious questions and didn't know who to talk to.

Chapter Two: Keeping Up

Things started out on a really positive note, and I felt pretty hopeful for my first year. But then a few things started to catch up with me...

For one thing, I didn't always make the best eating choices at the time. I was trying out a new way of eating, like, trying to be plant based. I still am- but now I know how to choose the right foods, and eat enough- like more than I had to before. And I really like how it's working for me right now, but back then I had anemia and I didn't know what was wrong with me. I would come home from classes and just fall asleep cause my body did not have the energy it needed to keep up with the fast pace of university. I thought maybe I was just lazy, or too overworked, or I don't know what. Now I also know to take B complex vitamins and I've found those are so important for my mental health.

So that was rough. Also, I did enjoy the social events at the start of term, but as an introvert, I was overwhelmed at times and had to really push myself to not just want to sit in my room for the rest of the night after being around people all day. And then in my classes...Like, I've always been good at math, right? But I found some of the courses kind of frustrating, they just weren't as interesting to me....not what I expected. I prefer to work more abstractly- not do endless computations. I had trouble keeping up...which was exacerbated by my low energy levels. So I did what I would do in high school- I know it's stupid- and not really look at quizzes that much but try to learn everything before the midterm. It was doable, I guess, but stressful. Time started to lose meaning for me, I didn't have any sleep schedule, stopped exercising, and forgot to eat a few times.

And then socially...I had a few friends but not too many close ones, and not a group or anything. And I lived on res at the time, but most of my friends commute, so they'd usually be looking to go home as soon as possible after classes ended. On my floor...I felt a bit excluded. That event I mentioned in the letter didn't really work out. It's just that there were international students and they seemed to be happy just speaking to each other. I made an effort but...I don't know what I could have done differently to connect across that difference. Like, I get it, it's more comfortable to speak in your first language and talk to someone you have things in common with.

Chapter Three: S.O.S.

As finals approached, I got more and more stressed. I wasn't sure if I could do it because it felt like each of my courses needed all my attention, and I had five, and I was so tired and anxious at the time! And then...my family is decently well off, right, but it's not like we have \$15 000 cash just lying around all the time for my tuition. I had OSAP and all sorts of grants and

scholarships, and I budgeted everything carefully. But then my mom got really sick, and had to stop working. Without their dual income, I wasn't sure...I didn't even know who to talk to about all this? Maybe I could get a job but would that even be worth it cause then I wouldn't have time to sleep. Luckily I eventually found a registrar who was really kind and helped me apply to other sources of financial aid in time.

I also got really worried about my friend Dorothy's mental health. She really missed home, I think, and her boyfriend had gone to school in New York...And she wanted to transfer schools but when she realized that wouldn't work out she got even more sad...I wasn't really sure what to do or if it was really any of my business to say anything. She was really stressing herself out over this math course she chose to take that wasn't even required! And then she failed a course ...It was scary and unexpected, especially because she was one of those girls who stayed in Roberts 24/7, it seemed.

One night when I was chatting with Dorothy on Facebook and trying to calm her down, I saw my FLC mentor Maurice had posted in the group that he was always willing to meet with any of us if we ever had any questions. So the next week I stayed after our FLC session and told him about some of my personal struggles, and also my concerns for my friend. He listened and was able to give some advice and referrals. He was the one who told me which registrar to talk to about financial aid.

Chapter Four: Adaptation

So, a lot changed after that first year. Mostly with my academic program, and just, like, my attitude towards everything. First of all, I switched programs. I did enjoy being part of the Engineering program...it was supportive and exciting, it just wasn't me...When I think back to why I chose that program, I just remember that I enjoyed my math and science courses and everyone in my family was like "Perfect, so she's going to be an Engineer then!" and I was like "Okay." I didn't really know what it was going to be all about. And even though it was a bit complicated to switch programs, I decided it was worth it. I appealed so that I would be able to finish most of it within four years...with a few summer classes and one extra semester. It was definitely a financial burden, but I decided I'm giving myself a chance to be happy now that I'm in physics and math. I've always preferred a more theoretical approach and now I can really explore that world.

Anyway, I started using the "Pomodoro method" to keep my self on track when I was studying...that's 25 minutes of complete focus and then a five minute break, and then after you've done that four times you might take a longer break. It really helps me to not get burnt out or anything but sometimes I get stressed out when time is passing and I haven't completed what I thought I would. But then, that's where mindfulness comes in. Dorothy convinced me to come with her to some of those "Mindful Moments" and yoga classes at Hart House and the Multifaith Centre. She's Buddhist and I'm not really anything, but anyways that's not the point

of the exercise. So I'm making an effort to apply the idea of mindfulness to my life. I take breaks sometimes, check in with myself, and just turn off my brain for a few minutes...

Chapter Five: Stasis

I admit that I don't really know for sure yet what I want to do with my degree. My family is proud because I'm getting good grades and so many opportunities are coming my way- that might not have happened if I stayed in Engineering, I would have just fulfilled the minimum requirements. In fact, I'm a Teaching Assistant this year, which is quite rare for undergrads. It's satisfying being able to help first years understand their profs. I also got offered a position as a FLC mentor and I really wanted to take it, but I decided I need to focus on my academics and paid work.

Conclusion

The Power of Stories

The diverse personas collected in this document demonstrate the unique power that human stories offer as a form of data presentation. Personas can bring context to or shed light on the human stories behind survey data and statistics. They attach lived experience to research findings and communicate user wants, needs, concerns, and motivations in a memorable, engaging way.

At the Innovation Hub, we believe that this potential is particularly powerful within the context of the University of Toronto. With a student population that approaches 90 000, it is easy to reduce individual students into numbers. Using personas to present our research findings destabilizes this tendency, and re-centres the individual student as a fully realized person with unique lived experiences and perspectives.

We thank you for taking the time to get to know some of our students.

Report Contributors



For more information about the data contained in this compendium or to contact the Innovation Hub, please contact Julia Smeed, Innovation Projects Officer at Julia.Smeed@utoronto.ca or 416 978 8619

Julia Smeed, Innovation Projects Officer

Danielle Lum, Project Assistant (2016 – 2018)

Kaitlyn Corlett, Project Assistant (2019 – 2020)

Innovation Hub Team Members, Spring 2016 Fall 2019

Additional contributors include Innovation Hub researchers and participants who helped to develop personas and findings presented.

