ReDesign: SLP Network

Themes and Insights: Design Thinking Summary
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introduction

The Student Life Professionals (SLP Network) is a community of practice for staff members in student-facing positions, originally created to address their needs and foster professional development. The Innovation Hub undertook a design project utilizing long-form empathy interviews with student services professionals to understand how the SLP Network can best support staff who work with students.

Regardless of departmental affiliation and seniority**, staff highlighted the importance of transmitting and preserving institutional knowledge**. **Moreover, interviews with student life professionals revealed a need for stronger personal connections, both horizontally (between departments) and vertically (between senior and junior staff).** The SLP Network is uniquely positioned to fulfill these needs. What follows is a summary of the key themes, quotes that bring these themes to life, design features to consider in the ideating/prototyping phase of program development, and some potential paths forward for this project.

theme one:
Knowledge of the Institution

As their work experience can change considerably day-to-day, student services professionals depend on knowledge of structures, systems, and people at U of T, which they obtain through communication between departments, to help them navigate their work.

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Key Insights

1) **Varied responsibilities:** Those interviewed described their roles as "educator," "researcher," "counsellor," and "mentor," among many others. Problem solving in student life requires knowledge outside their formal training.

   "My role is so varied. [I] don't even notice it happening. I feel I'm always in my role…. The role has many hats."

2) **Communication logistics:** The University of Toronto (U of T) is vast, and connection between different centres is often limited to personal ties between their members. Information spreads unevenly.

   "Some processes at the university are opaque. If once a year a team that manages the benefits [for example] would send a document about how it works, I wouldn't have to wait to call a line that no one picks up."

   "I think other places where more support would help would be if programs could have a clearer picture of what it is they're providing. I think in a lot of cases, a lack of clarity about the type of programming they can provide for us or what that support looks like makes it difficult for divisions that are dealing directly with students to know why it is we would access them."

3) **Departmental insularity:** Limits on the flow of information means staff have little awareness of the work happening in other departments. Isolation within departments makes smaller personal networks even more important to the work of student services professionals. This dependency drives further insularity.

   "For U of T, it is not really a matter of missing things but just that we cannot find them. It is so big that we often hear about great work that is being done somewhere else. There is often not a way to connect programs."

   "The staff has been growing but it's very insular. The staff was very small for a while and our boss manages a lot. I have to be careful how much I call on her, and so I'm grateful for my personal friends or connections. I would not have been as successful at all [without them]."

theme two:
Personal Connections

Inter and intradepartmental relationships are crucial to the transmission of institutional knowledge and professional development.

Key Insights

1) **Mentors and Networks:** Senior staff members typically have vast networks of contacts. These are a resource that requires time and effort to build, and a certain amount of social knowledge and finesse to navigate effectively. Networks open informal channels at the boundaries of existing administrative systems. Mentorship can expedite connection-making for junior staff members by providing access to these hard-earned networks.

   "It's that network, being able to consult with my network of people, both very locally and very broadly, with my faculty or across the institution. I've worked at U of T for [many] years, so I think that is how I've managed to be successful in my career and in my work, is by creating networks and knowing how to navigate those networks."

2) **Informal ties:** Mentorship relationships are generally informal, and as a result require the cultivation of personal ties and trust between student services professionals. These feelings of trust can present further opportunities for professional development.

   "I like when your direct supervisor promotes SLP or collaborative opportunities. When they say, 'Yes, you can attend this, and I see the value in it, and I trust that you are right in that'; 'I trust that you are a creator in that development'—that they trust that you know what type of growth you need."

   "My manager and boss are very supportive in a very hands-off kind of way. I've been in the role for five years, so it's been a process to get here. There are weekly check-ins, and we chat, and I give her updates, and she trusts that I tell her when something is important or wrong. Informal structure; trust is important for support there."

case study:
Referrals

The referral process provides a useful example of the difficulties student life professionals described in interviews.

Despite "wearing many hats," there is a limit to the kind of support any given student services professional can provide. **Referrals to different departments and professionals are a crucial—and delicate—part of their work**. Students who approach one department for assistance may find, after an initial consultation with staff, that their needs are different than they had originally thought. Student services professionals must be able to identify student needs, know what department is best able to assist, and ferry the student to the correct personnel.

Referrals run up against a wall when they reach **the limits of knowledge of the institution**—knowing where or to whom to send a student, and how.

> *"Sometimes it takes longer for people to dig out why the student has been referred to them, which takes a long time. Ticking off a page, referral and why they are being sent and the date—that kind of thing. We often do vocal referrals and communications but people forget and information is lost. Privacy rules can be difficult in terms of consent, too. We can't always know what is going on in offices that we refer them to."*

This process carries inherent risks by placing students in a state of limbo. **Failure to manage the transition properly can mean having students "fall off"** when they are not carefully directed to a contact who will take responsibility for them. The loss of time spent jumping through administrative hurdles affects both the staff involved and the student.

> *"I hate having to refer students out to the wider university; the more they get referred, the easier they will give up."*

> *"It took some time to figure out what they do and when I should refer them [students]. Regular contacts and meetings; 'Are the referrals working?'; 'Did I send you the right students?'"*

Student services professionals with large networks of contacts are best equipped to handle the referral. They can call on personal connections in various departments directly to handle the transition process or consult with those who have experience with similar cases to determine the best course of action.

design principles

Design principles are guidelines derived from the knowledge of designers and practitioners to help organize and prioritize design features. They are useful for weighing the benefits of potential designs against one another by offering a unified set of criteria. A good design principle is clear and specific. It should come from a place of empathy for students and their needs. The core features of future prototypes should draw inspiration from the principles.

design principle:
Management Leadership

Securing not only buy-in but personal investment from management is crucial to the success of any reform in SLP Network programming.

The SLP Network should meet with student services professionals in management positions to secure their support and/or participation in future programming. Management leadership is important for two reasons. First, senior staff play important mentorship roles which need to be promoted. Second, staff need to have consent from management to participate in SLP Network activities. This might be achieved by pitching the idea as something that shares the burden: creating a network of mentors for each student services professional, as opposed to a single departmental point of contact in management.

> *"I always need more of my boss's time. She is so great but she can't be the only one who is great, so it would be good to be able to sit down and chat with other senior administrators who are so good at their job. Even once or twice a term, if we could talk to other similar institutions and learn from each other. It would be so great to talk so senior administration folks. Would also be good for job progression. Mentorship would be a really nice idea."*

Management needs to lead by example, both so staff feel they have time/consent to participate and because their insight is crucial. But to get management involved, consideration of their stakes in the organization is important.

> *"So for a lot of us who have disengaged with SLP, it's because the meetings or the stuff that is happening is below where we are; we've already done those things and there's not a lot we can take away from this. So for us who've been at this institution for a long time, if you could bring in elevated training that we could engage with on a high level, that would be great, rather than recycling information year-to-year that we've already encountered."*

design principle:
Mentorship

Rethinking the role of the SLP Network in facilitating mentorship can help build lasting engagement, both in the organization and the in connections made through it.

The SLP Network should provide opportunities for mentorship between senior and junior staff and across departments. While the desire for mentorship was clear in interview data, this runs contrary to survey data where respondents found mentorship programs the least useful of those offered (9.15% responding positively). Formal mentorship events can be intimidating, or in some cases the time commitment they require can be too much for staff.

> *"The university has a formal mentorship program—I've never participated in it, but I identified people who I wanted to learn from. I've had many over the years, and I still do, but I would reach out to them and invite them for coffee or lunch and ask them advice about my career or about things I might take on. So for me, that was really important, and for me, it was important to have people outside of my unit who didn't have any oversight about the work I was doing who I could talk candidly with. I think the more formal mentorship program allows for that; I just didn't have the time to invest in that because you had to do one thing once a month or something, but it was important for me to have people I could reach out to ask advice."*

The strongest mentorships develop organically and evolve on the terms of those involved—not within the confines of a system with oversight. Establishing the proper conditions for staff to "click", and allowing them to develop these connections at their own pace, is vital.

> *"SLP used to do group mentorships for older staff and newer staff to get together and chat four times a year. Folks from that are people I still see and bond with. The mentorship has persisted beyond the program."*
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> *"I recently joined a mentorship program with SLP, to learn from senior professionals within Student Life…. It breaks ice between the departments, and there is still a lot more to be done. At departmental meetings every week, I learn from colleagues. Twice a week I meet with the lead coordinator–we share challenges. I really appreciate this supportive network–it gives me motivation to work."*

There are options outside of formal mentorship programs to help establish these connections. Initiatives that bring together staff from different areas to share ideas or volunteer facilitates this connection making. Moving outside of their division and connecting with someone who is not already in a supervisory relationship with them allows staff to speak candidly and may lead to unexpected solutions to problems:

> *"Exposure to things outside of my very narrow unit initially was really important, and I would say the same thing for anybody working in the university. You need to get out of your own silo, wherever you are; you need to be able to meet people and see how things are being done elsewhere, and make those connections and network; it helps you learn about how to do things differently or more effectively or efficiently."*

7

conclusion and next steps

Through these interviews, it became clear that most have—at best—fragmentary knowledge of the governance structure at U of T. However, student services at U of T currently thrives on personal connections and informal channels; thus, it may be best to cultivate these support networks and encourage mentorship and communication between student life professionals at a personal level.

The SLP Network can play a major role in fostering these connections. Its reach spans the entire university, and its programs can be modified to suit the needs of attendees. To fulfill the design features listed above, programs needs to attract a mix of senior and junior staff from a variety of divisions and also provide an environment where relationships can develop "organically" between them. From the data provided in this report, a few options emerge:

1) **Informal Connections**: The SLP Network can help student services professionals orient themselves within the university by creating opportunities to foster informal connections with their peers. These connections grow through repeat events and in casual, informal meetings arranged at the leisure of participants. The SLP Network plays a vital role in bringing together staff who might not have a chance to meet otherwise, and in creating an atmosphere where participants feel comfortable socializing.

2) **The Referral:** How do we solve the problem of referrals? Facilitating this process requires personal connections. Bringing together student life professionals to discuss their departments' approach to this issue could lead to the organic development of mentorships. This is one area where the wealth of experience accumulated by senior staff members is of indispensable value.

3) **Project Sharing:** Sessions that showcase ongoing projects in one department to staff from others have a variety of benefits. They can prevent waste from project overlap (and may allow teams to fold projects into one another), create greater awareness of the sort of work done in different departments, and may lead to opportunities for cross-departmental mentorship. A project-focused approach also shifts the explicit emphasis away from "networking/mentorship", lending the relationships that develop from sessions like this a more organic feel.

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