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Pre-Project Insights for the Student Life Strategy

Initial Insights and Data from the Innovation Hub

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

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Introduction

To support the Division of Student Life's Strategic Planning Process, the Innovation Hub is investigating how students seek support for their challenges and how they understand and navigate the university's services. In addition, we are rethinking how students can become active participants in the design of programs intended to support their experiences on campus.

While this project will involve the collection of new data, existing Innovation Hub data already has much to say about student experiences with help seeing and engagement with university services. The data, collected from previous empathy-based interviews and design research events since 2016, illuminates how students make decisions on whether to access services, the barriers they experience, and what they think and feel at every step in the process. The insights suggest that the decision to access help is multi-factorial and contains many potential barriers; thus, this report suggests areas to investigate as we collect new student stories.

Key Findings

Help-seeking is a multi-step process: from making a decision to seek (or not seek) help, to navigating available resources, to actually using services and the results of using these services. At each step, the student experience is influenced by both internal factors and the environment.

Theme One: Decision to Ask for Help

Recognizing a challenge and deciding whether to seek help are the first steps to obtaining support. Challenges arise for students at many points: some students enter university with known challenges, whereas others encounter problems during their studies. When making a decision about the type of help they require, students gauge the severity of their situation, the experiences of their peers, and barriers to support-seeking.

Doing it Myself: Students gauge the severity of their situations and may decide they don't need formal help services.

> "I did not think I was in such a bad shape that I needed the help. So, I decided to solve the problem by myself— by walking."

Financial Constraints: Students feel a tension between choices that support their health, both mental and physical, and choices that work with their finances.

> "It's expensive to get accommodation. So that's the hard thing."

> "I had a student the other day who said, 'My doctor needs money for a note, and I don't have that money.'... and I don't know what to do with that knowledge. You know, I will definitely not make you get that, but to think then that all the students who did get various medical notes or whatever, or however much it costs to get a diagnosis of something, umm you know, [···] that's a bummer."

Language Barriers: Students who speak English as a foreign language, particularly international students, struggle to get support within the bureaucracy of services. They may pre-emptively exclude themselves from help services because they anticipate communication challenges based on language.

> Interviewer (I): "Have you asked UofT staff/faculty for help?"
> Student (S): "No. I haven't. "
> I: "Why not?"
> S: "Well, the language … maybe it's the courses … sometimes I think that if I ask for help, then I'll be asking too much information. I'll be asking for all the details."

Not Enough Time: Time pressure can both exacerbate student problems and prevent students from seeking help. This is especially true when lack of time interacts with stigma surrounding help-seeking, particularly when students develop a communal identity based on 'busy-ness.'

> *"So, it's people with mental problems you see, [who] don't go to the services. That's what I think. Because all of my friends have them. I know that for sure. Most of the engineer people have some kind of mental problem, especially with their workload. And then, whenever they're stuck with course stuff."*

> *" I think one like, they feel like, including me, like I feel like I'm showing like my weakness, so they not only want to actively search for help. And another thing is like, we don't have like really time to like, go into those things. "*

As students grapple with whether to seek help, they are observing students around them for indicators of how seriously they should take their own situation. Sometimes they decide that their challenges are not severe enough to require formal help, but this decision is made in the presence of multiple factors that push against help-seeking: financial constraints, time constraints, language barriers, and stigma surrounding mental health and needing help.

Theme Two: Navigating Resources

If students decide to seek formal help, they must learn to navigate the available resources. Students report several challenges with doing so: they lack access to information, are unsure what resources are available, and encounter waitlists and confusing or onerous procedures.

Finding Services: Students may not know about available services, or even where to start looking for information. The university is a complex place, with many levels of organization, and different colleges, faculties, departments, and programs all have their own channels of information. All these options can feel overwhelming for students. Many students report that they finally found services in their final year and wish they knew about these sooner.

> *"I think that UofT is too decentralized. This is probably true for all students and not just Indigenous students—but it's often really hard to figure out where to go to get a service at UofT. So many things happen at so many different places that are kind of similar. There's colleges, then your program, then the campus is so huge in and of itself, and then we're kind of tri-campus in a way."*

> *"The one thing I can start off with for this is that people don't know how much there is at U of T. There's a lot of services. "*

> *"My doctor didn't tell me about [Student Life office]. I just heard about it from some students. And I had to go out of my way to find out about it."*

Overwhelmed by Email: Many students acknowledge that much information is communicated through email; however, they feel bombarded and overwhelmed by the number of emails and do not read all of the ones they receive.

> *"...you get bombarded with so many emails from student unions and the university and so many people that it kind of gets flooded."*

Experiencing Confusion: Navigating services is not just a logistical problem. Confusion—about how to face challenges, who to contact, and where to reach out—is a visceral experience for students. They may feel inadequate, especially when they believe that other students are doing better, and afraid and overwhelmed when they don't know that help is available.

> *"I felt way out of my element. I had never encountered so many articles to read at the same time, I didn't understand anything UofT (I remember emailing a prof when I couldn't figure out how to access readings on Blackboard), and I felt sure that the calibre of students was much higher than at my previous institution."*

> *"I had to basically fight for library access 〔…〕 the library access we just didn't have it, which meant that I wasn't able to be reading articles and keeping up with the readings of like, books or anything that was coming out."*

Confusion about points of contact is exacerbated by staff turnover. Students must redevelop relationships and reexplain their situations with new advisors and counsellors.

> *"That's one of the big issues I was talking about on Monday with advisers, there is so much turnaround. A lot of people retiring. Turnover with [Student Life office staff], counselors, that's gonna hurt a lot of students."*

Peer Knowledge: When students lack knowledge, they reach out to their peers or dons who had experience accessing services.

> *"Now I go to more specific places and Google them, then I go. But in my first year I had no idea. It was very difficult to navigate. It was easy to go to the dons to ask, and they would tell you where the resources were. But it was really difficult in general navigating anything."*

Waitlists: Students encounter long waitlists for services and feel frustrated because they must sometimes wait months for help.

> *"In terms of kinds of help I got, I did decide to go to my [Student Life office staff member]. I told her this is what I'm going through; I also went to [Student Life office] Which is garbage because they have a two-month waitlist."*

> *"Umm, the thing that I've found with [Student Life office] in particular ... there are just so many people that require it that it—it can be hard to make an appointment and have that appointment in time."*

Snowball Effect: Both the need for help and administrative difficulties can snowball. Students who need help must handle the challenges of their situation while seeking services: if they experience a flareup in their condition which causes them to miss an appointment, the time required to access services increases, and their difficulties compound.

> *"Like I had to write it by hand, because I missed the deadline which is my fault; I hadn't written [a final] by hand with my class since 7th grade, so I was panicked, but that was my fault for not meeting the deadline."*

Advocating for help often involves conversations with many parties. Students find themselves running back and forth, trying to explain decisions to multiple people and shuttle paperwork between them.

> *"I was always running back and forth […] then going to professors to explain what happened, and then going to the registrar to explain what happened. But then also going to doctors, then I can get legitimate paperwork. And then I can bring it back to those two people, but then also trying to register for accessibility."*

Students feel overwhelmed by the amount of "decentralized" information. It is confusing for them to understand which services are offered through their faculty and which are offered campus-wide. Most students will reach out to their social networks first, then use the Internet to find further information. Even after students find their first point of contact, they may be frustrated by waitlists or the bureaucracy involved with accessing help, especially when they feel shuttled around.

Theme Three: Student Perspectives on Needing and Seeking Help

Student feelings and attitudes impact their help-seeking behavior. Negative perspectives, such as feeling judged, burdensome, and unsupported, dissuade students from being proactive in accessing support and/or services.

Judgment and Stigma: Students may feel judged, especially when situated within a competitive academic environment. Feeling list an imposter is a common theme among students; they can feel hesitant to seek help after comparing themselves with peers and feeling like an anomaly within their social circle for struggling in school.

> *"I have definitely talked to some of my peers, but many of them are gifted. So, sometimes I feel like they don't have the same struggles as me."*

Another student felt that the sentiment among fellow students in their program was that asking for help was a sign of weakness. This, coupled with time constraints and academic rigor, acted as a deterrence to seeking assistance.

> *"But then what I realized is, even if [my peers] know that these services exist, they usually don't go because they feel like, including me, I feel like I'm showing my weakness, so they don't want to actively search for help. And another thing is, we don't have like really time to go into those things."*

One student thought they should not have needed help because of their age and the societal expectations tied with being older in university. They also felt pressure to mask their disability, which hindered them from meeting new people, and felt helpless because they did not feel as though they could reach out for support.

> *"I'm older and supposed to have it all together [⋯] I felt like I can't really ask for help. I'm not helpless...well I am helpless right now. So there is that expectation, and ableism. There's that expectation that people judge you. People on the autism spectrum have to constantly mask the fact that they're autistic. I have a little bit of that too. I'm a little bit on that spectrum. I didn't know that until I was older. I wondered why I did certain things. It was confusing; why am I out here? I'm supposed to be meeting people but I don't really want to meet anybody. I'm scared to meet people."*

Imposing on Others: Students also expressed feeling bad about asking for help because they did not want to be a burden on others. One student, when asked if they would feel comfortable seeking help during a trip organized by their faculty, admitted that they would not even consider being vocal about their concerns for fear of coming across as difficult.

> *"Definitely not, because I feel I would be more of a burden on them than anything, even if that's absolutely not the case. I just wouldn't want to feel like I've ruined their trip by complaining about how something isn't going the way I planned it, so I'd rather avoid going to them for help at that time."*

Overwhelming Atmosphere: Students can feel overwhelmed and intimidated by the prospect of asking for help, especially in the earlier years of university before they have had a chance to become accustomed to their new environment. An international student new to Canada mentioned that the large number of unfamiliar people, combined with the profuse amount of new information, discouraged them from speaking up and asking for help during orientation.

> *" I was there for the orientation day [⋯] and it was a bit intimidating, I think, because there were so many people. It overwhelmed me a little--orientation and staff presentation, I found it intimidating. "*

Support: Participants also expressed feeling unsupported within the university. One student felt that the burden of navigating the innumerous services and information channels fell on the students, who are busy

trying to balance other aspects of the university experience. They mentioned feeling as though seeking help was not worth the trouble.

> "I understand the feeling of it's not worth it. Because, it was like, sometimes it feels like trying to get help takes more work."

Students can feel that there are insufficient resources available to accommodate a community as large as UofT. One student expressed feeling bitter from the perceived lack of support from their department in terms of accessing research, scholarship, and career opportunities, especially after paying so much in tuition fees.

> "And as an international student, I don't see myself receiving a lot of support from my home departments, because I feel like they treat us like milking cows, we pay a lot for our tuition fee. And so, oftentimes we found that we are lacking all the opportunities to get TA-ships, research assistantship and various kinds of scholarship. So, it's kind of like you're in a very low-tier position compared with domestic students. So that kind of feeling is not so good. I feel you're not treated fairly."

The UofT campus can be a daunting atmosphere for students. Some prefer to handle their problems on their own rather than be a "burden." Other students feel that they are too busy to think about self-help. If the information and process of accessing services was made easier and students felt encouraged to access them, they would benefit greatly.

Theme Four: What Happens After

How does the decision to seek—or not seek—help affect student experiences? Students who receive accommodations often feel satisfied and supported, but students who are discouraged from seeking help due to previous negative experiences may continue to struggle.

Satisfactory Experiences: Many students who sought help were satisfied with accommodations and felt supported. Several students said that they felt there are lots of services available to help them. They especially appreciated the thoroughness of help, for example when staff contacted professors on their behalf.

> I approached the [Student Life office], and they helped me a lot. And they were contacting the professors as well for me […] I don't feel good about confronting professors myself, so that accessibilities confronting have been really great, have been helpful to me. And yeah, I got extra time on the exams, which is like really great, because I panic during the exams a lot, which affects my cognition during the exams."

While some students were happy with the help they received, they also recognized that not every student is so fortunate.

> "In my case, professors empathized with my accessibility needs, that boosted my performance in the course so much; not everyone can afford to be so involved."

Reaching Crisis: Other students experience negative outcomes, or a lack of support, from initial help-seeking attempts, which discourages them from seeking further help until the situation has deteriorated to a crisis point (e.g., struggling in or failing courses, worsening depression). This can result in moving from stress to distress quite quickly.

One student discussed their struggles in classes and the lack of support they felt from TAs in learning to study properly.

> "I had huge issues with physics and chem class—tried to reach out to the TAs—I felt that something was not working—I wasn't sure if I knew how to study properly."

When students cannot receive help in time, they feel frustrated and overwhelmed.

> *"It's frustrating to constantly be put at the mercy of the professor. Like right now I'm dealing with asking for extensions. It's not that you're entitled to an extension—you can ask for it and they can say no. And if they do that, you get recourse but then—you go through everything I went through. It's frustrating. So, if anyone told me no, I would have to say ok because…?? I don't know. You have to ask for extensions before the due date, and if you have health issues that's not always possible."*

Students are happy with the support received through campus services. However, other students are discouraged from accessing timely services due to negative experiences. If they do not feel supported academically by TAs and professors, they assume that accessing other university resources will yield the same result.

Conclusions

Help-seeking behaviours are multi-step processes, starting from recognizing challenges and deciding whether to seek help, to determining where to find help, to actually using resources. At every stage, there are multiple factors that affect students' decisions, including logistical factors such as financial or time constraints and emotional factors such as feelings of judgment and the desire not to be a burden. These factors interact with each other, for example when students feel that accessing help is 'not worth it' because it's too much trouble. Students' decisions about help-seeking have real outcomes, both in their emotional experience at university and in their academic achievement, so understanding and supporting them through this process is crucial for student services.

By illuminating all parts of the help-seeking process, we hope to reveal areas for potential action. We also find areas for further inquiry and discussion:

- ☐ **How can we reduce feelings of intimidation for new students and help them feel 'at home' at university?**
- ☐ **How can we normalize help-seeking behaviour and help students to recognize early intervention points for seeking support?**
- ☐ **How can we provide students with a clear and useful first port of call for accessing services?**

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