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Division of Student Life Strategy: Supporting Student Needs into the Future Themes and Insights: Design-Thinking Summary



STUDENT
LIFE

INNOVATION HUB

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Methods.....	3
Themes and Insights.....	4
Theme One: Information (Im)Balance.....	5
Where Should I Start?	5
The Labour of Access Information	6
Information Overload.....	8
Theme Two: People Helping People.....	10
The Power of Word of Mouth.....	10
Small Communities, Big Help	11
The Face Behind the Brand	12
Theme Three: Patchwork Service Affects Access	14
From Crisis Response to Crisis Prevention.....	14
Navigating Decentralized Services	15
Personas	17
Meghan	17
Tavi	18
Design Principles	19
Design Checklist	20
Conclusion and Next Steps.....	21
Student Contributors	22

Introduction

As part of its mission to support the student experience, the University of Toronto (UofT) Division of Student Life is planning its strategy for the next several years. A team of staff from all levels will collaborate with students and peers to make resources and services more accessible and relevant for all. The finalized strategic plan will guide the Division's activities over the next 3-5 years. The strategic planning process involves the revision of the Division's mission, vision, and values to strengthen and develop methods of coordinating collaboration between internal and external partners who will take part in the implementation of the strategic plan.

To better understand what students need from services, the team partnered with the Innovation Hub to ask: **"How do students understand and navigate the university's programs and services?"**. Using design-centered activities and empathy-based interviews, Innovation Hub members learned how students find information on and access campus resources, how they feel about these resources, and what they currently know about the Division of Student Life.

Methods

The Innovation Hub uses qualitative techniques to better understand participants' experiences. For this project, we hosted interactive events and conducted in-person interviews. In total, 33 students participated, including undergraduate and graduate students across various disciplines and departments. Participants were recruited through word of mouth.

To elicit student stories about their help-seeking experiences, Innovation Hub designers facilitated three types of activities:

1. **Think-Pair-Share:** Participants were asked to pair up, introduce themselves to each other, and answer a question. (For example, "What do you wish you knew coming to U of T?")
2. **Expectations, Realities, and Hopes Ideation Session:** Participants were asked to share their expectations (what they expected coming to university), realities (what resources and services they accessed), and hopes (what they wish they knew) about accessing on-campus resources and services.
3. **Journey Mapping/Process-Flow Diagrams:** Participants were asked to create a visual representation of their student journeys at U of T, highlighting significant events.
4. **In-person Interviews:** Participants were interviewed about their experiences in accessing on-campus services and resources.

Themes and Insights

The data revealed three key themes about student help-seeking, which are tied together by one central idea. For help to be useful, it must be found. While UofT provides resources to support students, many of which are high-quality, whether (and how) students learn about and interact with these resources is equally important.

Information about support services does not always reach students directly: it circulates unevenly through digital and social networks. In this environment of uncertain information, students struggle to diagnose their own issues before seeking help and are easily dissuaded by bureaucratic complications and long wait times. We identified three key themes that describe the help-seeking process—**Information (Im)balance**, **People Helping People**, and **Patchwork Services**. The following report explains these themes and provides design principles to guide development of student services.



Figure 1. Visualization of three themes

Theme One: Information (Im)Balance



Student Life provides copious information on student resources. Yet the abundance of information does not guarantee that students find what they need. Students' willingness and ability to find and use information depends on their understanding of their own needs, access to information, and the communication channels to which they are connected.

Where Should I Start?

While UofT offers many student resources and services, access remains a challenge. This challenge is evident in two different scenarios. In the first, students are unaware of the needs underlying their problems and obstacles. For instance, when a student's grade begins to fall, they may not immediately see the cause of this change. Thus, they cannot identify the appropriate services to support their needs.

"UofT has a lot of resources. It's just whether you know what you want. You need to find the right keywords."

"For me, one, one of my biggest concerns is that ... I think I came to UofT because I know UofT has a lot of different programs and resources. But the problem is I don't really know what I want. And I think when I was considering my program coming into university, I didn't think about like the practicality of getting a job after. And that's just what I'm worried about now."

In the second scenario, a student can identify their issue, but they are overwhelmed by all the services they can approach for help, not knowing which one best meets their particular need. Finding resources that cater to specific needs is difficult when students don't understand how the resources differ. They are paralyzed by choice. In addition, when needs overlap and interact, for example when a student is struggling with course work, treating a medical condition, and dealing with the resulting stress, it is difficult for the student to pinpoint what, exactly, they need help with. The uncertainty makes them reluctant to reach out, because they don't want to invest in conversation with one service only to find that they need to begin the process anew with another, especially given long wait times and urgent course deadlines.

"It's actually kind of hard, because there are just so many different places you could go for specific resources, and it's hard to know where exactly you're supposed to go. You might think that you were supposed to go to the registrar about academic based [issues], which makes sense, and then maybe you need to go to Health and Wellness, and then Health and Wellness tells you [...] that's like a physical problem; you need to go somewhere else."

"It's just a lot of different steps you have to go through, which I understand because our university is just so big and like not everything can be housed in like one specific area. But I feel like the lack of knowledge that a lot of students have about this is really the barrier here. Students just don't know where they're supposed to go."

This lack of clarity underscores the interrelated needs to support students and staff in identifying students' needs, to facilitate access to the right resources, and to determine the best point of entry for services.

The Labour of Accessing Information

Students enter UofT with differing expectations of the support they will receive. These expectations shape their interactions with information sources, and whether and how they will search for services to address their needs.

As a result, they may not be aware that they have access to different kinds of assistance from the Division of Student Life. For instance, graduate students might know of services from their undergraduate experience, whereas many undergraduate students coming from smaller high schools may not expect to receive any non-academic support.

Students are also unevenly equipped to navigate the services offered by the Division of Student Life. This is often their first time working through a bureaucratic system of this scope and scale. Reaching out for help in the manner they are accustomed to at smaller institutions might not translate into a large and complex institution like U of T.

"I think my educational background before I went to university We didn't really have any services in the school that I was going to; if you had any issues with any sort of courses, there was no tutoring or apps or programs available. So, from my experience, I didn't really come into university knowing that there were services available."

"In terms of emotions, I don't know if hesitancy is really an emotion, but I was hesitant coming into university because I wasn't sure how exactly to access certain services. That definitely left me a little bit unsure how to proceed academically because I was like, 'How do I talk to you about what major I want to do?'"

"I didn't expect anything [support programs and services]. Because like I didn't—cause it's my first time going to university, obviously; I just thought it's like you study every day and it's all going to be the same. I didn't know that the[re] were like so many mentorship programs, and it's actually cool that they have [them]."

Beyond their differing expectations and navigation abilities, students also face different life circumstances that limit their exposure to information about the Division of Student Life. Because of medical, accessibility, or immigration-status issues, some students may be excluded from structured attempts to introduce students to services, like Orientation.

"Right before I started university, I had surgery so I couldn't participate in a lot of things. I was just coming to school, going to classes, and then going home, staying in a routine."

"I arrived in Toronto the first night, and I had to go to attend the orientation the second day, because my study permit was delayed two months For grad life—specifically Grad Talks, Grad Escapes, all those things—I don't really have much experience, because they're very involved; they're very popular programs. Every time I went to the direct registering site, it's full. It's strange. I guess it might be better if they could expand the capacity."

"When I'm researching things for my assignments, I looked through Google Scholar and a lot of times, the articles I want to read, they're not available to me unless I pay. I didn't really know until last year that through the U of T library, you can access them for free and they actually open up and they use those!"

It is important to consider the mindset of students seeking support from the Division of Student Life. Students juggle academics, social nuances, family, and personal needs. It is not uncommon for students to begin seeking help when this balancing act is no longer sustainable. In other words, students are often doing the work of tracking down university resources while on the verge of crisis (if they haven't already slipped into a state of full-blown crisis). This has an impact on their ability to process information and make decisions.

"...One of my friends, her brother, had a panic attack He just didn't seem like he was having any issues. A lot of people don't realize how much help they may need, or they may think that they are fine until it really hits a point where ... it really affects you badly, and I wish there was a chance for him to know that these services were available. He was in his first year, so maybe he wasn't quite as exposed to the services, or he was more reluctant to go, because he probably thought that it was for people who needed it more urgently."

"I wish I knew about the Health and Wellness centre, when I was, my first year like earlier, because it took a whole, like, trip to CAMH for me to be connected to health and wellness which is crazy. That shouldn't happen, but I think, like, if I knew beforehand, then I would have saved a lot of time."

These extenuating circumstances dictate each student's approach to seeking support. Depending on their individual situations, students are forced to weigh academics against their health and wellbeing. In the same vein, they are forced to weigh seeking out support from the Division of Student Life against investing time towards meeting deadlines. Although students are aware of services, they may not be able to access them, because competing priorities are time sensitive.

"I did not want to go to the Writing Centre I would be more focused on the assignments that I had due that week, rather than something due two weeks later."

"I think it's very good for new students to know what's going on [on] campus. And maybe another issue is balance—balancing between all these things that I want to know, versus all things that I should spend time on."

"I guess I was also hesitant to access services because I think I did try a few times. But because the wait times and the process of doing it just seemed a bit too [stressful]. Because if I was firstly, like, writing an essay, I would have to book the writing appointment at least two weeks in advance, but I wouldn't be sure what I'm writing, or when my assignment was due, or if I would start on it. So, it would stress me out to finish the assignment before the date that I would give it to the Writing Centre."

In sum, students' access to information is affected by their expectations, exposure, ability to navigate a bureaucratic system, and life circumstances. While information about Student Life's services and resources is disseminated equally, consideration of how additional factors impact students' access will enable a more equitable circulation of information.

Information Overload

The volume and quality of information available to students are not the only issues. Equally important is the organization and distribution of information: it must be timely, easy to parse, and delivered steadily. When left uncalibrated, the organization and distribution of information can hinder students from seeking assistance. Interviewees reported feeling overwhelmed by the number of emails sent by faculty, Student Life, and clubs.

"... In first year, I remember receiving emails, and being bombarded with so much information, I didn't even bother with it until later on in my undergrad experience."

"[Those] weekly emails, I kind of ignored them to be totally honest. And I wish that I hadn't because they tend to have a lot of things that can be pretty specific to your own interests or for me. For example, a library club or something like ... there's always some random niche thing in there that I'm sure I would have pursued had I actually opened the emails."

"So as soon as I got here, I tried to search for all the information on all the departmental and organizational websites on the campus and found it pretty exhausting. Because there's so many websites and so many resources. Then I thought, maybe I can just read the emails and decide what I want to do. That's when I found out that there's pretty much like 20 emails every day in the first month of my program. There are emails from your department, from your registrar, the international students one, and there's the normal one. So, I just get too overwhelmed by information."

Emails are the preferred channel for delivering information at UofT. Consequently, student inboxes are flooded with messages. Students receive faculty-specific emails, general UofT emails, and other listserv emails, and more. It is important for students to know that the emails they receive are catered to their needs and are relevant to their experiences. The density of these messages, which often feature dozens of links, event announcements, or workshop notifications, makes it difficult to find pertinent information. For some, even "digest"-style emails could be further streamlined.

"I think it's always good to [be] updated every week, because every week, there's always new things happening. Nine of them. [Everyone laughs.] But I think it might be better if—let's say there's kind of categorization: these three things belong to academic; these three things belong to sports and recreation; and these three things belong to career development or something like that."

"You're also getting emails about things happening at the university Hmm ... yeah, too much for my liking. Too much. It was both campuses too, which [can be overwhelming] because I wasn't really willing to come take Comp Sci at UTM, and I don't really want to go to UofT just for services."

Quality of information and ease of navigation are also important. Students often find that the information on webpages is outdated, websites are hard to navigate, and contact information is not functional. In addition, communication lines for assisting students are at times non-responsive, which leads students to seek help elsewhere.

"I think that some information on the off-campus housing website has to be updated. Because when I try to search that website to look for information, I found some really outdated information, like the price. And sometimes there is no contact information [for the house owner]."

"So, they do have like housing co-ops, but they're really hard to reach. They don't have people answering the phones all the time; they don't really have an email address that's really functional. So that's something that was really annoying, and I ended up finding housing elsewhere. Buns, Home Zone on Facebook."

"UofT website is just so weird and there's just way too many things on there that nobody really understands. So maybe having like a specific area designated to resources that you can access, like, even if you just search, you need this type of thing, like where would you go, would be really beneficial. I feel like just centralizing things, because UofT is just so decentralized, would really help."

Students expressed a need for tailored information based on their individual interests. This information has the greatest chance of reaching its target audience when it is deployed across a variety of channels and in a digestible, focused format.

Theme Two: People Helping People



Students reported that one of the best ways to learn about resources and services was through peer connections and from their communities. Since their peers already had experience with the resource or service accessed, they were able to give reliable referrals to their friends seeking similar support. Because information disseminated through email or hosted on websites can often be overwhelming, having peers vouch for certain services allowed students to receive relevant knowledge to improve their student experience. However, students who are disconnected from peer networks and/or smaller communities face greater challenges accessing resources and services.

The Power of Word of Mouth

Students often begin the process of help-seeking by turning to their peer network and learning about available resources and support networks through word of mouth. Considering that students are sometimes unaware of their needs and the appropriate resources for those needs (Theme One: “Where Should I Start?”), peer networks are an effective way for students to learn about available resources and how to access them. In this way, students learn from each other's experiences. They also trust, to a greater degree, services recommended by friends. Further, considering the information overload that many students experience, peer networks provide personalized information specific to a student's needs and interests.

“It’s helpful to ask your upper years, which courses are helpful, kind of like ... which profs you want to take?’ Stuff like that, I kind of relied [on] other people’s experiences with other courses too ... and that’s helpful.”

“I didn’t really find out about [clubs] through the clubs fair or anything. My roommate in first year went to it, and she talked about it, and then I went to it and liked it.”

“I think a lot of [things] I learned about through friends, because sometimes the emails and listervs are just so overwhelming. When you hear about it from someone, you can hear like how they’re engaging with it or how it finally is useful or how it impacted them. It kind of made me want to go more. It’s kind of like a recommendation or testimonial.”

In addition to pathfinding, peer networks increase the likelihood of students accessing resources, as they normalize help-seeking behavior. Many students view their personal challenges as individual shortcomings. Learning about their peers’ experiences removes the stigma attached to seeking help.

“My roommate was actually with [the Accessibility Services]. And I mentioned to her a couple of things. She was like, ‘Oh, that sounds similar to my situation. Why don’t you just go talk to accessibility?’ She actually directed me, because I found the website a little confusing. Do I need to see a doctor first? Do I need to like talk to someone else first, where does this form come from? Like it was confusing. And if I didn’t have her, I may have not even pursued it.”

"I guess just having the confidence and even just the initiative to go out and do things. Because when you're in first year, you feel like everyone's so much older than you and wiser and knows what they're doing. And I guess I wish someone had told me that I could get involved in things in first year"

"Oh yeah, like everyone is like struggling, and they won't have to keep it to themselves, because like even if UofT is a very prestigious school, and everyone's [...] supposedly smart, people are still like struggling."

While having friend groups advertise supports is effective for creating awareness and access, overreliance on peer networks runs the risk of providing inaccurate information to students. For example, one interviewee was unsure about the need to renew their T-Card because of *"... rumors about how if you don't switch it, you can't write your exams. I thought you had to, so I just did it, but I didn't know if you actually had to or not. Some people kept it, so I'm not sure how that worked out."*

The effectiveness of peer networks points to the need for personalized information, assistance with finding access points, and the normalization of help seeking. It also illustrates the power of word of mouth. Each interaction between an individual student and Student Life is, in effect, an interaction with the larger student body.

Small Communities, Big Help

Colleges and student groups act as an immediate form of community. There, students can connect to others based on specific recreational interests, or by virtue of academic reference points. These smaller communities are effective in directing students to resources for reasons discussed in the previous section. Smaller communities are spaces for forming close friendships that lead to referrals and normalize help seeking. The smaller scale of college administrations means students perceive internal services as having relatively low wait times.

"Then I went to the club fair. I'm from Malaysia and there's a Malaysian Singaporean Student Association. I went to a lot of events from there. And then I also went for a lot of workshops in my first year, and one of them was a writing workshop. And from there, I got in touch with this community arts organization called [name of project], which is an arts group. That was through a person I met at the workshop. So, it was like all these connections that formed unexpectedly."

"Realizing that there are UofT wide resources that you can access, but also, you're [a] part of a college [at the St. George campus]. There are the same resources ... but there will be smaller wait lists, which is helping us."

"And then in second year, through the club I joined in first year, I met a lot of people who are execs throughout UofT. They introduced me to other clubs. So, I got involved with six other clubs in second year. And, through my TA I learned about research and hospital opportunities, so I started doing that kind of stuff."

Students expressed that colleges and small groups are more convenient communities for seeking help support as they are better integrated into their daily life. Colleges provide easier access for many students as the divisions between college-level support and large UofT systems do not appear intuitive to students. They may not understand the difference between college-level administrative units and university-level administrative units.

"Before coming to university, I received an e-mentorship program email from my college, so I knew that there were like different support programs that existed. But I didn't realize that it was a broad UofT type of thing. I thought it was just, based on your affiliated college, you're supposed to go only there: that's where you get all the information. So, I didn't understand the difference between your college base, or UofT as a whole."

"When I got here in Toronto, the first event was the SGS orientation [which] is a pretty big event at [Toronto] hotel. There was more useful information about all divisions and services in SGS. There's the GCAC. There's GPS credit, GPS, professional development program, and there's the academic centre and also Grad Life. Later we went to a departmental orientation night."

As previous Innovation Hub projects have demonstrated, community plays an integral role in creating a sense of belonging and providing resources and support to students. These smaller pre-existing networks are a great way to connect with students. Additionally, there is a need to clarify the position and role of Student Life in relation to colleges.

The Face Behind the Brand

Students value in-person experiences to learn about the resources offered by the university. Orientation, academic advisors, or registrars are often the first places students turn to for information besides online searches. Face-to-face interactions were seen as the most efficient way of delivering help. They reduce the burden placed on students to navigate around the abundance of information and find solutions for their needs.

"I think having the initial exposure to some of those services or in the form of going through orientation with a spokesperson in each of them is helpful ... I guess the access or the way to reach out to them is fairly straightforward coming from my point of view. Especially that there is someone face to face telling you that you can go through the steps to access the resources that a student might need or that I might need. I think it's putting myself in that position where there's someone that's telling you all of these things, as well as getting like a business card after and you have a direct line to those of services."

Some interviewees were surprised to find the level of personalized support already available on campus, since they previously assumed that such experiences were not possible in an institution the size of UofT.

"I assumed that there would be some academic support and things like that. But it wasn't until I actually got here that I realized the full extent of that, how there's peer—or in first year

we have this thing called Gears where upper years would help you with your homework. And there's a learning strategist who helps plan your entire life, basically. It's super individualized so I didn't realize how personalized the support could get."

In-person interactions also allows students to create long-term relationships with administrators. These relationships allow students to feel that their needs are seen and that they are supported. An ongoing dialogue with a single advisor means a deeper understanding of a student's situation as it develops over time.

"I was assigned an accessibility advisor, who then was speaking to me on an individual basis, and it wasn't like an office email or a phone number; it was an actual person that I could be like, 'Oh, the specific questions,' and we got to know each other. It was definitely better from that point, but just getting to them was actually a little bit difficult."

"I learned about [resources] mostly through my academic advisor. Every time I went to go see him, he was like, 'I've got a resource for you.' [I learned about the academic advisor when] he introduced himself. And then, I was just like, 'Okay, I'm gonna go make an appointment.'"

While students struggle to understand the complexity of UofT at the institutional level, their positive experiences interacting face-to-face with Student Life highlights the division's greatest potential strength: its staff. The need for personal connection points to the importance of relationship building with the Division of Student Life brand.

Theme Three: Patchwork Service Affects Access



In a decentralized system, students encounter many bureaucratic inefficiencies.

For example, though many students have needs that require support from multiple resources, services that should be connected are difficult to locate. Students are often given unclear directions for juggling those resources, which becomes a barrier for them to overcome. Moving from service to service without a clear roadmap affects students' motivation. Students are often constrained by a lack of time. Not knowing where to go next can heighten their stress and discourage them from seeking further help, increasing the chance that their issues will become unmanageable and affect multiple domains of their lives.

From Crisis Response to Crisis Prevention

Student Life has responded quickly to the recent mental-health crisis on campus, providing rapid care for students in immediate need of help. The Innovation Hub's previous mental-health project also revealed that students who actively seek assistance for non-time-sensitive matters (for example, professional development) are largely satisfied with the service they receive.

But there is a need to focus on students who fall between these two groups. This third group consists of those who, while not in the midst of crisis, have identified worrying trends in their own behaviour, health, or academic performance, and are pre-emptively seeking help. The longer these students spend navigating services or in waitlists, the greater the odds that they will be in, or on the verge of, crisis by the time they connect with Student Life professionals.

Interviews revealed several examples of students encountering such delays. One student recalled a frustrating experience while seeking help from Accessibility Services:

"And so like, I just keep trying to see my accessibility right or that she could. And I'd sent you know, my paperwork again. Yes. Yeah, I emailed it to her multiple times and be able to like, please just sign off on it. She's like, 'You have to see me first.' It's like, this is happening multiple times, multiple years where I just keep on being put off and off and off."

Reflecting on their experience with Health and Wellness, another student expressed how difficult it was to get their foot in the door (while acknowledging the relative ease of access after this first step):

"It usually takes like three weeks to book [appointments for mental health]. I was like, 'Oh, once you're in the system its easier.' And then you just, you can book the next session at your current appointment—like you don't have to wait in the line. [Before that], people transfer you to ten different places."

Another student explained how the wait times deterred them from seeking mental help:

"But I've also heard a lot of feedback about [mental health services] too. [...] Like there's always a really long waitlist, so students don't get the opportunity to speak to therapists. Which is something I kind of am ... one of the reasons I'm kind of hesitant to go in the first place. Because I do not want to wait."

Bureaucracy can add unnecessary stops in a student's journey to access services, impacting some students more negatively than others. Students might be dissuaded from seeking help when the problem is more manageable. However, without receiving the needed support, it is likely that their problems will grow in number and severity, affecting multiple aspects of their lives. Expanding the paradigm from crisis response to crisis prevention will better allow Student Life to assist and provide support for students.

Navigating Decentralized Services

Perhaps unsurprisingly, waitlists were a common pain point among interviewees. While wait lines for accessing services are inevitable given the size of the student body and budgetary constraints, it is important to consider the time that a student has spent making their way into that line. The lack of clarity and transparency around the process of navigating decentralized services, such as getting referrals for services and understanding the wait time it takes for acquiring access, delays and dissuades students from acquiring the help they need. Students value connected systems and information that is consistent across access points. Efficiency in directing them to the appropriate resource was consistently highlighted as an issue.

"I think that UofT is too decentralized. So, I think that it's 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."

"But I know from like, when we were just looking at and talking to people accessing mental-health services on campus, there's just, there's no sort of, streamlined way to do that"

The effects of decentralization extend to digital platforms. One student, for example, shared their experience paying tuition:

"This year I paid my tuition late [...] and so I missed the deadline, because I thought you could just pay it at any point throughout the year. I didn't realize that after a certain date, you pay a late fee. So, that happened to me. I feel like if it was clearer, like maybe on ACORN or something, for important things like that, if it was bolded so I didn't have to actually Google 'deadline to pay tuition.'"

When students struggle to locate the appropriate resources on their own, their time-sensitive issues can be exacerbated. In interviews, students recounted their confusion when trying to locate the right services. Their own efforts to navigate the system rarely resulted in a clear understanding of the Student Life ecosystem. Rather, they simply came away feeling "lost":

“There would be resources for clubs so that was like one thing that I really looked up for. But in terms of like, like other resources like supports, like how I mentioned before on academic help. I didn't really know about those resources, so I didn't really know where to start, or where to find them. So that sometimes makes me feel ... really confused about that. For example, when I had a question about like tuition and paying for it, I didn't know exactly who to ask or who to go to. So, I find that sometimes that makes me feel a little lost, I guess.”

While UofT's decentralized structure is an issue too large for any one division to address on its own, clarifying the navigation process of can eliminate confusions that delay and dissuade students from accessing services. When the rules are clear and progression through the line is equitable, students trust in the system and feel less stress about navigating it.

Echoing the findings in Theme 1, students spend a considerable amount time figuring out what their needs are and what services are appropriate for those needs, while being shuffled around between different services. One of the benefits of understanding students' experiences is providing insight into the many ways that existing resources can be better utilized to eliminate inefficiencies and prevent exacerbation of students' issues.

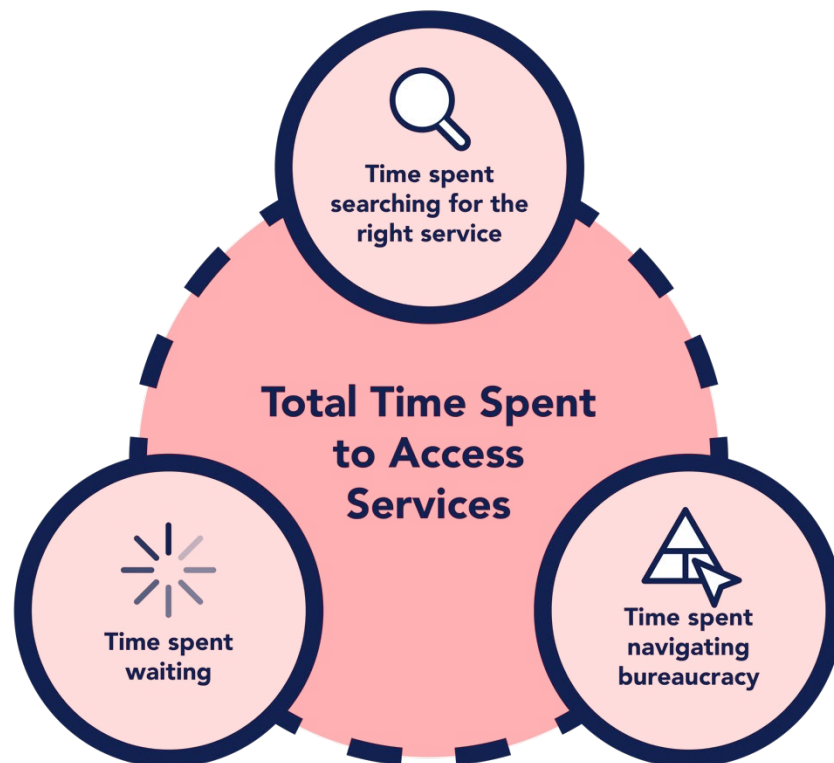


Figure 2. Visualization of Total Time Spent by students to Access Services

Personas

All participants had unique experiences and perspectives, but they also shared common patterns that reflected their roles and the university culture. **Meghan** and **Tavi** are two personas who show the similarities and differences across the aggregate data.

Meghan

- **First Year Undergraduate Student**
- Living at home, commutes to campus



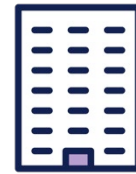
I'm a first-year student, living at home, and commuting to campus. I haven't had much time to use resources, attend events, or to join clubs on campus. My high school was fairly small, so coming to a big university has taken some adjustment. I wasn't sure quite what to expect when I first arrived. Due to scheduling issues with transit, I missed a lot of the orientation events during my first week of school. I feel a little lost walking around campus and seeing signs advertising different student services. In terms of campus life, I know that there are many clubs and organizations that I can join, but I haven't looked into it. It probably isn't worth the effort and I can spend that time working on all the other things that I have going on.

I've mostly been keeping up with my course work, since it's a lot to do and I already spend a lot of my time commuting. No matter how hard I try, I can't seem to replicate my grades from high school. I've been having trouble sleeping. It makes focusing on my work even more difficult. I scheduled an appointment with the Health Centre to see if there might be a medical explanation. The doctor suggested I speak with a mental-health professional after our appointment. I went to the mental-health office, and they told me I need to first see someone to get an assessment. The first available appointment was three weeks later. After the assessment, the therapist told me I should see someone who specializes in ADHD and that there is a bit of a wait. It's been five months now, and I haven't heard anything yet about when my appointment will be. So, I am doing my best to deal with the lack of sleep and schoolwork on my own.

Living off campus has made it difficult to make friends. I don't have much of a support network here. I'm thankful to have family and friends near my home, but it would be nice to vent or get advice from people who have been in the same situation as me.

Tavi

- **First Year Masters Student**
- Lives on campus in graduate housing
- International Student



I'm in the first year of my Master's program, and I live on campus in graduate housing. I was able to find a Work-Study job through the connections I made with other international students from the Philippines. The transition to a new city and school has been hard, as I had to learn many things. I wasn't sure about things like taking transit and making sure my Work-Study was in line with the limits of my student visa. I also had to search for banking information on my own, which I mostly found through online searches and by asking other students. My friends have been really helpful in this process. Some of them have gone through this before and told me about the things that they have learned about the city, about UofT, and other things that they thought I should know about. We also share a lot of information with each other, because we know what the other person might be looking for or is struggling with. So, for instance, if I come across something that I think might help a friend, I would let them know and they would do the same for me. It also helps that I'm living on campus and see my friends all the time.

I'm considering attending some writing workshops, but I'm looking for ones that relate more specifically to my program. Another student told me about the referencing software called RefWorks that we have access to, which I wouldn't have known about otherwise. I have attended several orientation events and workshops that were organized by my department and student association. These orientations taught me how to access my student accounts and get my T-Card. My Work-Study job helped me to connect with other areas of the university that I may not have found out about otherwise, so I found that helpful. I know there's a Student Life app and I downloaded it, but I haven't made use of it besides the times I needed to for my Work-Study job.

I went to the Career Centre once and used the Career Learning Network (CLN) to help me plan for work after graduation. I know there are other workshops I could attend, but I don't know much about them and honestly, I don't have that much to figure it out. I've seen some emails that tell us what's going on at campus, but I get so many emails and I can't read all of them.

Design Principles

Inspired by the data, these design principles will guide the development of Student Life strategies that increase student access to services and resources.



- 1) Student Life is a Community:** Community is an important link between students and Student Life services. When students think of “community” and “Student Life” as separate and distinct categories, student life appears as another layer of UofT’s bureaucracy. Making Student Life a community on its own will facilitate greater relationship between students and administration.
- 2) Get Personal:** Personal connections between staff and students keep students in the Student Life service community. Receiving tailored information and working through complex issues with a consistent set of staff will clarify the process and make students feel like their needs are seen and supported.
- 3) Think Beyond the Waitlist:** A student’s search for services does not begin from their first recorded point of contact with Student Life. It starts with self-reflection, research, inquiries, and referrals. For students facing imminent crisis, this is valuable time wasted. When we consider time to access, think beyond the waitlist. Eliminating time wasted by students before their first successful contact with Student Life reduces stress and overall time to service access.
- 4) It Takes Help to Find Help:** It can be difficult for students to determine what their needs are. Supporting students' needs should start with supporting need-finding, so they can be promptly directed to the correct service.
- 5) One Student is More than One:** Every interaction with a student has ripple effects as they share their experience with their peers. Given the vital role played by these smaller communities in directing students to the services they need, every student needs to be treated as a potential point of access to their entire network.
- 6) Harness Word of Mouth:** Where students reported feeling overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information, word of mouth exerted a strong influence on students seeking help. When friends and advisors suggest accessing student services or engaging in campus life, they normalize help seeking.

Design Checklist

1. Student Life is a Community:

- ☐ Follow up on students' referrals
- ☐ Use testimonials from other students when suggesting services and resources to students
- ☐ Connect with on-campus groups, even if the interests of the group seem irrelevant to Student Life
- ☐ Establish personal connections

2. Get Personal:

- ☐ Tailor the information that you provide to students based on their individual needs
- ☐ Walk students through the different stages of navigating the decentralized system
- ☐ Follow up with students after service provision
- ☐ Reach out to students when you find new resources relevant to their needs

3. Think Beyond the Waitlist:

- ☐ Consider difficulties students face with reaching out for help & factor this time into service design
- ☐ Assist students to find the right resources faster
- ☐ Direct students to the right resource after the first contact with Student Life
- ☐ Create interconnectivity between Student Life services
- ☐ Reduce opportunities for students to "fall off" in the referral process. Whenever possible, ensure that each interaction with a student results in a scheduled next step

4. It Takes Help to Find Help:

- ☐ Develop resources for self-assessment to help students quickly determine what service they need to contact first
- ☐ Add scenarios to service descriptions
- ☐ Map out services and how they relate to one another

5. One Student is More than One:

- ☐ Ensure that students leave with a clear understanding of the process for receiving assistance from a given service

6. Harnessing Word of Mouth:

- ☐ Encourage students to refer their friends
- ☐ Identify and connect with key community stakeholders who might help to direct students to resources

Conclusion & Next Steps

This partnership between the Innovation Hub and the Division of Student Life revealed how students seek help. It also uncovered the barriers they encounter, and thus the opportunities available to Student Life. Unmet needs point out possibilities for growth. As a supporter of UofT students, the Division is well positioned to develop services based on the identified needs.

- **Rethink First Point of Contact:**
 - Develop a system that provides continuity for each student from the first point of contact and throughout their journey
- **Create Connectivity in a Decentralized System:**
 - Build relationships between divisions of Student Life where the staff are aware of different services and processes
 - Establish a system to follow up on referrals and train staff in these processes to ensure continuity
 - Communicate the relationship between different divisions to students through a variety of mediums
- **Focus on Community Integration:**
 - Explore opportunities to leverage student social networks to build trust and create positive narratives about Student Life as a trusted place to access support
 - Identify key community stakeholders who might help to direct students to resources; keep talking with these stakeholders to adapt services based on their feedback and changing student needs
- **Shift in Messaging Strategy:**
 - Position Student Life as a trusted partner and advocate for students in all areas, a neutral support team who cares and can open doors at various stages in students' academic lifecycle based on varied needs
- **Help Students Help Themselves:**
 - Create resources for self-assessment and/or needs identification that students can use to easily self-refer
 - Work directly with students to design tools that they can access themselves and that they perceive as valuable, and deliver them in the way they are looking to receive them
 - Explore opportunities for AI or other technology that can make online services feel more individual/personalized

These suggested steps seek to improve how students learn and interact with the resources provided by the Division of Student Life. The fact that students do not directly learn about Student Life's support services, that they struggle to identify their own needs before seeking help, and that bureaucratic complications act as barriers, are important factors to consider when it comes to providing support to students. Attending to the needs that this report has identified will ensure that Student Life can address students' needs when it comes to navigating the complex process of help-seeking.

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Imagery provided by the Innovation Hub.



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