



# The Future of SLP

Design Event: Themes and Insights Report  
January 2019



Prepared for the Student Life Professional Network,  
University of Toronto

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# introduction

The Student Life Professionals Network (SLP Network) is a community of practice offering support to student-facing staff through professional development and community events. To better understand the needs of its members, the SLP Network first partnered with the Innovation Hub in 2017–2018, asking the Innovation Hub to identify the common challenges and experiences of student-facing staff. Through in-depth interviews, the Innovation Hub arrived at several insights, including the importance of institutional knowledge and personal networks, and the need for management to support staff development.

To follow up on these findings, the SLP Network once again partnered with the Innovation Hub in 2018–2019, this time to run a series of activities and small-group discussions with student-facing staff. Here we present the results from those discussions. Key themes include the **importance of personal networks in navigating the university**, the **need for better support in working across departments**, and the desire for **professional development activities that are applicable and accessible**.

# theme one: Information Flows through Personal Networks

The University of Toronto (U of T) is vast and complex, with many decentralized offices and departments. This complexity makes it difficult for staff to find information, make efficient referrals, and communicate across departments. Personal connections bridge gaps in information flow, but the reliance on personal networks may be a challenge for new staff.

## Insights

### 1) Navigating the University

To new employees especially, but even to those with experience, the university can be an opaque and mysterious place. This insight emerged in the 2017–2018 study, where we found that staff have incomplete knowledge of programs and processes outside of their departments.

In this new study, we hear similar stories and find in more detail how staff build their knowledge of the university. Building institutional knowledge is necessary to work effectively, because the navigation aids the university provides—e.g., websites, job titles, program titles—may confuse and mislead.

Formal supports exist for learning about the overall structure of the university. In our discussions, many staff credited the Organizational Development & Learning Centre (ODLC)'s “Understanding University Governance” courses for illuminating the governance structure.

Yet for smaller, everyday details—like knowing where to ask for assistance and where to get information—much of the discovery is informal. The Internet serves as a starting point, but staff often run into the confusions mentioned above, where inconsistency or opacity in terms and titles provides them with misleading information.

Because they perceive information as inaccessible or buried online, they turn to people as the best resources. Sometimes, it takes only one degree of separation to reach the right person, but often a chain of personal connections and phone calls is required. In the words of one participant, the process of finding answers feels like “going down the rabbit hole.”

*“It’s difficult for me to find my own place within the institution [...] I’m still trying to gather information about my role, the institution.”*

*“Job titles are so deceiving, like who actually does what specific task, and that kind of thing.”*

*“So if I’m looking for info on student mental health, it’s likely going to have some sort of name like “UZen” or something, and I’m not going to know that that has anything to do with mental health. I think it would be so much better if the names of programs were straightforward and evoked what kinds of services are being offered.”*

*“I do my best to look everything up online, and then there’s some things I still haven’t figured out. If there’s a department that has a Scarborough program and a St George program, I always get them wrong if I Google that.”*

*“And often you’re connected with [the person who can help you] in an indirect way, like I don’t know with whom to connect so then a colleague is able to [say], “Oh, actually, here’s this exact person’s number. Give them a call and they’ll be able to help you out.”*

## **2) Necessity of (and Strategies for) Network-Building**

Since staff depend upon personal connections to navigate the university and find information, extensive networks make information-finding less frustrating and more efficient. Yet, this reliance upon personal networks creates a challenge for those just starting out or switching to a new field.

More experienced staff have the advantage of years to make connections and build working relationships with people, but even their connections sometimes need to be refreshed due to staff turn-over.

These insights—the importance of personal connections and the advantages of experience—confirm the findings of the 2017–2018 report. In this study, we also get more detail on how new staff build their networks.

They may get help from their supervisors, who provide access and introductions to their own networks. When staff take their own initiative, they rely on informational interviews and cold introductions, which participants describe as awkward and intimidating.

Experienced staff continue to actively seek connections, but eventually network growth also takes on its own momentum, as staff move around the university, and old connections meet potential new connections.

*“I switched jobs in the last few months and I’m in a completely different area, and I found it actually quite hard. I was like, I don’t really have a network in my area. The strongest connections that I have are in the field I was in [...] New staff [need help to] build networks in their new roles because otherwise they’re just relying on past connections, and that doesn’t necessarily serve the function that they’re doing now.”*

*“People change, and there might be new people, and then all of a sudden the way they do things [is] completely different.”*

*“Even though I’m more of an extroverted person, I’m shy, so the first conference that I went to.... I’m glad I knew people there already cause it’s a really.... It was a huge conference.... And I think being a new person in that...well. The people are really lovely but it would be really intimidating.”*

*“These are offices that I used to work at [...] New staff [are] coming in and out, [and] as staff go to other places, they become my connections, and [...] as new staff come in, they build onto my connections. Even though I didn’t work alongside them at the time I was there, I still count them as part of my connections and networks.”*

### **3) The Referral Challenge**

As in the 2017–2018 study, we find that confusion and decentralization affect student referrals. Staff again described feeling like they send students off into the dark, because they have limited knowledge of what happens on the other end of the referral, limiting their ability to explain the benefits of the referral to students. Some staff feel that additional training would help in this regard.

Compounding the problem, students are sometimes unclear about whom they’ve talked to before, making it harder for staff to counsel them or to avoid bouncing them back to someone they’ve already seen.

In this study, we find that many of the most vivid, emotionally charged responses deal with student referrals. Staff clearly care deeply about students, and express frustration and helplessness when faced with struggling students are who getting bounced from office to office.

Finally, staff sometimes feel hesitant about whether to refer a student. It may be unclear who is responsible, or how to best steer a line between providing help to students and respecting other offices’ territory.

*“Training for sure; the one thing that I want is beyond meetings and websites, attending [programming] or shadowing and getting someone from another team to talk about how [specific services] are provided, what topics are covered; to thoroughly learn what our service entails; not that I don’t know what they do but having that clarity to be able to communicate that with students.”*

*“So maybe some cross-training or even understanding [...] what goes on in a typical [...] career counselling thing [...] so that when I refer students to the Career Centre, I can actually tell them what they’re going to get in addition to what I’ve already told them.”*

*“[The students] come to my office. They’re sweaty, and you know, they’re just mad already, and then [...] I have to say the same thing. I’m like honestly, I cannot; physically, I have no powers; I can’t do that for you.”*

*“So then they go and they’re crying [...] and then they have to tell the story all over again, and then I pass them on, and then they have to tell their story.... Like how many times are they re-traumatized because they’re being passed from place to place, and not because we’re trying to be cruel....”*

*“A student felt more comfortable coming to me for information because he did not understand the information given to him at [another office]. The reason he did not understand was a language barrier, so I am guessing he felt more supported by me here at [this office]—but I didn’t have the full information that he needed. I had to decide whether I should get the information and help translate it to him. But probably the other office would want me to send him back so they could try to communicate it again to him.”*

*It is frustrating for the student to be sent back again, so I don't want to do that. Sometimes this feels like a question of territory.... Who is the content expert?"*

## Takeaways

- New staff often feel lost at the university, and even more experienced staff feel that many areas are opaque to them. This results in inefficiencies when people must navigate a chain of referrals to get the right answer.
- To more efficiently navigate the university, staff rely on personal networks, which creates a challenge for new employees, who must overcome a sense of awkwardness and intimidation to make initial connections.
- Staff genuinely care and express empathy for students. They feel frustrated because they sense that they may be inadvertently contributing to student distress. Though they have a clear desire to improve the situation, the opacity of the system works against them.
- Due to the inconsistency in terms used across campus and the fragmentation of information, staff may be unsure what exactly a student is going to get out of a referral.

## Questions

- Are there opportunities for the SLP network to help staff manage their sense of feeling lost within the vastness of the institution?
- Is it better to improve non-social methods of information access (e.g., through better online resources), or does the social aspect of current information chains add value (e.g., by improving inter-departmental relationships and communication)?
- What is the best way to help new staff build their networks? Is there a way to ease the initial awkwardness? How can the SLP Network facilitate network-building for new staff?
- What is the best way to streamline and clarify the referral process? Is it more institutional knowledge, or clearer documentation of the referral chain, as some have suggested?

# theme two: Insularity and Lack of Time are Challenges for Collaboration and Change

Staff care about improving the university and making its processes more effective and efficient. Many described taking on initiatives to increase collaboration or effect changes. However, departmental insularity and lack of time or support create friction for those leading such initiatives.

## Insights

### 1) Working Across Silos

Personal relationships and institutional knowledge enhance collaboration. As a corollary, the lack of relationships or knowledge impedes inter-departmental projects. Units may not know what other units are doing, and thus inadvertently act at cross-purposes.

When collaborations happen, personal relationships can provide the trust needed for success. New employees, who have not yet had the time to build such relationships, may feel hampered by a lack of trust.

Friction also builds when departments with different levels of interest and expectations come together. Participants described a sense of territoriality and competition between units, and a lack of clarity about who should be in charge.

But there are success stories as well. For example, Mindful Moments was held up as a successful example of coordination.

*“Sometimes units don’t talk to each other. [...] You find that one unit may be doing something they’ve been doing for ten, twenty years, and then the other unit, because they’re newer people, may be doing different things [...]”*

*“A bit it helps when my manager is in the room. It makes things more productive solely because of the relationships that those two individuals have and I’m seen as a new person who’s not as well-versed in the process.... For me it’s just getting to understand how these other people skills work...practising empathy.”*

*“Collaboration has been challenging because there are twelve different stakeholders.... It’s hard to prorate their level of engagement, and different expectations about the activities....”*

*“The health promo part is very interdivisional [...] but [I] found that because we were so insulated...it was all the people who already cared about health. It was hard to get people who weren’t part of our group to get involved in conversation. [...] So my experience working interdivisionally outside of our group is that it’s very frustrating.”*



*“Every person on this team has a different portfolio and reflects a different ecosystem and can be territorial and competitive around who does what, e.g., graduation and support: SGS has caught wind that grad students have needs other than admin support, e.g., programming for grad students.... Whose portfolio is that technically under? No one officially.”*

*“Why would we feel motivated to collaborate when there is this sense of competition, of wanting to do it better ourselves?”*

*“Mindfulness doesn’t have a home...but some folks have demonstrated leadership to provide coordination.... Mindful Moments... Someone just asked who is doing mindfulness drop-in sessions...and they curated it into one website. They didn’t build a new program from scratch, they just put it all in one place so it’s mapped.”*

## **2) Barriers to change**

Because so much time and attention are (understandably) focused on all the things that *must* happen to run the semester, those trying to implement changes can find that work pushed to the side. A lack of personal relationship between the participants increases the challenge by decreasing the incentive to work together right now.

Successfully implementing change requires acknowledging people’s priorities, and trying to work around those priorities, making it easy for people to understand and to take part.

Participants also expressed frustration because they feel that the institution is paying lip service to collaboration, without actually providing the needed time and support. In particular, staff think that more is being said than done when it comes to collaboration with faculty, with one staff member describing the problem as “myths about connecting with faculty.”

*“The semester kind of flies by so quickly, if you haven’t spent time collaborating in the summer, or you don’t really know the person, it’s hard to now ask somebody, ‘Hey, in two weeks I want to run this initiative, are you interested?’ It’s sort of like, ‘I don’t really have time, let’s look at next semester.’”*

*“I’m used to a quicker pace though [in my past job outside of academia], having to meet timelines come hell or high water. [...] There’s more flexibility here for non-time sensitive things. People are more forgiving here because you’re not working to appease a client. The client is the student body.... if the students aren’t counting on it that’s not the end of the world.”*

*“People being busy, acknowledging that during the school year, it’s quite busy for people so being mindful that I only have a couple of minutes to have someone review something or meeting someone... People are busy.”*

*“Setting expectations at the beginning for people and timelines and being firm on timelines...also just in the process when sharing something with people to get their approval—providing a lot of context for people but also making it so it’s easy to give feedback, easy for people who are time-strapped. So preparation and setting expectations for involvements and timelines.”*

*“There’s an odd culture, at least how I’m sensing it—there’s this, ‘Oh, we should collaborate, we should collaborate, we should collaborate,’ but the departments or the team leads are not actually making that space for their employees. So [...] we should be collaborating, but what am I giving up on in my day to day to actually facilitate that collaboration and that opportunity?”*

*“Another group is faculty. You know, bridging the gap between staff and faculty. [...] Getting them involved is sometimes a challenge.”*

## Takeaways

- The university’s decentralization appears to hinder collaboration. Personal relationships provide bridges and smooth out rocky interactions.
- Offices may also be hesitant to collaborate due to perceived territoriality and competition, as well as a lack of clarity around responsibilities.
- Staff trying to initiate changes must work around the time demands of the regular semester. Again, it is easier to get buy-in with a personal connection.
- Some staff experience frustration because they feel that more is said about collaboration than is actually done, and that there is a lack of concrete support.

## Questions

- What is SLP’s role in enhancing collaboration opportunities? Is this best approached as a side-effect of building networks? Or are there other ways in which competition can be reduced?
- What support do staff need when trying to collaborate or implement change, and what is SLP’s role in providing that support?
- How might staff-faculty relationships be better built? What incentives do faculty have to engage in these collaborations? Does SLP have a role in supporting this type of relationship development?

# theme three: Achieving Goals Requires Identifying Values and Recognizing Relevant Learning Opportunities

Staff seek professional development opportunities to work towards a variety of goals, ranging from career advancement to personal job satisfaction. Professional development opportunities may be formal or informal, but both require management support, and lack of support may lead to conflict.

## Insights

### 1) The Role of Values in Identifying Goals

Every participant could identify goals for their careers, whether those were advancement-related goals (“work in a management role”), goals related to helping students (“develop and implement commuter student supports”), or personal goals (“work/personal life balance”). Trajectories are not necessarily ‘up the ladder’; while most respondents listed advancement goals, including promotions and formal degrees, some want to move laterally, and others to improve the services they provide for students.

Participants described the importance of identifying the values underlying their goals. Many feel pressure from peers or from the industry to achieve advancement goals. For some, those goals are legitimate despite this pressure, though the sense of ‘having to do it’ might be demotivating. Others, however, come to feel that identifying a deeper personal value is important, which sometimes means foregoing a strictly advancement-based goal.

*“Sometimes my motivations are like: I need to get this done because my peers have Master’s.”*

*“Mentors [...] kind of helped me chill out about advancing—I think I did like one leadership role in one department, and folks were like, ‘Why? Why do you want to do that?’ I was like, ‘Oh, because everyone else wants it and I feel like I should,’ so the reflection was to kind of dig in and actually go, ‘Oh, why is that something you desire?’”*

*“Before when I applied [for a Master’s program], I kind of had to, because the industry wanted it. But the second time I applied, no, I really wanted to.”*

*“Failing [...] fundamentally started getting me to start thinking about my values. There [was] a huge focus on tangible outputs [in my workplace]. [...] I don’t want to be stuck in another position like that. I want to be in a place where I feel aligned and invigorated.”*

*“I have considered going—moving up and going up, but I just—it’s just that deep down, I know that if I lose that contact with that student, then I’m not going to be happy—so yeah I’m probably not going to move [...] but does that mean I would be happy doing the same thing over and over? No, because I know I can do better at it; I can learn.”*

## **2) Formal Learning**

Having identified their goals, participants then had mixed reviews of the utility of formal learning in achieving them. While some appreciate the learning they received in academia, others find the theories hard to implement in practice. Nevertheless, attaining a Master’s degree is one of the primary advancement-related goals in the data. (This appears to be driven by peer pressure and industry demand.)

When it comes to short courses and workshops, whether from ODLC or other organizations, some participants again consider the material to be immediately applicable to their jobs. But overall reviews are more mixed, mostly focused on a lack of learning and applicability. Participants said that they find it difficult to justify attending workshops and events if the material is too generic, or if they cannot point to an immediate and specific benefit.

*“[An academic degree] looks good on paper but in practice it’s really hard to actually implement those things.”*

*“You don’t block out two or three hours every day to go to a workshop, and maybe twenty percent of it is relevant to you, because they’re trying to keep it generic enough to be helpful to everybody.”*

*“And they come to give this presentation, and it’s like, you know, what can you learn in two hours, what can you learn in an hour sometimes. And usually, by the time everybody gets into the room, it’s almost time. You know, it’s over, right?”*

*“I mean there were workshops that I attended that I’d say, you know, ‘Why am I here?’”*

*“If I’m going to spend two hours at this workshop, or this event, it has to be directly applicable to what I’m doing. Even if it is a nice thing that I want to learn about, I won’t go to it, because I just literally can’t. [...] So, I think, in general, the obstacles are how can we increase access to professional development opportunities, maybe like shorter professional development, maybe like three hours or half a day. Maybe online...I don’t know. I wish I could see more diversity in ways to access those things.”*

*“For me, one of the things that I often say no to: overall social, informal networking things. It’s valuable. It’s informal. I don’t have time for that.”*

When staff are interested in attending workshops or classes, management support is crucial. Especially for front-line workers, lack of management support and the inability to step away from the desk prevent them from accessing professional development opportunities. But even for workers not directly on the front line, management disapproval causes conflict, and staff may need to develop strategies for accessing learning opportunities despite disapproval.

*“Being at the front leaves me unable to have any time to shadow or attend [programming].”*

*“I couldn’t go to presentations because it had nothing to do with my job [...] I was actually prevented from development. And it was two hours. I don’t think the world would crumble in two hours, but there you go.”*

*“Your supervisor doesn’t let you go to things because you need to be at the front line. [...] I needed to meet more people, and get more experience but they wouldn’t let you do that until you are senior. So it’s a barrier. [...] SLP can definitely direct.”*

*“My obstacle was my supervisor, who didn’t support it, and publicly admonished me for [...] leaving an hour early to go to class. [...] So I sort of reiterated U of T’s goal of professional development, and I did it anyway. If he wanted to create an issue further than that, that was up to him. I was doing my Master’s, end of story, and I knew if I really needed to, I’d get support from the chair [...] He just didn’t pursue it further. [...] I tried not to let him know that I was leaving an hour early for class. I had a lot of dentist’s appointments. [...] I felt very deceptive, but ultimately the world is not going to crumble if I leave an hour early. Students were taken care of.”*

### **3) Informal Learning**

When it comes to formal mentorship programs, participant experiences also vary and seem to depend on their relationship with their mentor. The most positive participants spoke highly of the networking opportunities in the program, but lamented that few could benefit due to limited spaces in one-on-one mentorships, as opposed to mentorship breakfasts or other half-formal models.

Though informal mentorships were also described in terms of networking, they are associated more with moments of personal reflection compared to formal mentorships. Staff find informal mentors useful in dealing with imposter syndrome, getting second opinions on their personal strengths and challenges, and handling professional struggles.

Some of the most important learning experiences come through opportunities that participants seek out on the job. Especially for those looking to advance or to make a lateral move, opportunities to perform tasks outside their job description help them gain experience and confidence in their own skills, and to articulate and ‘own’ those skills in job applications and interviews. Sometimes those opportunities come in the office, for example by substituting for a superior on leave, and sometimes they came through joining an outside group.

This type of learning was described as very self-directed and self-initiated, yet management support is still crucial in providing opportunities to take on new tasks. A nuance to this approach is the difference between unionized and non-unionized employees. As a former non-unionized employee explained, they struggled to get experience because they could not volunteer for unionized responsibilities.

*“Mentorship was really big too, just kind of people [to] reassure and [...] illuminate things about me and my strengths that maybe I didn’t see myself.”*

*“It’s an external person helping you think outside yourself. Sometimes you need that.*

*“I had to explain why I was struggling where I was, and why I wanted to move on, and that caught attention and [...] they got a better sense of—even though I didn’t have the exact skills, they understood my motivation for wanting to change pathways, and [I] felt that then...that was what opened the door for me to be considered for something I didn’t have the right qualifications for.”*

*“I’ve started volunteering myself in ways that are not part of my job duties. [...] I volunteer [...] to do things to try to involve myself in more front-facing stuff. So I’ve really gone over and above to get new experiences, so [being rejected from a job] doesn’t happen to me again basically. I’m ready for it.”*

*“I would say your manager is really important in this. If you have a goal, and you can already see where you want to go in terms of career, I think it’s helpful to have a manager who supports you and says, ‘Okay, we know that you’re not going to be here forever, so what can we do to help support you and your goals?’ So you need a manager [...] [who lets you] go out and things that are not part of your [...] job duties stated in your contract.”*

## Takeaways

- Values play an important role in identifying career goals. It is important for participants not to think of career trajectories as solely and relentlessly upwards, purely for the sake of moving upwards. Nevertheless many expressed goals related to advancement, whether through acquiring formal degrees or promotions.
- Formal learning opportunities are evaluated in terms of immediate utility. Lack of perceived utility (because things are too generic, or too short) disincentivize staff from attending events.
- Mentorship is about networking, but also about self-reflection and gaining an external view into one’s values and strengths.
- Both formal and informal learning opportunities depend highly on management buy-in, and lack of support from management creates frustration and conflict.
- Front-line workers struggle to attend workshops due to inflexible schedules.

## Questions

- What would be more effective: formal, one-on-one mentorship or a more informal model? How might mentorship opportunities be extended to more people?
- Is there space and desire for values-based, reflective self-discovery in a more formal environment, or are these things that people must come to informally?

- How might the SLP Network advocate for management buy-in when it comes to learning opportunities for staff? Or how might it support workers in seeking opportunities despite a lack of management support?
- How might workshops and events be made more accessible to frontline workers?

## limitations

The data in this report draws from a series of focus-group discussions and activities with around twenty student-life professionals, lasting for one-and-a-half hours. Some of the insights are supplemented by corroborating sentiments expressed during seventeen one-on-one interviews with staff conducted two years ago. This sample represents only a small slice of the thousands of staff at the university.

Moreover, the people who attended these activities chose to attend, and are likely to be the same people who choose to go to other such events. Where are the missing people, and why are they missing? How are their needs and struggles different from the needs and struggles of those who show up? One thing we do know—our data privileges the experience of those on the St. George campus, as most of our participants were affiliated with St. George. Other than that, we cannot say.

Finally, even though participants were guaranteed anonymity in transcription and reporting, most of the data came from semi-public group discussions in the presence of colleagues. Did participants say what they thought was expected of them? Are there issues that they did not feel comfortable admitting to? Both are possible, though the consistency between this data and the results from one-on-one interviews (conducted over the previous two years) gives us confidence that the insights are genuine reflections of staff sentiment.



## conclusion

In the course of their roles, student-facing staff need to navigate a university that is large, complex, and often frustratingly opaque even to those with experience. Personal networks provide a navigation guide for many, but the reliance on personal connection creates a start-up barrier for new and transitioning staff, and may not provide the necessary depth of knowledge some desire. Institutional opacity also hinders students from receiving effective and efficient help, a deficiency that student-facing staff find frustrating.

The complexity and lack of information flow also frustrate staff trying to collaborate across departments. Lack of urgency and lack of time, as well as lack of support from management, are other factors that cause friction for staff trying to implement change.

When it comes to professional development, goals and desires vary between education/advancement, improving the help provided to students, and personal goals. Staff take opportunities both for informal learning, by taking on tasks outside of their roles, and formal learning. Reviews of the latter are mixed, and depend largely on the immediate applicability of the material. Both rely on management support, and on the flexibility to attend and seize opportunities, which may be lacking for frontline or non-unionized staff.

The problems faced by student-facing staff are varied and complex. Some may fall outside the purview of the SLP Network, but there are many areas in which the Network is positioned to help. Given the importance of personal networks to acquiring institutional knowledge and working across departments, helping staff overcome barriers to network-building might be an efficient strategy. Events run by the SLP Network and partner organizations can also be made more accessible to frontline staff. Finally, given the importance of management support to collaboration and learning, opportunities for improving relationships between different levels of staff should be explored.

By supporting staff in these key areas, the SLP Network can most effectively use its influence to improve the working lives of student-facing staff. As we have seen, these are areas in which current experiences fall short, but here we can also find opportunities.

# Student Contributors

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