Designing a Culture of Care at the University of Toronto

Design Principles Based on Innovation Hub Projects

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

INNOVATION HUB

Design Principles & Checklist

These design principles are based on themes and insights uncovered by the Innovation Hub, in various projects investigating student experiences, mental health and wellbeing at the University of Toronto (UofT). They are meant to guide and inspire staff who support students and student leaders to contribute to building a community of care.

1. **Redefining Excellence:** Students learn to excel in diverse ways at UofT. Alongside academics, they develop the skills to cultivate their own success at university and beyond. Co-curricular and work integrated learning are holistic experiences that consider whole-student development, foster transferrable skill–building, and encourage failure as a learning opportunity. The community's understanding of excellence is broadened.

    ☐ Transferrable and broader life skills are incorporated into programs and activities

    ☐ Programs, and activities explicitly describe to students the transferrable skills they will learn

    ☐ Students have access to experiential and applied learning opportunities in real-world environments

    ☐ Learning objectives focus on broad skill development rather than content acquisition

    ☐ Opportunities to make up inadequate or missed elements of a program are incorporated into the evaluation design where applicable, or possible

    ☐ Consider leniency with missed appointments or deadlines

    ☐ Accommodations are made through alternative deadlines, and other possibilities that alleviate, rather than compound, mental health issues

2. **Breathe, Relax, Connect:** When students have time to rest and socialize, they gain the capacity to take on challenges, bounce back from failures, and return to their work focused and rejuvenated. Providing space and time for these activities nurtures student self-care, enhances campus and community experience, and cultivates the capacity to engage deeply in work and life.

    ☐ Campus space includes areas for relaxation, socializing, community building

    ☐ Campus space, including classrooms and relaxing spaces, include greenery, natural light, and comfortable furniture, where possible

    ☐ Relaxing campus spaces are accessible and open to all students

    ☐ Signage in relaxing spaces indicates that students are welcome

    ☐ Staff in spaces are encouraged to welcome students and find opportunities to interact in a friendly manner, where appropriate

    ☐ Time is scheduled during programming and work times for group- or partner-based work, with the aim of encouraging friendship, peer support, and community

    ☐ Students have relief periods from programming and/or work expectations, as needed

3. **Equity is Foundational:** UofT recognizes that its diverse student body also has diverse individual needs. In its commitment to equitable care for all, it accommodates these needs by providing accessible support. Students are complex individuals, with lives that include multi-faceted challenges: difficult financial situations and/or intersections of different social identities and experiences. Such identities might include being part of marginalized communities based on race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and/or religion. When equity is foundational, all students—regardless of identity or vulnerability—feel safe and receive the specific and sensitive care they need to excel.

   □ Additional costs to students (above usual compulsory fees) are minimized for programs, services, etc.
   □ Alternative fee structures and payment plans are provided where additional costs are necessary
   □ Extra attention and guidance are provided for students with complex cases and situations
   □ Services include programs specific to student populations who may otherwise experience barriers because of their social identity, including LGBTQA2+ students, women and trans* people, religious and cultural identities, and international students
   □ Care providers, administrators, and faculty are informed of specific student-population needs and how to offer sensitive treatment that accounts for students' unique lived experiences

4. **Diversity at all Levels:** Inclusivity for all students (regardless of background, identity, or experience) aligns with UofT's recognition of its exceptionally diverse student population. Diversity in fostering a culture of care comes from expanding support and services beyond the medical and professional frame while recognizing and reflecting student diversity.

   □ Mental-health and student wellbeing services draw upon staff from a variety of roles, including chaplains, elders and cultural leaders, dons, and residence staff
   □ Staff and student leaders are trained in the diversity-based needs of the student body and how they intersect with mental health
   □ Support options are available in multiple models (for example, in-person, online, group therapy) at different times (including 24-hour crisis response) and in different therapeutic modalities
   □ Students are guided among a variety of care options so they can make an informed decision about what services will suit them best
   □ Individual support services minimize wait times and increase opportunities for just-in-time support so that students can find support quickly
   □ Services and programming incorporate cultural, religious, and other diversity-specific options
   □ Staff diversity enhances the overall student experience, including in areas of mental health

5. **Clarity is Caring:** The path to care is clear. When students seek support, they readily discover where to go, whom to talk to, and what care they need. They are empowered to take charge of the care process and seek help, because they believe that support is readily accessible. To guide students through UofT's distributed care system, the university provides clear and concise information, knowledgeable networks, standardized and streamlined practices, and informed frontline resources.

- ☐ Frontline services are knowledgeable about pathways to support and good referral practices
- ☐ Frontline staff receive regular updates and training, so they know of changes to pathways to care, mental-health services and support, and how to direct and connect students
- ☐ Pathways for accessing support are simple and standardized across websites, campuses, apps, and any other information sources that students may consult
- ☐ Good referral practices are outlined, consistent and well- communicated
- ☐ Procedures of support are clearly and consistently communicated to students from enrolment onward
- ☐ Procedures of support balance standardization with responsiveness to individual needs
- ☐ When students make enquiries about care and begin accessing services, they hear about specific next steps and timeframes
- ☐ Students who exit services receive check-ins and support from partners in the UofT community

6. **Embedding Care into Every Day:** Care-seeking and receiving is part of the everyday experience. From enrolment to graduation, students acquire preventative mental-health skills and support that will help them beyond university. Through integrated mental-health programming, they grow into self-reliant individuals with healthy approaches to coping with challenges. This embedded culture of caring makes both caregiving and help-seeking more visible on campus.

- ☐ Students receive information about care and services at orientation, in beginning-of-semester materials, and during any relevant programming
- ☐ Staff partner with faculty to support them in incorporating mental-health principles into their courses
- ☐ Support is made visible on campus in multiple forms: embedded counselling models, on-location services, entry points, program-specific counselling, guidance and support, department-specific programming, and more
- ☐ Supporters are updated with current information about mental-health research, community partner–relationships, and student feedback
- ☐ Staff and student leaders are given periodic training in best practices for addressing students' mental-health concerns and referring them to appropriate resources

7. **Students are Experts:** Students are experts in their own experiences. When they are treated as sources of knowledge about student life, wellbeing, and needs, they develop mutual trust with the larger university community. Students are encouraged to engage through feedback, consultation, and representation. They are shown the respect which prompts them to invest deeply in their UofT experiences.

☐ Information and expectations are made available and transparent to the student body and to those they affect

☐ Communication strategies use diverse channels to reach a wide range of students

☐ Communication strategies amplify their messages by involving student leaders

☐ Student partnership is fostered by soliciting student feedback, administering surveys, sharing reports with students, and consulting existing student groups

☐ Student groups, student governments, and communities are invited into projects and planning sessions

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