



June 2022

Cultivating Reciprocity

at Chestnut Dining Hall

INTRODUCTION

Food Services at Chestnut Residence Dining Hall experienced challenges over the last year related to changes necessitated by the global pandemic. Food Services approached the Innovation Hub in the fall of 2021 seeking support to design impactful student consultation and co-design for the future of Food Services operations at Chestnut.

The Innovation Hub takes a design thinking approach that focuses on student-led consultation and co-design of the student experience. We design *with* students, rather than for students. Design thinking uses empathetic methods that foster open and generative sharing among students. In this way, the Innovation Hub aims to be an unbiased partner in the Chestnut Dining Hall Project.

To learn more about the ongoing student needs at Chestnut, we conducted student-led consultations and data analysis to help Food Services to gain an understanding of the student experience of the dining hall and build ongoing positive and collaborative relationships with students. This report is designed to aid in planning collaborative community dialogue events at Chestnut in fall 2022.

OUR APPROACH



At the Innovation Hub, we strive to understand students' experiences, as told to us through their stories, and allow that understanding to inspire design. We explore the 'problem space' —moving beyond the what questions to the why's and how's. To achieve this, we use activities such as interviews, discussion groups, and interactive exercises to encourage students to describe their experiences to us in their own words.

For this project, we first interviewed eight Food Services staff about their experience with students and their perspectives on the new implementations. We then arranged feedback sessions with the students at Chestnut. Unfortunately, the turnout was low for these sessions, with three students in attendance, so we proceeded to interview eleven students who were living at Chestnut. We asked students about their dining experiences at Chestnut and their communication with the Food Services, and further probed about any challenges they faced and their interactions with the staff members.

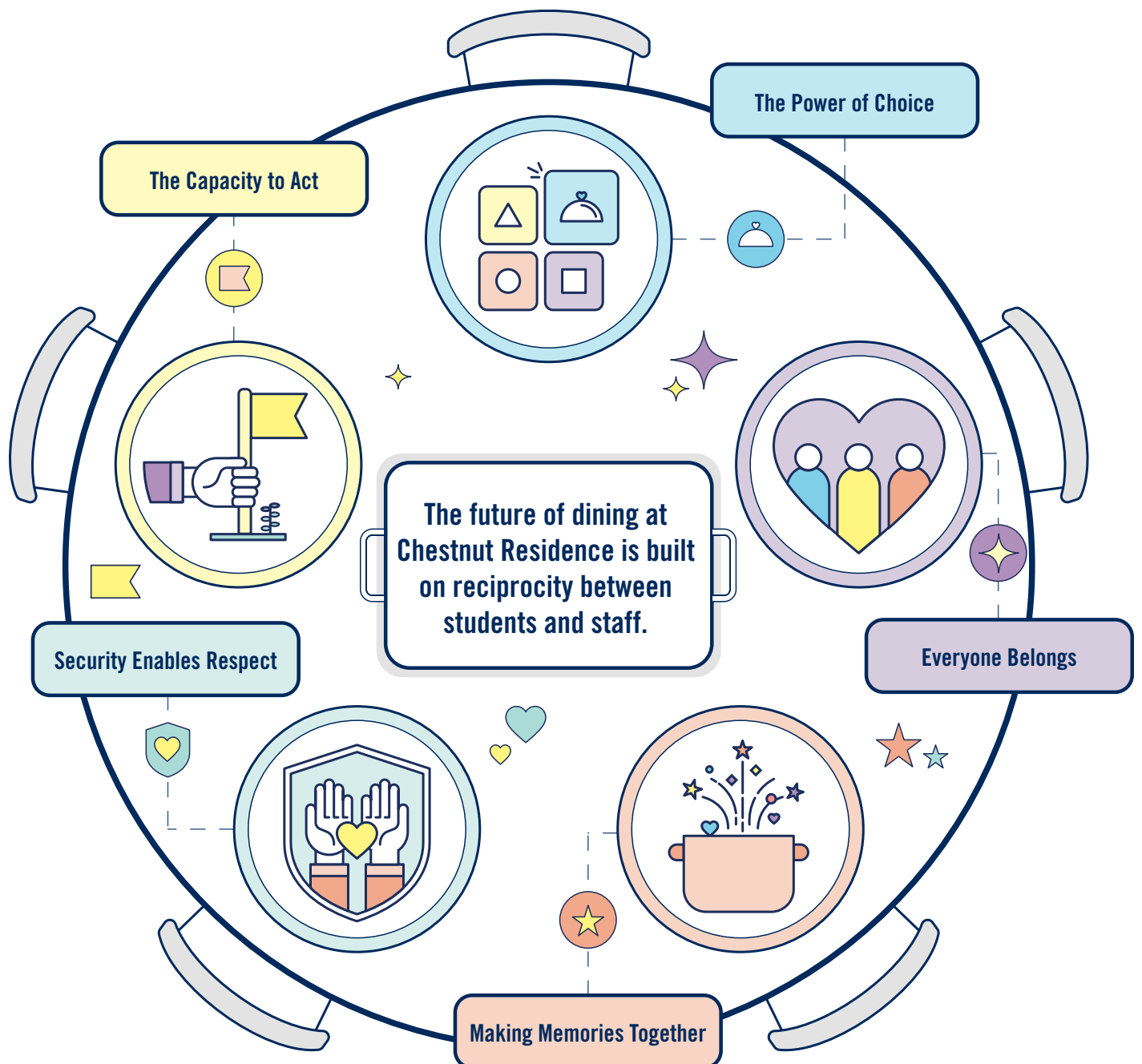
In our examination of the data, we used grounded analytic techniques to gain a deeper understanding of the core needs students and staff communicated, and developed a vision based on our insights. We synthesized stories students and staff members shared into personas to contextualize their needs. We also developed design principles that guide how to foster a mutually beneficial relationship between students and staff members at Chestnut Dining Hall.

OUR FINDINGS

The future of dining at Chestnut Residence is built on reciprocity between students and staff.



We found that the staff and students at Chestnut are committed to improvement and wish for their needs to be respected. There is great potential for a mutually beneficial relationship between both parties.



THEME 1

THE POWER OF CHOICE



Flexibility

Throughout the data, it was clear that students value flexibility when it comes to eating on campus. Students spoke of the need for **flexibility around where and when they can eat** based on other commitments and factors in their lives.



Students told us that they appreciated the flexibility to eat at locations closer to their classes, especially on days with back-to-back lectures.



During the all-you-care-to-eat model (AYCE), some students shared that the meal hours didn't align with their schedules. They sometimes were not able to make it back to Chestnut before the end of the mealtime, or if they did make it, the food selection was depleted by the time they could get there.

Choice

Throughout the interviews, students expressed that **having choices in what they eat** matters to them. Students told us that they want options and choices when it comes to the food available to them.

Many students shared that they wish to maintain healthy eating habits while away from home. Interviewees acknowledged the food variety but stated they felt that there was a lack of food alternatives for individuals with dietary preferences or restrictions.



Some students said they would rather go out for what they considered healthier food options. For example, students said there are more choices for vegetarians/vegans outside of Chestnut, or that healthier snacks are more affordable outside of the Residence.



Fairness

Students expressed the need for **fairness and consistency in the pricing** of the food they have access to at Chestnut with what is available outside.



Students told us that they find it puzzling that the price of an identical item varies significantly between grocery stores and Chestnut, which left them feeling uneasy.



Staff members acknowledged that adjustments could be made to pricing and that some changes were already underway.

THE CAPACITY TO ACT



Staff members shared hesitancy to consistently produce hot food during non-peak hours to reduce food waste.



THEME 3

SECURITY ENABLES RESPECT



Safety and Security

Students want to feel secure to ask for what they need and know that Food Services staff are listening – they have many diverse needs and need to feel they can have a dialogue and get their needs met. Both students and staff expressed their **desire for spaces to safely and confidently communicate their concerns and requests** about Chestnut dining.



One student described how their food source mainly relied on the grill, because their diet is halal. They wished for more halal options but felt their needs might not be met because they are in the minority of the students at Chestnut.



Some staff members felt that students were very hostile to the staff, often misinterpreting their response or taking it out of context. This made it hard for them to connect with the students and get to the root of their concerns.

Mutual Respect

Chestnut staff told us they value student feedback but expressed the need for students to **recognize their efforts to make improvements**. Similarly, students value voicing their opinions and expressed the need for more transparency around Food Services practices and processes.

A staff member shared that students often vent their frustrations but do not provide suggestions for improvement.

A few students shared that they were interested in information about local sourcing and food advocacy but found it difficult to get this information.



THEME 4

MAKING MEMORIES TOGETHER



Connection and Community

During interviews, students described previous **positive interactions with friendly and considerate staff as being memorable moments**. They highlighted that when staff are approachable and reliable, it is easier for them to reach out.



A student described that the staff provided a lot of useful information on meal plans and food served in Chestnut when they moved in. They appreciated the friendliness and responsiveness of the staff, as well as how easy it is to contact them.



Another student appreciated a staff member who reminded them that their meal plan balance was getting low at the check-out while getting lunch one day. They felt a sense of community in that moment.

Joy and Celebration

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that celebrations bring tremendous joy to the students at Chestnut. They expressed the **need to feel a sense of belonging and joy** while living on Residence during their academic journey.

One student mentioned the special events in the dining hall such as festival meals and a monthly cake day to celebrate people's birthdays that month. They found these gestures very thoughtful as the festivities provided an opportunity to celebrate with people outside of their established friend circle.

Another student described how they will excitedly notify any passers-by in the Residence that there are free cakes during the cake days, and they will all go to get cakes together. This was one of their most memorable experiences at Chestnut.



THEME 5

EVERYONE BELONGS



Inclusion

Students expressed that **feeling included is an important part of life at Chestnut** and an even more important part of the dining hall experience. They expressed the need for Chestnut to feel like their **home away from home**.



Many students in Chestnut shared their belief that there is a good variety of food options in the dining hall. However, the options aren't always inclusive of students with dietary requirements such as halal, vegan, and vegetarian. Students also shared that they wish for better cultural representation in food choices.



Both students and staff expressed that the dining hall is more than a place to eat food, it is an important cornerstone for interaction and socializing. This was challenging during the pandemic, and many felt that the opportunity for an inclusive safe space for meetings and interactions had somewhat disappeared.

Acknowledgement

Both students and staff told us that they **value having their beliefs and ideas for Chestnut acknowledged**. They expressed the need for acknowledgement as a way for students and staff to show each other respect and courtesy.

Both student and staff stories showed that while some conversations are happening, many individuals from both groups feel that they are not being fully acknowledged. Some students shared the feelings that their ideas and concerns were not being fairly considered. Staff members shared feelings that their efforts to meet needs are disregarded.

The turnout for events to support communication between Food Services and students has been low, further demonstrating these challenges.



PERSONAS

Personas bring students' stories to life by presenting narratives based on their experiences. Each story is written based on the data we collected. Personas offer a humanized view of the data, highlighting themes and insights. Reflection on these personas while brainstorming solutions can be useful to test if a proposed solution might meet individual needs. Consider how these personas would interact with the ideas.

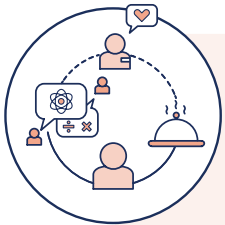


YASMIN, First-year international engineering student leaving home for the first time

"While I am thrilled to have the opportunity to study abroad, moving to a new country for school is not easy – it is my first time being away from family for an extended period. I am having trouble adjusting to a new environment because I am unfamiliar with Canada's culture, people, and food."

I often feel homesick because I miss the sort of food I ate growing up back home. As someone who has dietary restrictions, it was great to know that the food at the dining hall accommodated individuals who can only eat halal. However, I feel like I am eating the same thing over time, and I wish there were more variety in the food selections.

I want the feeling of "home away from home" through the food and community at Chestnut Residence. After a long day of lectures and coursework, I want to choose the food I enjoy eating that reminds me of home. I always appreciate it when friendly individuals greet me and improve my day. Although the feeling of "home away from home" is important to me, I also want to experience other cultures through the food and community at the Chestnut dining hall.



JACOB, Second-year arts and science student coming to campus for the first time

"The transition from remote to in-person was very daunting and I wasn't sure what to expect. My first year of courses was entirely online and coming in to second year was my first time living in Residence and away from home."

I was anxious about meeting people after the pandemic because I was coming in to Residence in my second year. I'm grateful for the early interactions I had in the Chestnut dining hall. I still remember the first time I walked into the dining hall. The staff member who cashed me out called me "darling" and I felt so warm and welcome.

At this point, I had only met my roommate and had no friends. We sat down at a table with some other students and as we started chatting, we discovered that some of us were taking the same program. **I was so happy to meet people who are also taking the same courses as me and it made me feel less lonely in this new environment. I feel like the dining hall was where I made my first friends at university.** I'm still friends with most of the people I met that day, and every so often we all eat together in the dining hall.

Most of all, I appreciate that sense of community and having neighbours I can call friends. Having a tight-knit community at Chestnut helps me battle moments of loneliness.

PERSONAS



MIN, Fourth-year engineering student struggling to adjust to recent changes

"I am in my fourth year, and I've been living at Chestnut since I began university. Chestnut has always been a great place to live, and I really enjoy living here. Specifically, I love cake days because they give me a chance to connect with new people."

When COVID hit lots of things changed. The dining hall used to be a place where my friends and I would hang out, chat about life, and have a few laughs. Those were some of my favourite moments of my undergrad. Nowadays, the environment of the dining hall has become bleak because of the pandemic.

No one is interested in socializing and there aren't any smiles anymore. Those small interactions really made my day and helped me get through a lot of disappointing marks and missed meals. **I especially struggled with the change in the meal plans. The switch from the All You Care to Eat program to the Declining Balance meal plan was a big shock to me.** It really changed how I spend money on food because I feel like I am paying more in the declining balance model, and I have to reconsider the way I eat throughout the day.

Before the pandemic, I never worried about the portion size or cost of food. Now, with the new model, I have to completely rework my eating habits to accommodate the changing value of food. Despite all the changes, at least cake day still feels the same. It's a great way to celebrate and bring students back together after tough times.



FRANSESCA, Food Services operational staff in their 6th year of employment

"After working at Chestnut for 5 years, I have felt the real ins and outs of the job, especially throughout the pandemic. I truly and deeply care about the students and their needs and improving student life is something I strive for."

The pandemic has deeply affected our students and staff. It led to drastic changes in how Food Services determine food supply, operational cost, and delivery model.

One big change was our decision to move away from the All You Care to Eat meal plan to a Declining Balance model. We experienced pushback from students expressing their disdain for the change. Students didn't understand that we had no choice. We had to make a change and accommodate the new reality caused by the pandemic.

Staff members at Chestnut are constantly working to make things better for students. We really care about the students and want them to have a great dining experience. **I wish students would understand how committed I am to my job. I want to bring high-quality and nutritional options to our students.** At the end of the day, I want students to have a sense of community at Chestnut and know that we as staff care about their wellbeing. Our end goal has always been about the students and their needs but it's tough to meet those needs when there is no middle ground.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The principles presented here are guidelines for designing services. They suggest issues to keep in mind while prototyping solutions and offer criteria for refining and prioritizing design ideas.

ACCOMMODATE EVERYONE

Chestnut residents have varying schedules and dietary needs. Think about accommodating all student schedules and dietary needs when designing for the future.

For example, find creative ways to ensure that students can receive appealing food options regardless of when they come to the dining hall.

ALL ARE WELCOME

Welcoming environments encourage students to be themselves and engage with others. Giving opportunities for students to interact works towards building a community where students feel supported.

INFORMATION EMPOWERS

Provide information that allows students to make informed decisions for themselves. Giving clear insights about the food and internal processes gives students the opportunity to decide what food options are best for them.

For example, ensure details about food sourcing and nutrition information are available to students.

BUILD MUTUAL TRUST

Openness and honesty from Food Services staff will go a long way to build trust with students. Establishing trust while respecting boundaries supports students and staff in achieving their goals to better their experiences.

For example, communicating openly and honestly with students will reassure them that staff is on their side.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

TRANSPARENCY BUILDS TRUST

Transparency allows students to better understand the processes and reasonings behind policies and changes within Chestnut. Clear communication helps to establish trust between students and staff.

For example, make sure that reasons for policies or policy changes are clearly communicated to students.

REFLECT ON DIVERSITY

Chestnut residents come from a wide range of academic and cultural backgrounds. It is important for the food served at the dining hall to reflect the same level of diversity as seen in the student body.

For example, collaborate with students to find new ways to showcase a variety of regional cuisines.

For example, get creative in designing regular and ongoing programs and events designed to foster dialogue between Food Services and students.

CELEBRATE TOGETHER

Celebrating in community helps students decompress from stressful times throughout the year. Giving opportunities for students to enjoy themselves and celebrate together builds appreciation for staff and joy in students.

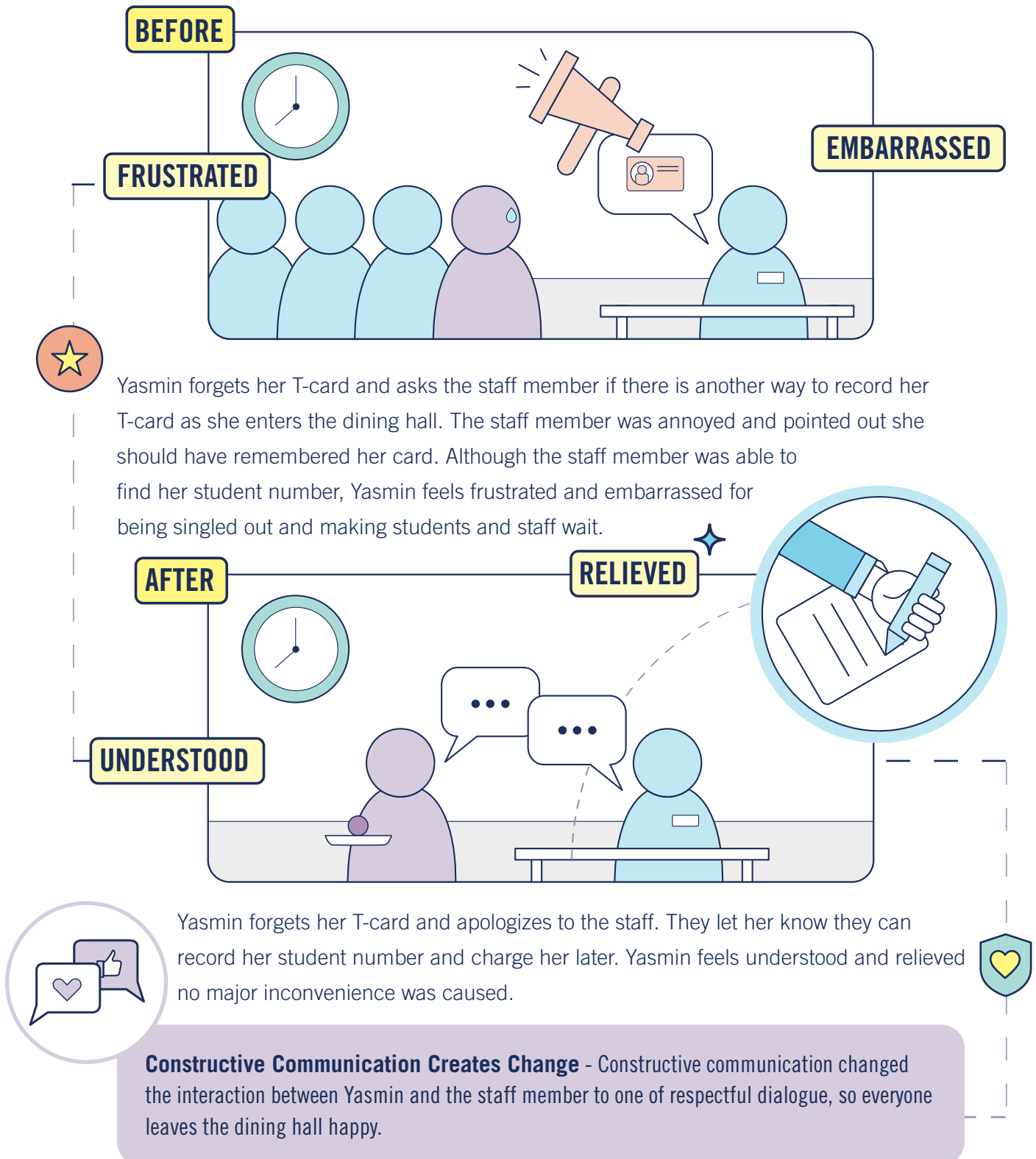
For example, host special events in the dining hall on a more regular basis.

CONSTRUCTIVE COMMUNICATION CREATES CHANGE

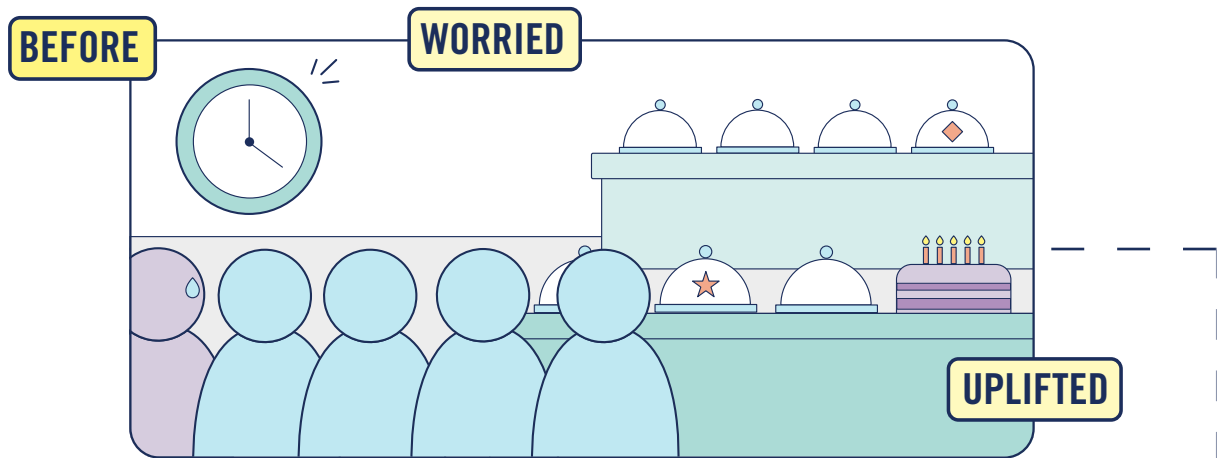
Both students and staff appreciate suggestions and feedback when they are constructive. Designing opportunities for consistent dialogue between students and staff ensures that all opinions are heard and considered and can create a culture of feedback.

JOURNEY MAP

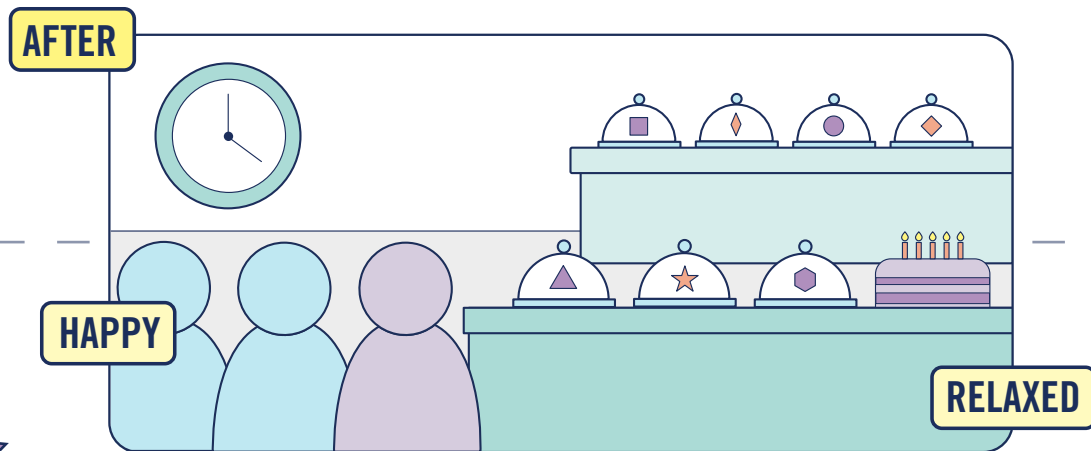
The following story shows a day in the life of the persona Yasmin. This journey map highlights three moments from Yasmin's day before and after design principles are applied to three key moments in the day. A journey map is representative of student stories by mapping out a student journey.



JOURNEY MAP



Yasmin is running late for lunch and is worried she won't find food that meets her dietary needs. After seeing a long line up, Yasmine feels forced to buy something she doesn't like. Yasmin feels uplifted after a staff member tells her it is cake day.

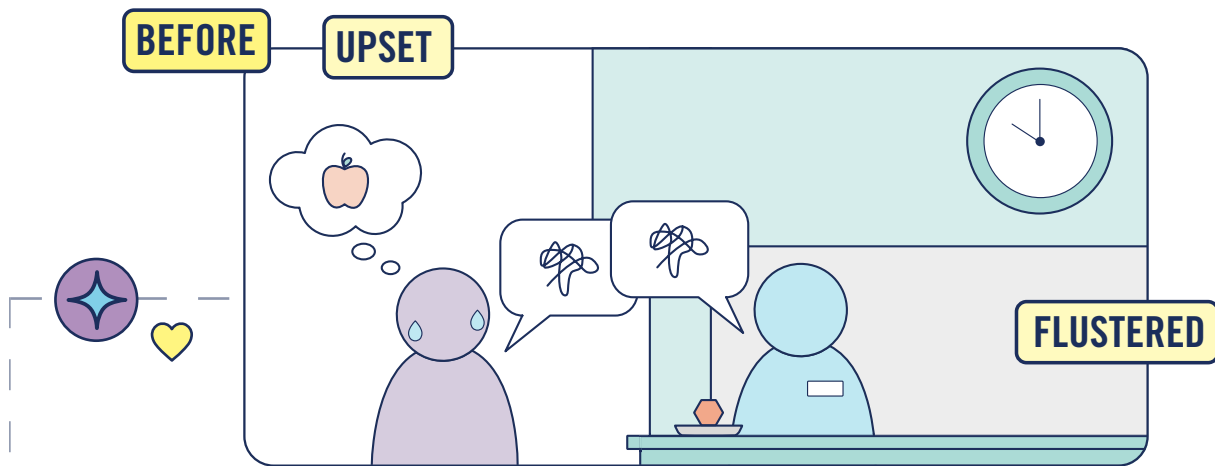


Yasmin is running late to lunch but is not worried about not being able to eat her favourite meal that meets her dietary needs since it is available all day. Yasmin feels happy leaving the dining hall since it is cake day.

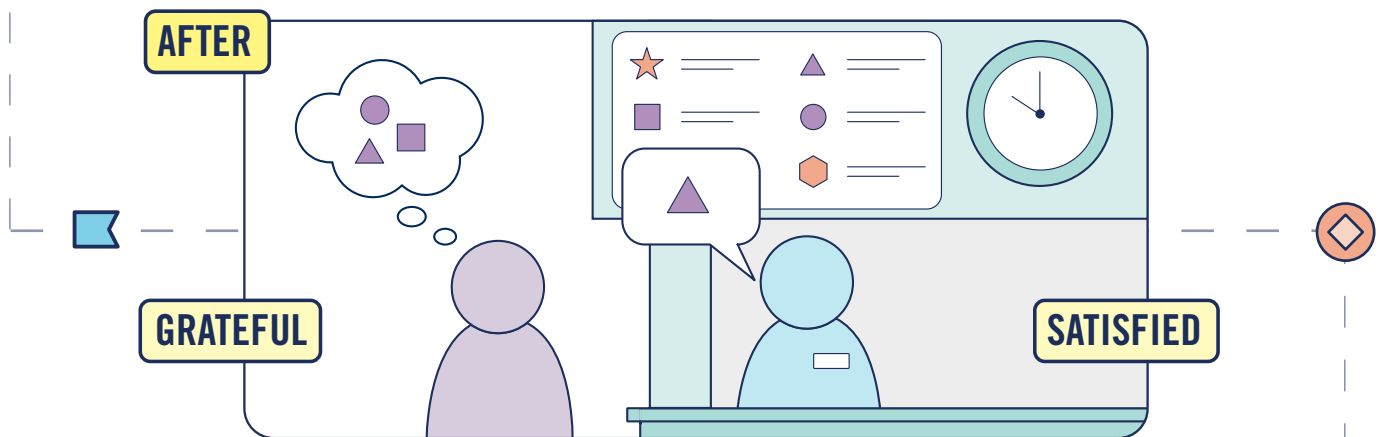
Accommodate Everyone - The dining hall was able to accommodate Yasmin's class schedule, which allowed her to be able eat what she wants.



JOURNEY MAP



After a night lecture Yasmin sees everything is closed in the dining hall except the grill station. Yasmin finds it difficult to communicate with the staff member about finding alternative food options because they are wearing masks. Yasmin leaves the dining hall feeling upset after this interaction and realizing she received the wrong order.



Yasmin arrives after her night lecture to thankfully see many food options that align with her strict dietary needs. Yasmin receives a recommendation from a staff member and decides to try it out, feeling grateful for the recommendation.

Reflect on Diversity – The food reflects the diversity of Chestnut students and Yasmin feels like she has agency and community at Chestnut Residence.



NEXT STEPS AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a mutually beneficial relationship between the students and staff members is essential for harmony at Chestnut. Fostering this relationship can give both staff and students a greater sense of belonging at Chestnut, where both parties feel acknowledged and respected by each other. Additionally, this understanding will allow staff members to communicate more effectively with students and be able to better accommodate the different needs of a diverse student population. **The future of dining at Chestnut Residence is built on reciprocity between students and staff.**

The data and insights contained in this report will support the Innovation Hub and Food Services to plan and organize an engaging and collaborative community event at Chestnut in October 2022. These guided community feedback sessions will allow us to share initial findings from this report with the community and create opportunities for dialogue between staff and students early in the semester.

After the fall event, we will bring together all the data and write a final report with a proposal for an ongoing program of consultation and engagement between Food Services and Chestnut residents. The report and presentation will be ready in December 2022.

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