



September 2022

Co-Creating Identity at University College



INNOVATION HUB

Introduction

University College (UC) plans to revitalize its space to support student engagement and interdisciplinary academic programming. The college values equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (EDIA) and wants to reimagine spaces with these principles at the forefront.

Since 2016, the Innovation Hub has established an in-depth understanding of student experiences and expertise in designing feedback sessions across a variety of settings at the University of Toronto. We take a design thinking approach that focuses on collecting qualitative data through conversations as well as storytelling and translating the themes and insights from the data into design criteria. Our attention is focused on ensuring that all stakeholders can participate in the consultation process for the project. This process of designing *with* rather than *for* people leads to increased positive sentiment from the community in the final design because people see themselves and their needs reflected in the final design.

While considering the EDIA principles at the core of UC's reimagining, the findings suggest the need to address UC's identity and community. After consulting with UC students, staff, faculty, and alumni, we were able to identify key needs from the college community. This report is designed to highlight these human-centered aspirations as UC develops physical designs for the college's spaces.

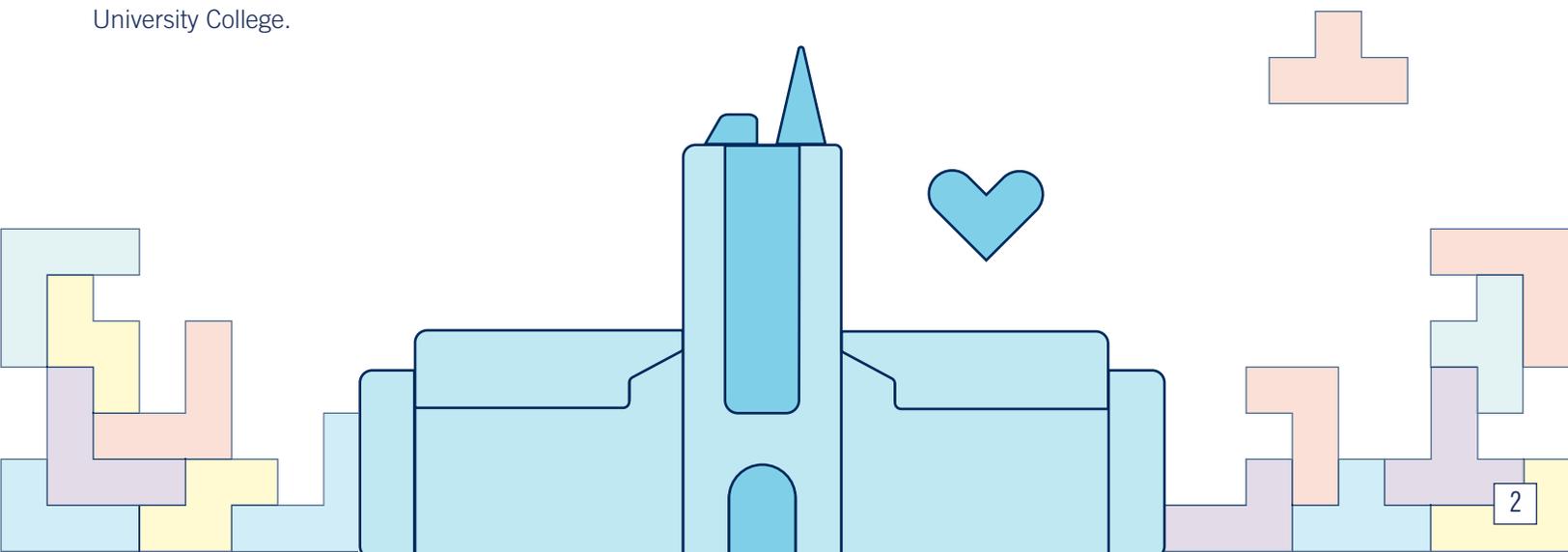
Methods



At the Innovation Hub, we strive to understand student, staff, faculty, and alumni experiences, as told to us through their stories, and allow that understanding to inspire design. We explore the 'problem space' in all its textures—moving beyond the what questions to the underlying why's and how's—rather than jumping to solutions. To achieve this, we use approaches such as interviews and discussion groups to encourage students to describe their experiences to us in their own words. The richer these descriptions, the better we understand how it feels to be in their unique positions.

We want our understanding to be authentic and comprehensive. Thus, we focus on meeting people as equals, encouraging them to speak in depth, and seeking diverse participants. **For this project, we interviewed 20 students through five feedback sessions as well as 18 faculty, staff, and alumni.**

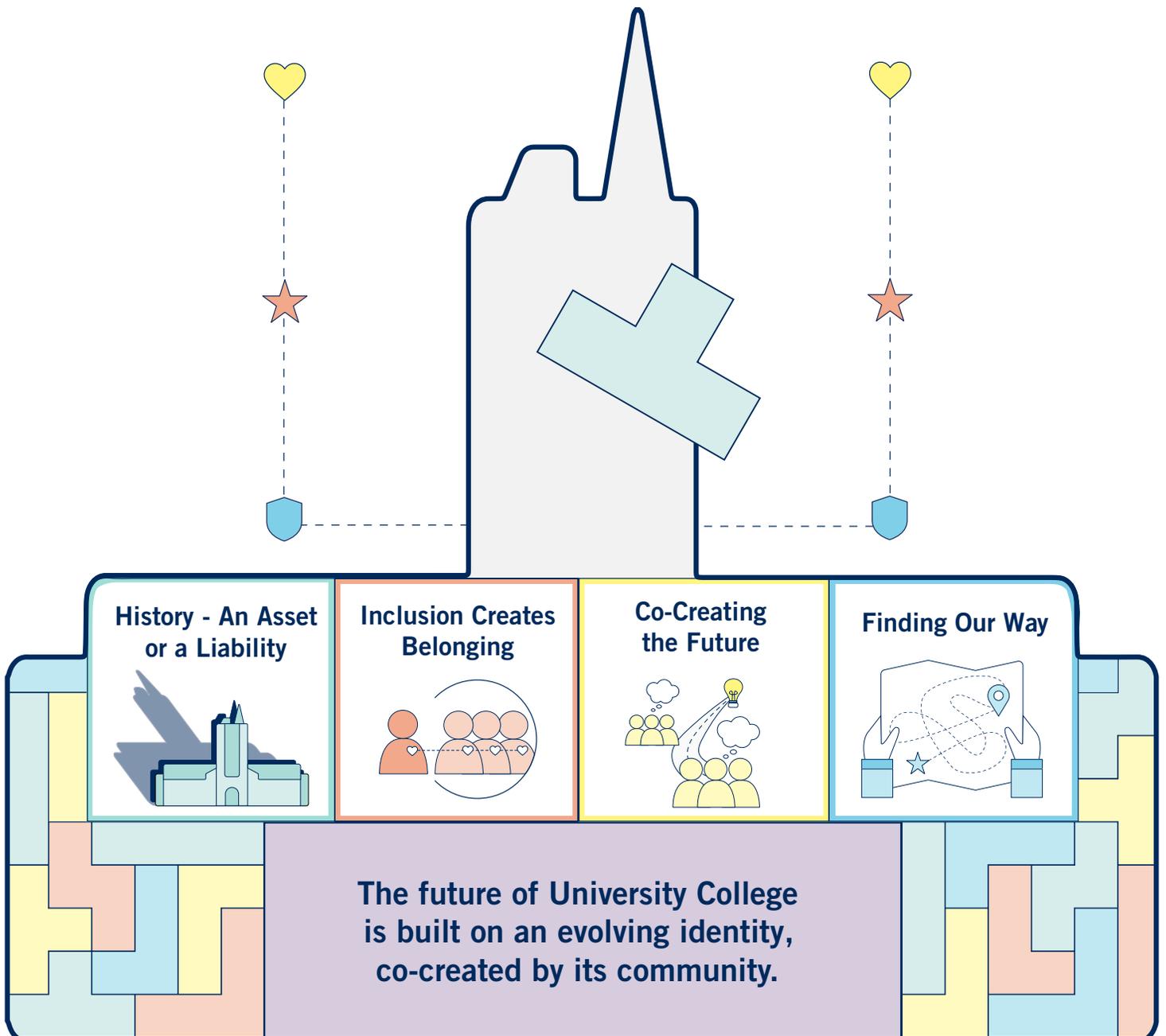
In our examination of the data, we used grounded analytical techniques to gain a deeper understanding of the core needs students, staff, and faculty communicated, and developed a vision based on our insights. We synthesized stories participants shared into personas to bring their needs to life. We also developed design principles that guide the reimagining of the future of University College.



Our Findings

Vision: We believe that the future of University College is built on an evolving identity co-created by its community.

We found that students, faculty, staff, and alumni have somewhat different understandings of what UC's identity is. All groups referenced UC's history in various capacities and in their discussions, they compared its history to where the college stands today. The pandemic worsened the divide we noticed between students perceptions of UC's identity and faculty and staff descriptions of UC's identity. Fortunately, the college is well positioned to reconcile this disconnect because its students, alumni, staff, and faculty are eager to be part of UC's evolution into the future.



History: An Asset or a Liability?



Setting a New Standard

The colonial history of UC and the university in general came up throughout our conversations as a particular area of concern. Staff and alumni raised concerns about UC's colonial history and architecture. **They expressed the need to decolonize and recontextualize this history to be more inclusive.**

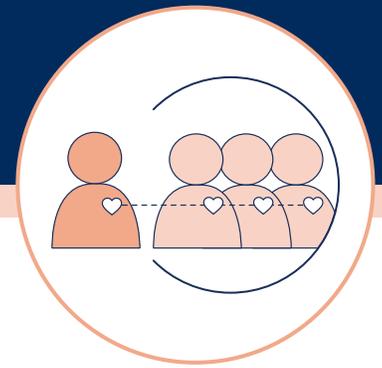
- Many students agreed that UC's unique architecture makes it an iconic and significant part of the University of Toronto (U of T) campus, sometimes representing the entire university. The age of the building poses practical challenges to students' sense of well-being, cleanliness, and order in the college. Students expressed the need to reconcile their affinity for the unique architecture with their practical needs from spaces.
- However, UC's iconic architecture carries with it the college's colonial history. An Indigenous community member mentioned that UC's colonial architecture reminded them of residential schools. Beyond the practical challenges of space, which many community members addressed, UC needs to be revitalized to address the emotional challenges its colonial history imposes.

Our Story: Evolution From Then to Now

Students and stakeholders expressed **the need to reimagine UC in a modern context that is adaptable for the future while still respecting and considering UC's whole history.** Members of the UC community shared they would like to see a solid identity for UC that can readily evolve with the changing needs of the community.

- One faculty member addressed how the pandemic and the transition to online learning and socialization has turned their interactions with members of the UC community to being only context-based. The remote culture reduced the number of casual interactions between community members, isolating communication and socialization to specified times and groups (e.g. classes, club meetings, council meetings), thereby reducing the community's sense for connection.
- Students also expressed sentiments about the need for UC to become more adaptable. Across feedback sessions, students varied in opinions between preserving UC's architecture and preferring a modern university environment. One student mentioned how they loves the gothic feel of the main building. Another student criticized how the floorboards creak and suggested that the building should be brought up to shape. There is a need to reconcile the polarized desires into a singular vision for an adaptable college that will evolve readily.

Inclusion Creates Belonging



From Loneliness to Finding Community

Staff and students **expressed that they lack a strong sense of belonging within the UC community.** Community building has become a difficult task for many members of UC, which includes disconnection in social environments and barriers in physical spaces. Students and staff expressed the need for the college to respond to their feelings of detachment and isolation in order to foster a stronger sense of belonging on campus.

- Commuting students who we spoke to were able to find some sense of community within UC in the space designated to them. However, they often reported struggling to find places near their class to congregate with others which hurt their ability to build community.
- Staff members discussed how their office felt very out of the way and disconnected from other faculty members. One staff member addressed how very few members of the UC community have been able to find them at their office, and said they feel a sense of loneliness due to the lack of impromptu interactions.

Everyone is Included

Students shared the **need for community spaces to act as stress-free environments to collaborate and congregate.**

- Many students told us that they look forward to congregating with their peers in UC classrooms to work and socialize. These students enjoyed the privacy and often quieter nature of an empty classroom. However, just as many students shared not feeling welcome in empty classrooms. One student shared an experience where they were looking for a space to study quietly. They found a room with a few students and asked whether they could study in the same classroom, but they told them to find a different space.
- In one feedback session, the students agreed that the UC Dining Hall is a notable example of a stress-free environment and suggested that the college replicate the successful elements of the space in other spaces. Students told stories of how the UC Dining Hall allows peers to collaborate and congregate in a stress-free environment. This culture fosters a sense of inclusion and belonging amongst all members of the UC community.

Safety

Staff, faculty, and students shared stories about UC's infrastructure. Given the age of the physical spaces at UC, stakeholders have concerns about their physical safety and well-being while on the UC campus. Students, faculty, and staff also shared concerns for community members' psychological safety. Students, faculty, and staff concerns for safety show that they **need UC to be more proactive in ensuring all its spaces are physically and psychologically safe.**

- Staff members describe the buildings as being "old and run down," leading the buildings to feel unsafe which left staff feeling uncertain when discussing their well-being. Specifically, one staff member described how a cracked window their office caused natural elements to enter their office space. Another staff member described a squirrel entering their office. The event caused them great anxiety for their health and safety.
- One student describes a dorm washroom covered in mold. They stated that the mold made them feel unsafe and that they felt good for friends with glasses who could not see the mold if they took off their glasses. Another student shared that they felt uncomfortable going into UC basement spaces because they are dark and typically sparsely populated.

Co-creating the Future



Aspiration vs Reality

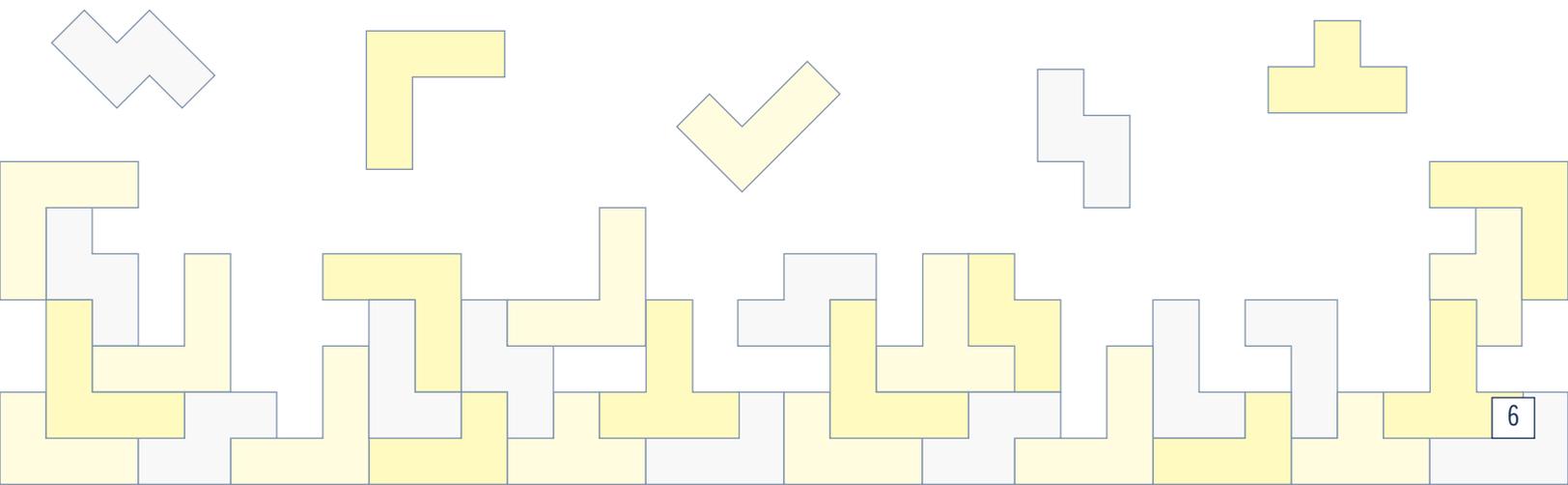
The experiences students and staff shared **reveal a disconnect between their perspectives on several key issues**. In general, students expressed feeling disconnected from UC and shared some negative stories, demonstrating their **need for more compassion from UC staff in understanding their frustrations about the college**. They expressed feeling out of touch with the UC community and emphasized the importance of meaningful interactions between both staff and students for reigniting this community. Staff, faculty, and alumni, on the other hand, expressed positive sentiments about the college and UC student experiences despite the pandemic's impact.

- Some students expressed significant difficulty associating with the college virtually because of the pandemic and their sense of connection with UC diminished greatly once they were no longer visiting the college space physically.
- Many students discussed that virtual events are less fulfilling than in-person events. In one feedback session, students unanimously expressed no desire to attend virtual Fireball since the event relied so heavily on its in-person components.
- Staff and alumni who still formally associate with UC often emphasized the pandemic's positive impacts on communication and community-building. One staff and faculty member shared that using platforms like Zoom was a wonderful opportunity to increase their engagement with the UC community. They said that virtual learning broadened their outreach and communication with people in their classroom attending from across the world.

A Place to Create

Students, faculty, and staff highlighted the **value of spaces that encourage creativity**. UC already has certain spaces that community members use for creative work, such as Café Reznikoff and the Drama Department, but stakeholders expressed a need for more spaces dedicated to creativity, collaboration, and skill-building.

- Several students expressed enjoying working on more creative projects in the UC Library because of its fusion of modern and historical elements. These students reported that the library's ambiance encouraged them to work productively.
- One staff member expressed the desire for more creative spaces within the college. They expressed that the introduction of more creative spaces would not only encourage creative collaboration among students and staff, but that it would also help foster community among likeminded individuals with comparable interests.



Finding Our Way



Navigating UC

Students **expressed frustration navigating University College spaces due to a lack of signage accompanied with the building's confusing layout.** Students reported being unable to find their classes or their professors' offices and struggled to find help while wayfinding. Students shared that these navigational issues made them feel stressed, anxious, or embarrassed. Multiple faculty members also addressed this issue, stating that late arrivals disrupt their lectures.

- Many students reported making a significant effort to find their classrooms. One student said that they would arrive to class well in advance to avoid the stress of their navigational challenges. Another student reported feeling overwhelmed by just the prospect of navigating UC. Another student stated that they accidentally walked into a lecture hall thinking that it was a bathroom multiple times because all the doors have the same appearance with little to no signage.
- Faculty and staff members have even reported making accommodations to help students navigate their way to their classroom. One staff member pointed out that because of UC's complex architecture, people would only walk through the UC building when they have a purpose to.
- A faculty member stated that they meet students outside of University College for office hours and meetings because students struggle to find their office inside the building. They suggested that this alternate meeting space helps save their visitors time and frustration that they experienced while they searched for their office.

Removing Barriers

Students expressed the **need for flexibility in UC services to help them succeed.** Students shared various barriers to student life at UC that often remain invisible. Multiple students expressed the need for UC food services to accommodate late classes and financial concerns. Students rely on campus food services for reliable sustenance. These students shared how financial and temporal constraints on these services leave them without reliable access to nutritious food.

- One student mentioned their concern with UC Dining Hall's closing time claiming that it closes too early for their schedule. They suggested that students with early and/or late classes might end up not having a place to have dinner they already pay for.
- Another student expressed frustration at not getting a refund for the mandatory meal plan when the university sent them home due to the pandemic.

Being a Small Pond in a Big Sea

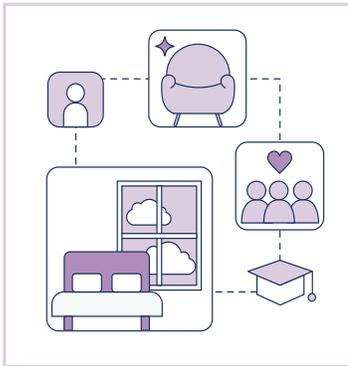
U of T students have access to such an extensive range of services, spaces, and offerings that it can be difficult to navigate where to go. Students expressed a **need for more clarity and guidance about spaces, services, and offerings at UC, where there are a broad variety of these offerings.** Many students and staff expressed the **need for a centralized and simplified system** where they can identify these offerings and navigate the countless opportunities open to them.

- Students expressed not knowing which clubs and organizations are even available to them, sharing that students know they need to do their own research but do not have the tools to successfully start. These students shared that they feel frustrated because they are interested in getting involved but cannot find the information they want to find.
- One student suggested that UC's current attempts to introduce students to their options are not the most effective, citing the information-dump at orientation is something they quickly forgot the details of.
- Staff members also recognized that students need more consistent and accessible resources to locate opportunities for engagement. Some staff members felt that the current systems are disorganized and harmful to student experiences.

Personas

Personas bring stories to life by presenting narratives based on peoples' experiences. Each story is assembled from several interviews, which allows us to offer a collective view of the data, highlighting recurring themes, and to personalize the insights, encouraging designers to take students' perspectives, while maintaining anonymity.

We encourage University College designers to reflect upon these personas as they brainstorm solutions. Consider how each individual would interact with your ideas.

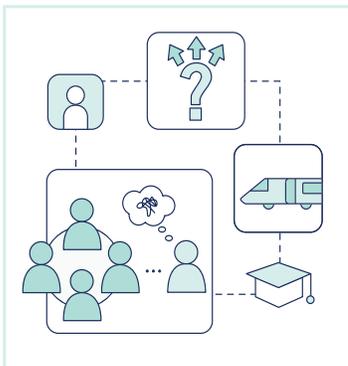


Roberto

Second-year student that lived in a University College residence

I loved my time living in residence at UC. Being there made it so much easier to meet people, see my friends, and get around the campus. Even though there were some things about it that were inconvenient, it was well worth it due to this closeness I was able to foster with my peers. We had a lot of fun spaces that we were able to use, like the common room. In these spaces we were all able to come together, relax, take our minds off academic stressors, and just have a really fun time hanging out. Living in residence definitely made me feel like I was a part of the UC community and really helped me make friends at the college.

“Living in UC, like living in Whitney Hall, was a really great experience because the Dons were so supportive and the communities...Actually, I was weirdly... put in a life science Living Learning Community, despite not being [a] life sciences student, but just because of the way it was structured, it was still really easy for me to... meet other people I had common interests with and make a....really good community.”

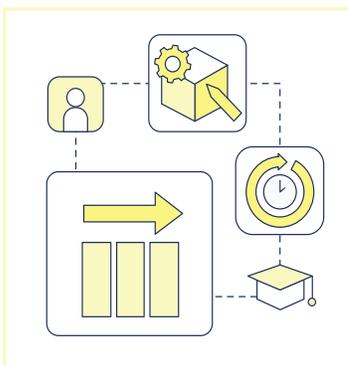


Carly

A fourth-year commuter student in University College

My experience with UC has not been ideal. I'm a commuter student, so I don't have a strong connection to UC because I only spend time there if I need to. I always get lost in the old UC building. A friend told me to check out the Commuter Student Center to make some friends, but when I went there, I found that everyone seemed to go in groups rather than as individuals looking to socialize and make friends. This inability to fit in left me with an awkward feeling that I didn't belong at UC.

“I just have an experience with the CSC, this is back in first year before Covid happened, so I've no idea what it's like now. But it's, it felt like a welcoming place at first, but then it got a little bit like clique-y, because people had their own groups. I guess the idea of the place was just to have, like a shared common space where people can study or joke around, and, you know, make friends. But yeah, became like unwelcome at times, because people would form groups and then kind of make it like a hostile environment.”



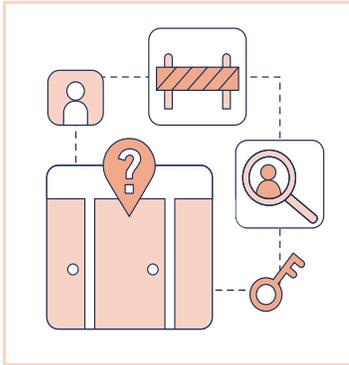
Ahmed

A University College alumnus

My experience at U of T is something I will certainly not forget. I spent a lot of time in residence during my undergraduate studies and hung out on campus frequently during my Master's. However, I noticed there are many spaces that have not been updated since my studies a couple decades ago. I can still hear those wooden floors squeaking while rushing between my classes. The residence I lived in is exactly the same as it was when I stayed there. I also know for a fact that those rooms in the basement of UC are, and have been, majorly underused. The architecture is beautiful, but I was looking forward to some better uses of student spaces.

“Several years ago, now, a friend of mine from university days and I went back, and I'm thinking of Whitney in particular, and spaces in Whitney were still not being used. The old industrial kitchens were still not being used I think that's still true.”

Personas

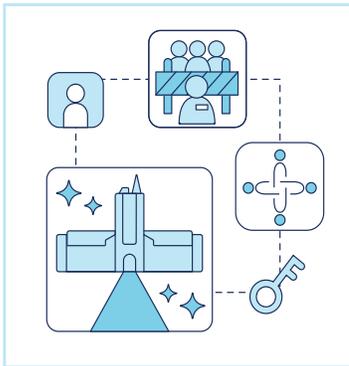


Frida

A professor in a University College program

I love teaching at UC and am grateful that my research interests align with a UC program. I get to see students start exploring in their first or second year and see them grow up as courses get smaller and smaller. I'll supervise students' independent studies or hire them as research assistants in their final years and really get to know them as individuals. The tight-knit nature of the program means that I recognise most of the faces in some of my courses and get to offer them academic and professional advice before they move on into the world. That said, my office is hard to find and in a part of the UC building that is not physically accessible to all students. Although I try my best to offer accommodations to my students, I often wonder what connections I'm missing out on because I'm hard to find.

"There's my office and then there's like a classroom and then there's like a lounge for [program] students. But nobody's ever around. So, it's like I'm alone in a little hallway so the pandemic is just... just nobody is there ever, except me."



Steven

An staff member at University College

One of my favourite things about working at UC is certainly the architecture and aesthetic beauty of the building. When I come to work, I feel a sense of grandiosity that one might not expect from an administrative position, and I am constantly exploring the college and finding interesting new spaces and facts. However, one thing I have struggled with is finding a sense of community at work. The pandemic definitely affected this and made it more difficult, but even now after returning I've found it somewhat difficult to feel truly connected to the college. A particular difficulty is reaching all areas of the student body. I've found that the same students tend to get involved in UC initiatives, primarily student leaders who are already involved in college life in a major way. I would love to be able to reach a broader community and help foster a greater sense of connectedness for the entire UC student body.

"So, the feeling of community I don't necessarily feel, but I think that's just my role, too, and from everyone being away and all this kind of stuff. So, I would say, just like proud about working here, but also still grappling with that history I was talking about earlier. Yeah, allowing myself to appreciate what's around me and the history without losing sight too."

Design Principles

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

Recognize and Recontextualize History

Consider UC's complicated and extensive history. Explicitly recognize this history and recontextualize the building's positive architectural values to address and mitigate the emotional damage these histories caused.

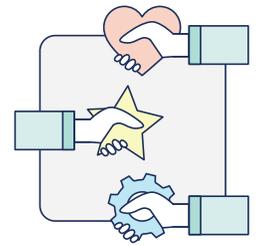
For example, create displays that acknowledge UC's historical relationships with indigenous people and demonstrate reconciliation efforts.



Co-Create an Evolving Identity

Ensure that all members of the UC community are the ones to help evolve and establish a sense of identity. It is important to stay true to the original context, while also allowing room to adapt according to change.

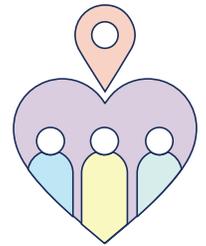
For example, consult with UC student groups on an ongoing basis to understand their perspective on UC's identity and seek opportunities to strengthen these principles.



Inclusion by Design

Consider the rich diversity of the UC community in every new design. Use universal design principles when creating new programs, services, and spaces to ensure that everyone has their needs met and feels welcome.

For example, build intentional social elements into existing programming to provide opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to connect.



Calm Environments

UC has many spaces where students feel comfortable congregating and relaxing. Replicate elements of spaces that students enjoy bring de-stressing elements into new spaces to create a calm atmosphere.

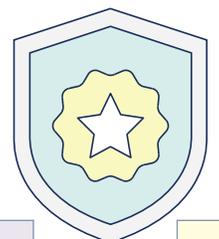
For example, create multi-purpose spaces where students can gather, socialise, eat, and relax with different atmospheres to encourage a broader range of students to engage with their peers.



A Safe Haven

Prioritize student, faculty, and staff safety. Consider designs that protect and enhance physical and psychological wellbeing to allow the UC community to thrive while in campus spaces.

For example, ensure that campus spaces offer students comfortable and inviting seating that suits the space and its purpose.

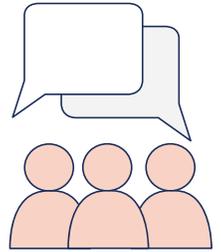


Design Principles

We're Here to Listen

Listen to all kinds of UC community members to understand their experiences and desires for UC. Look for quick ways to implement their ideas and create a sense that they are part of co-creating a more unified identity.

For example, introduce community discussion sessions where students, faculty, staff, and alumni can engage and discuss their experiences at UC, and vision for the college on a more regular basis.



UCreativity

Find innovative ways to encourage students to gain, strengthen, and share their creative skills. Spaces built with creativity in mind will also help foster community and shape UC's identity.

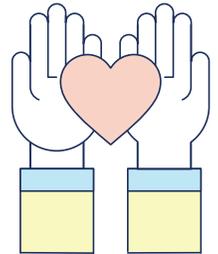
For example, offer a space where students can access a wide range of creative tools such as musical instruments, paintbrushes, rhyming dictionaries, and more.



Embedded Guidance

Enhance wayfinding in creative ways to ensure that UC is easier for the community to navigate.

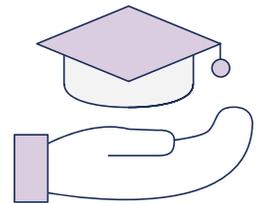
For example, place a building map or colour-coded navigation key at all entrances of UC buildings to help students and visitors navigate.



UC for Students' Real Lives

Students benefit from services and spaces that are built around the sometimes-odd structure of their academic lives. Address logistical barriers that students face to accessing services and spaces by accommodating the various real-life scenarios and situations students face.

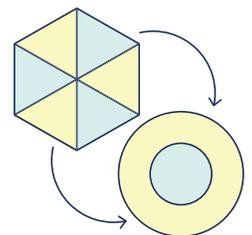
For example, expand food service hours to the early morning and late evening to accommodate the wide range of student schedules that commuter and residence students' have.



U of T's Complexities Simplified

Consider the challenges U of T's systems and structures pose to members of the university community and assess how UC can offer support. Address and implement solutions or supports in response to these challenges at the college-level to support a more accessible and inclusive overall experience at U of T for the UC community.

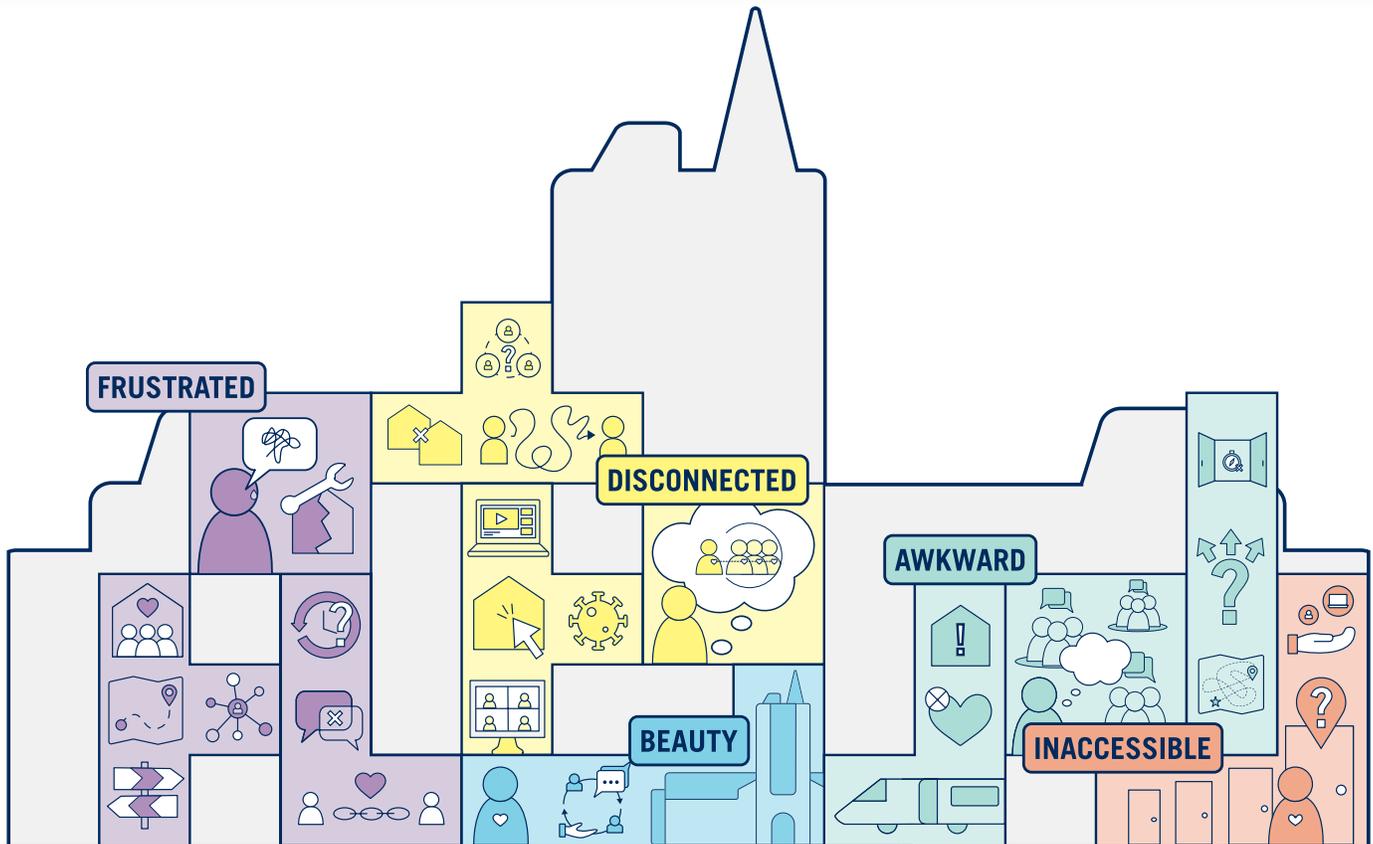
For example, offer students same-day appointments with an advisor who can answer any U of T - related questions and help them find the next steps for problem-solving.



Journey Map

Present UC

A journey map is representative of student, staff, and faculty stories by mapping out their journey. **The following depiction of the college's building showcases student, staff, and faculty stories as building blocks of University College's identity.** Each of the five stories detail a fictionalized account before our design principles are applied to their experiences.



Roberto feels like their first year living in residence was a mixed bag. It made it easier to navigate campus and feel closer to the community. However, their residence was really old. They tried to bring these issues to the Residence Council, but felt frustrated by the lack of progress on these issues. Clean and safe living conditions impacts how they feel and wishes living in residence didn't feel like a trade-off.

Marina lived in residence at UC during their first year. It was entirely online due to the pandemic. Virtual orientation events made them feel disconnected from the community. A fully online first year made it difficult to make friends, since students weren't allowed to use common spaces. As the university transitions back to in-person, Marina is not sure how to navigate finding new connections.

Steven works in an administrative role at UC. Their favourite thing about UC is the architecture and aesthetic beauty of the building. They work with UC students, but often struggle to connect with them. The same students tend to get involved so they would like to reach a broader community that's more representative of the entire student body.

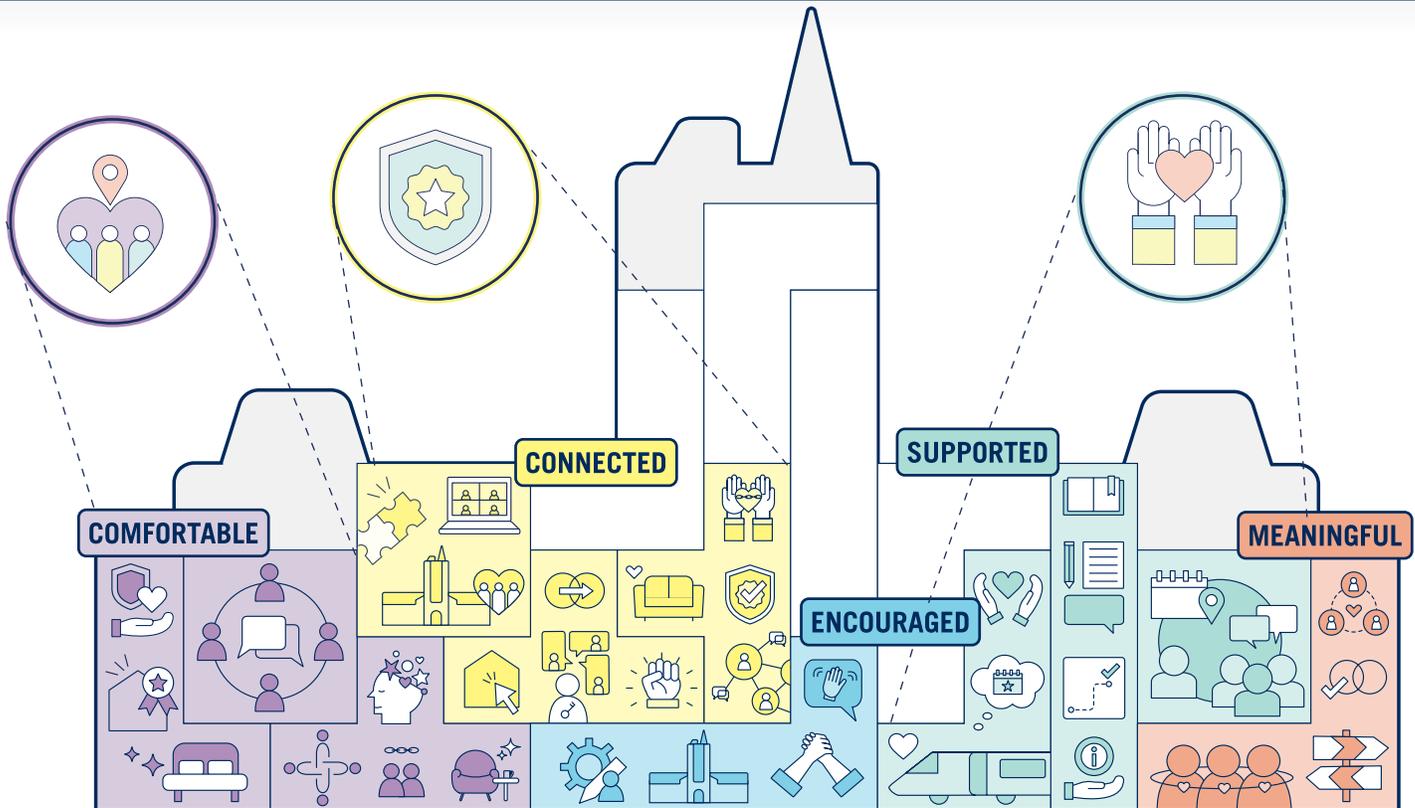
Carly is a commuter student and doesn't feel a strong connection to UC because they only spend time there when needed. They get lost in the building from the unclear signage. They tried to hang out at the Commuter Student Center to make friends, but everyone went in groups rather than as individuals looking to socialize. This inability to fit in left them feeling awkward and like they didn't belong.

Frida is a professor in a UC program and loves teaching here. They feel like they make really meaningful relationships with their students. However, their office is hard to find. It's in a part of the UC building that is not physically accessible to all students. So, they don't feel like they're reaching as many students as they can.

Journey Map

Future UC

The following depiction of the college's building showcases student, staff, and faculty stories as building blocks of University College's evolving identity co-created by members of its community. Each of the five stories detail a fictionalized account after our design principles are applied to the space.



Living in residence was awesome for **Roberto!** The buildings were nice and clean, so they felt comfortable living there which made it easier to experience positive college life. Roberto feels connected to everything that makes campus life great, like being able to meet new people and being near friends. Living on campus also definitely helped them get around more easily and make it to classes on time.

Marina's first year of university was online, but they formed great connections through UC! Their residence dons made students feel safe and heard throughout the pandemic. They found lots of friends once in-person through UC events. They hangout with friends in the Junior Common Room and other newly renovated areas. Having a space to congregate in has made it a lot easier to develop relationships.

Steven's favourite thing about working at UC is the architecture and aesthetic beauty of the building. They were worried that it would be only the same students who would tend to get involved in UC initiatives, but they interact with every kind of UC student almost every day! Steven hears all the time from students that their peers encouraged them to come say hi, and they're so happy to be working somewhere that encourages this inter student-staff collaboration.

Carly is always making friends in the CSC. UC offers event series to build connections with other students and staff, which makes them feel part of the UC community. They have several classes at UC, and feel like navigating the building is pretty easy with the clear signage. They did get lost one time, but found a friendly staff member to help them. Their experience at UC is the most memorable during their time at U of T. They're having a wonderful experience as a UC commuter student!

Frida is a professor in a UC program and love teaching here. The relatively small student base makes them feel like they make meaningful relationships with their students. Their office is hard to find because it's in a tucked-away part of the building. But the signage was recently improved and students joke that it's easier to find their office than the class's Quercus page.

Conclusion & Next Steps

In conclusion, reimagining University College spaces will need to consider the sometimes-opposing needs and values of its students, faculty, staff, and alumni to unify and solidify UC's identity. Members of the UC community have expressed sentiments of loneliness and disconnect from the college and desire spaces to connect with their community. The college buildings currently pose barriers to access such as in navigation, accessibility, and emotional wellbeing. Through creating calm environments where students, faculty, staff, and alumni can gather to discuss and listen to the challenges they face at the college and steps for the college's evolution. Though this work is still in progress, this evolution has led the community toward the work the college has already done toward reconciliation and decolonization. The college needs to continue to foster these spaces for collaboration and growth as it continues to develop and establish its future-forward identity.

The data and insights discussed in this report will support the Innovation Hub's next steps in the Reimagining University College project. Discussing these findings with our stakeholders will help us to facilitate a dialogue with UC students as we enter a co-creation stage of the project in the following months. This report and the results of the following stage of this project will help support University College's vision toward embedding EDIA principles into the college's culture and physical spaces.

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