January 2024

Reimagining Commuter Student Spaces

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

STUDENT LIFE

INNOVATION HUB

Introduction

Over the next few years, Spaces & Experiences aims to reimagine current and future spaces for commuter students across the St. George campus. Several buildings including Grad House, Harbord Residence, Oak House Residence, Knox College, and various food halls have the potential to offer spaces intended for commuter students. In partnership with Spaces & Experiences, the Innovation Hub aimed to understand the needs and perspectives of commuter students to make design decisions for future and existing spaces.

Methods

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. Our team takes a human-centered approach, using in-depth qualitative research methods and design thinking strategies to foster rich data collection and elicit honest stories from students about their perspectives. We translate the stories into themes that help us understand their diverse perspectives and reveal insights that will inspire the future design of programs and services.

In the summer of 2023, we conducted group feedback sessions with staff, faculty, and student leaders, speaking to **6 student leaders and 14 staff members** about their experiences supporting commuter students.

In September 2023, we initiated a widespread call for participants for an event titled, *Reimagining Commuter Spaces* across various communication channels. We received interest from 140 students. The Innovation Hub hosted 5 open dialogue and interactive feedback sessions using empathetic and story-based methods for data collection to learn about commuter student experiences. A total of **50 students participated**; 48 students attended the group feedback sessions, and 2 students completed written journal responses.

In October 2023, we collaborated with community members and subject matter experts to host more focused feedback sessions with students from equity-deserving populations. We first hosted sessions with commuter students who identify as having a disability entitled *Centering Accessibility in Commuter Spaces*. We spoke to **28 students who identify as having a disability** over two feedback sessions, and 2 interviews. Next, we hosted sessions with Black-identifying commuter students entitled, *Honouring Black Student Stories in Commuter Spaces*. We spoke to **7 Black-identifying students** over 2 sessions. We transcribed and de-identified our data which included feedback session and interview transcripts, journals, and short answer form responses.

In our examination of the data, we used grounded analytical techniques to gain a deeper understanding of students' core needs across the sessions and developed a data-driven vision based on these insights. We synthesized stories into personas and story moments to bring students' needs to life. We also developed design principles intended to serve as design guidelines for future commuter spaces on campus.

We hope that the insights from this design research will inspire Spaces & Experiences to build spaces for commuter students that recognize their diverse and unique experiences as they journey to, on, and from campus.

Vision: When students find moments of respite during their academic journey, they feel more grounded.

We found that students are in a constant state of transition throughout their university journeys. Students shared feeling excited by opportunities presented during their time in academia, while balancing feelings of anxiety and instability. In particular, commuter students shared that they experience a heightened sense of instability with constantly moving from place to place between home and school and across campus. We noticed that students who took the time to pause throughout their days experienced more frequent moments of mindfulness. Our data revealed that spaces at the university can anchor students within the present moment. **When students find moments of respite during their academic journey, they feel more grounded.**

Finding My Space

It's My Time

Permission To Belong

Leading My Success
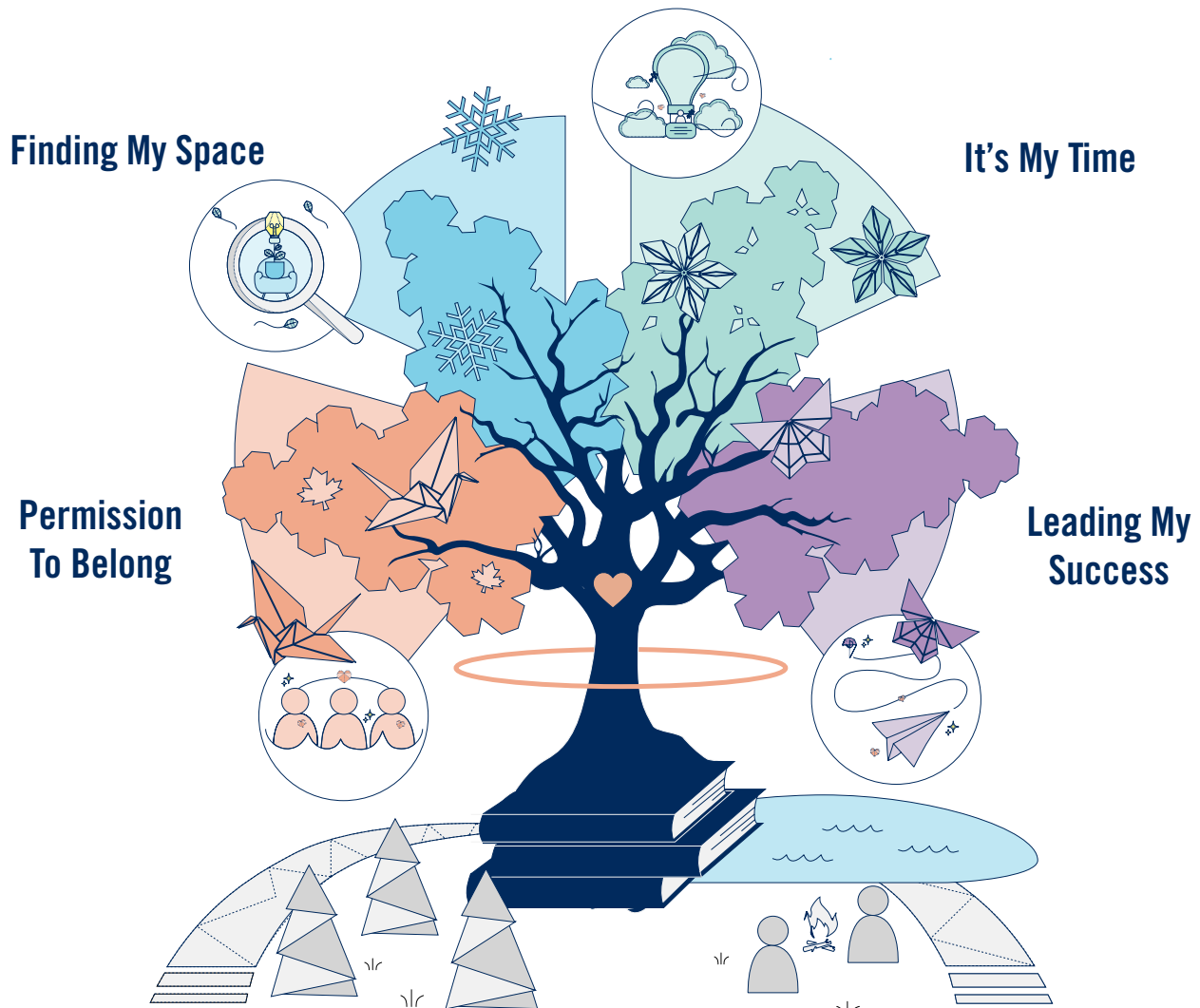
Data Visualization

Our Digital Communications team of students sought to depict the data-driven vision with an original graphic design image. Inspired by the art of origami, the use of paper folding into various shapes aims to represent the feelings of calm that students experience while pausing in the present moment. Origami's ability to transform paper into art with each fold showcases the growth and change students experience along their academic journeys. The tree in the center represents when students feel grounded during their time at university. The placement of the tree within the 4 seasons of winter, spring, summer, and fall represents the passage of time, the four key themes uncovered in the data, and students discovering the roots of the "trees" in their lives that ground them.

Permission to Belong
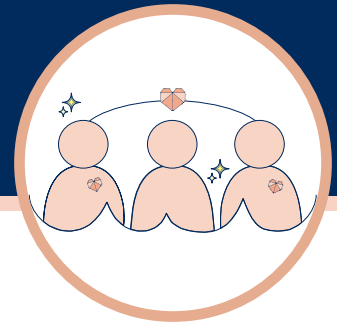
Insights related to feeling a sense of belonging on campus or to the university community when students are present in the moment.

A Commuter Campus

Student stories revealed a desire for **the university community to acknowledge that it is a commuter campus.** Commuter students expressed that they want their needs to be prioritized and reflected within campus spaces and resources. Students shared that when they feel their commuter status is recognized by the university, they feel valued as members of the university.

- One commuter student reflected on when they almost missed an exam due to a public transportation delay almost missed an exam and expressed that they would have been hopeless if they actually missed it. The student shared that they were hesitant to reach out for accommodation because of the fear that they would not be supported.

- Another student shared frustration when the campus remained open during a snowstorm. The student did not want to travel during harsh weather conditions and felt that the university was not being considerate of commuting students' needs when deciding to remain open.

- A student expressed frustration that commuter meal plans were more expensive than residence meal plans. The student explained that they decided to not purchase the plan because they determined that they would not have enough money to buy sufficient food for the school yea . The student expressed disappointment that they could not benefit from the convenience of on-campus dining and the comfortability of dining hall spaces without the meal plan.

Intention is Appreciation

Students expressed the importance of **spaces that feel intentional to the needs of commuter students**. Some commuter students shared that they felt unimportant and neglected when entering commuter-focused spaces that appeared uncared for. Students explained that when spaces appear to be built with care and consideration of their needs, they feel appreciated and valued as members of the university community.

- One student expressed appreciation for a student center on campus which they felt intentionally catered their space to make all students feel welcome and comfortable. The student noted that initiatives such as events in the student center and the provision of places to eat and socialize attracted them to the space.

- Several students shared the perception that the location of some existing commuter spaces on campus felt arbitrary and did not reflect thoughtful choices to prioritize their needs. The students elaborated tha many commuter lounges seemed to be placed in random locations, such as in building basements and inconvenient places across campus.

- Another student expressed discomfort about the old couches in a commuter lounge because of how worn down and dirty they were. The student was frustrated that the commuter lounge was given furniture that had already been discarded by a residence and felt that there was no intention to create comfortable spaces for them.

Permission to Belong
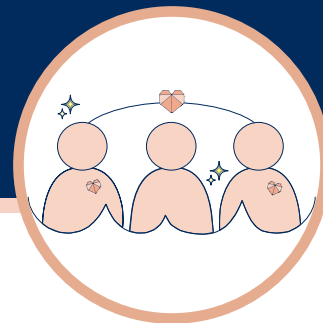
You're Invited

Our data revealed that students desire to **feel welcome entering spaces**. Stories highlighted commuter students' feelings of hesitation and discomfort using rooms around campus because of a perception that they were intruding in spaces with established communities that they did not belong to. Students expressed that they want to feel invited to use campus spaces so they can feel reassured that their presence is welcome.

- One student expressed feeling like an intruder entering a space to use a microwave. The student explained that despite the space technically being open to anybody, they felt like they were not supposed to be there after noticing that most students using the area were from a specific program that they were not enrolled in

- Another student described how their college's commuter lounge felt too exclusive, comparing it to a "high school clique". As a result, the student remarked that they were uncomfortable inviting their friends who were registered in another college.

- One staff member shared that their college space tours are intended to ensure that commuting students know the college is always open for them to come study. The staff member felt that students who took part in the tours felt more comfortable in the space.

Finding My Space

Insights related to feelings of comfort when students can stay in the present moment and enjoy their time however they choose.

Recharging My Battery

Our data revealed that students **need rest in their day-to-day lives while on campus**. Students described facing many uncertainties in their commute, which leave them feeling mentally and physically drained upon arriving on campus. In some cases, students discussed the importance of opportunities to pause so they could recharge and feel capable of being fully present in their classes, extracurricular activities, and social events.

- One student expressed the importance of having spaces to unwind and have alone time. The student shared that having time to self-reflect throughout the day was essential to feeling happy and enjoying offerings o campus.

- Another student described themselves as a "nomad" because they felt that they did not know how to prepare themselves for the uncertainties they face during their commute. The student stated that dealing with this instability leaves them feeling mentally and physically drained when they arrive on campus.

- A student described the five-hour gap in between two classes as "insufferable". The student felt tha there were not enough spaces on campus for them to sit in a relaxed way. The student revealed that they sometimes feel so tired and unable to focus that they opt to skip class to go home and lie down instead of attending.

Reliable Spaces

Student experiences demonstrated the **need for campus spaces to have reliable availability**. Students shared that they often felt discouraged to enter spaces that frequently change in use and availability. Students explained that, when they know what to expect from a space, they can make more informed decisions about how to invest their time and energy when planning their day on campus.

- One student shared how they often go to library spaces to study between lectures, only to find the completely full. The student elaborated that they noticed that study spaces are often used by other students to socialize and expressed hope for more separate spaces for studying and socializing.

- Another student described their frustration trying to reserve a private study room at the library because the rooms are always full and require significant scheduling in advance for successful booking

- A staff member shared a perception that students hesitate to enter spaces when their "regular rhythm" is disrupted. The staff member explained that many large commuter spaces also serve as event spaces, which they feel prevents students from accessing areas they thought were available. The staff member perceived that these disruptions discouraged students from frequenting the space.

Finding My Space

Necessities of Life

Students expressed the importance of **feeling secure in their ability to meet their basic necessities and personal responsibilities in their day-to-day lives**. Stories revealed that when students could not manage their basic needs, they struggled to stay engaged with campus activities. In some cases, students who could meet their basic living needs and responsibilities were more willing to participate in on-campus academic and social activities.

- A student described how they often go home after class instead of staying on campus because they struggle to afford the food options available on campus. The student explained that when they do bring their own food, it is often not enough to satisfy them because without access to microwaves, they opt to bring smaller, simpler meals.

- One staff member noticed that a commuter student was motivated to stay for an on-campus event because they could take extra food back to their family. The staff member learned that the student had a 4-hour commute but carried hundreds of leftover sandwiches from the event in their luggage bag. The staff member reflected on how the rising cost of living is making food unaffordable for students and their families

Inspiration Through Design

Students want to feel **inspired to do their work by the spaces around them**. Students shared that a space's atmosphere and unique design features directly impacts their decision to use that space. In some cases, when spaces foster a comforting environment, students feel more motivated to make the most of their time on campus and focus on their studies.

- One student shared their appreciation for a library space they described as "inviting" because of the open-concept design. The student explained that bright environments and comfortable seating give them the energy to do work and conquer their day.

- Several students described how seemingly small changes in seating could have major impacts on their ability to be present on campus. Students valued how comfortable seating promotes better focus on their work, which in turn impacts their moods and ultimately their feelings of engagement on campus.

- Another student shared their appreciation for a commuter lounge that they consider to be a "hidden gem" because not many people know about this space. The students shared that this was their favourite place to study because the lounge provided many features such as a kitchen, storage lockers, charging outlines, and couches that allowed them to recharge and relax between classes.

It's My Time

Insights related to students having the agency and freedom to explore/discover moments in their everyday lives.

Making the Most of It

Students expressed a desire to **make the most of out their university experience by participating in campus opportunities beyond academics**. Our data revealed that students see the university as a place to explore their interests and connect with others. In some cases, when students can engage in opportunities that interest them, they find their university experience more fulfilling and worthwhil

- One student described feeling like they are not making the most out of their campus experience because they need to prioritize their family, work obligations, and commute above extracurriculars. The student shared that they wish they could participate more in on-campus activities, but felt like they did not have the time.

- Another student discussed how they wanted to participate in as many orientation events as possible, but had to leave earlier than their friends because they felt unsafe taking the TTC late at night. The student explained that they felt like they missed out on experiencing orientation to the fullest because they couldn't stay for the entire day's events, especially when compared to their friends who live close to campus.

I'm in Charge

Students expressed a desire to **participate spontaneously in campus opportunities to feel fully engaged in student life**. Several students shared that they feel constrained by their need to plan around their commute, which limits them from attending campus events that they learn about on short notice when participation requires certain attire or equipment. In some cases, when students feel that they can be present on campus, they may feel more connected to the campus community.

- One student described themselves as "less impulsive" in comparison to their peers who live on residence. The student shared how they could not spontaneously join their friends at the gym because they would have needed to plan to bring their gym clothes to campus.

- Another student revealed that they often had to meticulously plan their day around the constraints of their commute, making it difficult to opt in to on-campus events they learn about, especially those scheduled lat at night. The student discussed feeling left out of campus life due to their tight schedule and lack of flexibilit from the commute.

- A student shared the perception that not many people have the time or capacity to attend structured events and resources. The student expressed appreciation for drop-in sessions because the format allows people the flexibility to participate in programming when they can, rather than feeling pressured to participate b signing up.
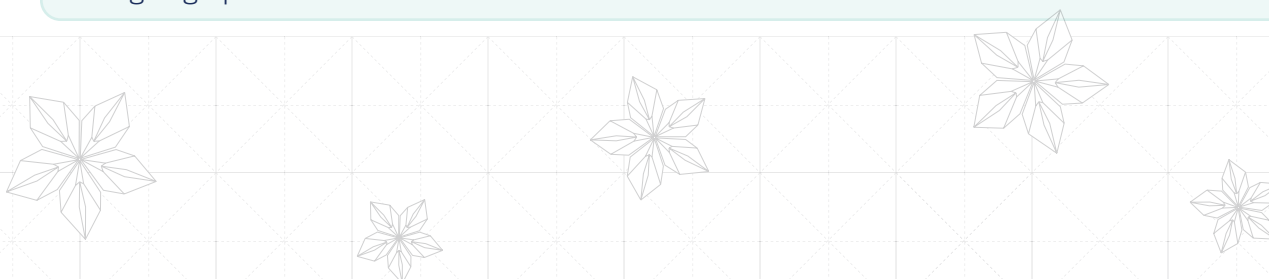
It's My Time

Flexibility in Engagement

Our data revealed that students **value opportunities to participate** in on-campus programming that aligns with their schedules. Students expressed that they often felt limited by their ability to engage in activities beyond their class commitments, but shared appreciation for occasions when they could because it made their campus experience more fruitful. Students shared hope for campus opportunities to expand their time availability so that they can partake more frequently.

- Many commuter students shared that they feel overlooked by on-campus programming because events and activities often occur late into the evening when they need to go home. The students expressed disappointment that they cannot engage in campus opportunities and felt that they were missing out on the full university experience.

- One student shared their disappointment when they had to turn down work as a teaching assistant for an evening class that they thought would be held online. The student explained that the class was too late at night and there was no place for them to sleep overnight on campus.

Resilience in Comfort

Students expressed the importance of being able to **adapt to how their commute impacts their day**. Student stories revealed that when they noticed and embraced the positives of their commute, they felt more relaxed about their journeys to campus. In some cases, students shared that finding reasons to appreciate their commutes allowed them to feel grateful for small moments in their lives and build resilience during overwhelming times.

- One student described how they choose to come to campus very early and leave late to ensure that they can get a seat on the subway to get their work done. The student explained that using their two-hour commute to complete their work has helped them cope with how tiring their trips to campus can be.

- Another student shared how their perception of the commute changed from feeling inconvenient to enjoyable. The student revealed that they began to enjoy their commute once they started to find smal moments of joys on their trips to campus by listening to music or using this time as a period of "built-in mindfulness."

- A student explained that they preferred taking the subway over the train because they made friends during their commute. The student expressed that finding these connections made them feel happ , and helped them to pass time while commuting.

Leading My Success

Insights related to taking ownership of their learning journeys, including feelings of inspiration and motivation when students can successfully navigate towards resources.

Balancing My Time

Students wish to feel **productive in order to optimize their university experience**. Many students expressed that they felt like they were wasting their time between classes or on their commutes because they were too exhausted to focus on schoolwork. Students shared a hope for alternate ways to pass their time meaningfully, such as recognizing the value of non-academic activities that can still complement their learning experience.

- One student shared that they would appreciate more leisurely activities available in their college's commuter lounge so they would have other ways to stay occupied. The student explained that they are on campus daily from 8 AM to 10 PM and feel that the only way to pass time is through studying, even though they do not have the energy.

- Another student with a 5-hour gap between classes stated that they prefer doing multiple different fulfillin tasks over sitting in one spot and studying the whole time. The student explained that they always plan ahead to ensure this time is used productively; for instance, by attending office hours or on-campus events

I Know Where To Go

Our data revealed that students need **clarity finding available campus spaces to settle in throughout their day**. Several students described feeling confused and unaware of what campus spaces were available and felt disappointed that they often learned about great campus spaces late into the year when they discovered these places by accident of through word of mouth. Students wished for better access to clear information about campus spaces so that they can find the places that best meet their needs when spending long hours on campus

- One student shared the perception that they learned the purposes of different campus spaces by entering "random doors" and figuring it out themself. The student explained that they would appreciate a mor centralized resource to learn about buildings on campus so that the information is more reliable than their own assessment.

- A student told us that having clear resources about campus spaces is important to them because they do not feel as grounded in the university as someone who lives on campus. The student explained that because they are not on campus as often, they are not exposed to as many avenues that allow them to learn about the university spaces.

Insights from Black-Identifying Students

Shared Identities Creates Belonging

Students expressed the importance of **feeling a sense of belonging with others who share similar cultural identities** as them. Students appreciated finding other community members with shared lived experiences, especially staff and faculty, because it helped them feel more comfortable to stay on campus and become involved in campus life. In some cases, students shared that feeling safe on campus boosted their confidence and motivated them to take risks to pursue their social and academic goals at university.

- One student expressed their appreciation for a recurring event that provided a space for Black-identifying students to meet and de-stress together. The student revealed that the space encouraged them to step out of their comfort zone and meet new people who shared similar experiences to form a community.

- Several students shared that seeing faculty members who looked like them in successful careers gave them hope that they could also successfully pursue their career and academic goals. The students explained that seeing others who looked like them in academia helped them better picture themselves in the fields of study.

- A student shared their appreciation seeing more Black and racialized staff and resources after the pandemic. The student explained that these new resources made them feel comfortable asking for help because they could talk to someone who understood certain issues that they felt their non-racialized peers would not understand.

Friendship Fosters Learning and Engagement

Students we spoke to emphasized the **importance of forming strong and lasting connections** throughout their university journeys. Many students revealed that they saw the university as a space to meet others and to feel inspired to excel in their academic goals. In some cases, students expressed appreciation for the networks they built, which made them feel supported and happy to be a part of the university community.

- One student expressed their appreciation for facilitated study sessions on campus. The student explained that they often felt unmotivated and lonely at home and found that these sessions were encouraging spaces for them to stay productive and meet people. The student shared that they felt happy on campus and hoped that they could form friendships with the people they meet while studying.

- Another student shared that they want to move closer to campus to have more energy and time to network with others. The student elaborated feeling that the university was a unique place to find a community that could support them and help them with their future career.

- A student explained that they were grateful for their short commute because they feel that living further would impact their ability to make friends if they had to leave campus early to go home. The student elaborated that they would feel isolated and "completely removed from campus life" without friends on campus.
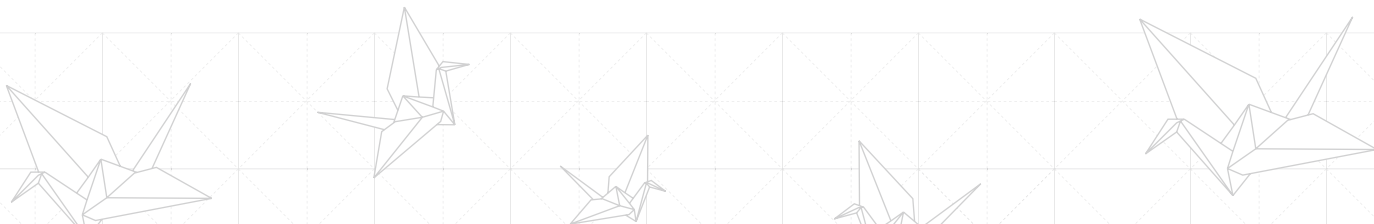
Insights from Students with Disabilities

Recognize Me

Our data revealed that students **need to feel recognized** within university policy and spaces. Many students wish to challenge the perception that most students will not benefit from accessibility policies and described feeling invisible because they felt that their accessibility issues were often ignored and deprioritized. In some cases, students shared their disappointment learning that university policies kept changing in ways that restricted their support and made them feel excluded.

- One student expressed frustration being told that many accessibility policies implemented during the pandemic were rolled back because these accommodations no longer benefited the "majority" of students The student shared that learning this information made them feel invisible and unimportant and that the lessons learned about accessibility during the pandemic were lost to most people.

- Another student described feeling sad and hurt because they felt ignored when raising issues about accessibility. The student shared that they raised concerns about a ramp and heavy doors being inaccessible and did not hear anything back.

Well-Being is Presence

Student stories revealed their need to **prioritize their health and well-being** to be able to feel present on campus. Students shared that they often felt exhausted and hopeless on campus because many spaces were not easily accessible or made them feel overstimulated. Students shared hope for campus spaces to consider students with disabilities in their design so they can more fully participate in campus life.

- One student who uses a wheelchair explained that they only go to buildings where they know for certain that there is reliable elevator service because they feel safer knowing what to expect when they arrive at the space.

- Another student described that one of the biggest challenges they face as someone who is neurodiverse is dealing with bright fluorescent lights in every building, which make it hard to focus while on campus. Th student stated that they could escape fluorescent lights in the summer by going outside but felt hopeles during the winter.

Personas

Liling (they/them)

- 3rd year undergraduate student studying humanities
- Domestic student who grew up in the GTA
- 2-hour commute via GO train and TTC
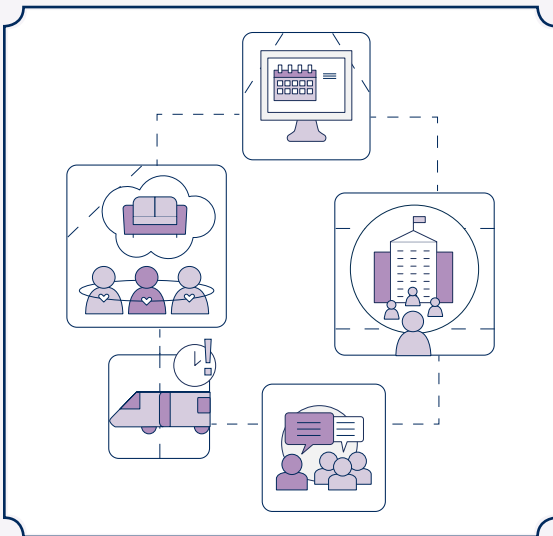
When I started my degree, I promised myself that I would use my time at university to make new friends and explore new interests, even though I knew that this would be challenging as a commuter student. Since U of T is such a large and diverse campus, I figured there would undoubtedly be opportunities for me to engage with other students who also commute, or who have similar interests. In the last few years, I've really worked hard to find ways to plan my course schedule and commute times to ensure I have extra time to do things on campus, like go to the gym or participate in social activities so I can meet new people. However, I'm still having a hard time feeling connected and building strong friendships.

Everyone says that because U of T is so big, the best way to connect is through your college. I was put in a college that is on one far side of the campus, and all my classes seem to take place on the other side. My college seems great – they send out notices about fun activities and ways to get involved. But honestly, programming is never really at convenient times for me and would require me to walk far across campus from everything else I need to do. In my first year I did go to some events and meet some nice people, but their schedules seemed to be quite different from mine, so we lost touch. When school started to get busy, I just stopped trying.

At this point, I have lost some hope that university will be a place where I can really connect with others. I felt especially lonely when I came across a place to eat my lunch in between classes at a nearby college. As I sat down on a couch, the students across from me looked at me a little funny—only for a split second, but enough for me to notice. I tried to seem nonchalant while I slowly realized that everyone else in the space had merch from the college and were all talking and hanging out in groups. None of the students said anything mean (or anything at all), but every couple of seconds I swear I felt another pair of eyes flick towards me, then quickly away. I wanted to walk out, but I didn't know where else to go. I was deeply uncomfortable, but I still needed to eat my lunch, so I stayed.

I often wonder why U of T doesn't have spaces for commuter students. I would imagine there are a lot of us who would love to connect with one another. I sometimes wish I could find other students who live close to where I live or who at least have similar schedules to mind that I could hang out with. I haven't given up on my desire to find connection at university, but it's much harder than I thought it would be.

Personas

Anna (she/her)

- 3rd year undergraduate student studying political science
- Domestic student living in GTA, works part-time
- 45-minute commute via bike ride
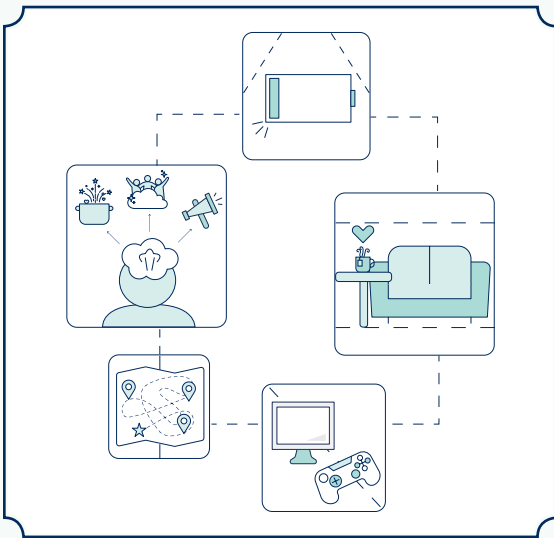
My family and friends like to remind me that my university years are the best time of my life, and that I should always try to get the most out of my experience while I'm here. For me, I've always imagined this to mean studying hard, hanging out with friends, getting chores done if I can, and making time for my own health and well-being. Achieving these tasks throughout my days is what I think will make me feel productive and capable of really enjoying my university experience. Little did I know that there would be so many obstacles preventing me from reaching even a bit of my ideal day.

For starters, when I started university, I didn't realize that my class times would feel so far apart, yet simultaneously short enough that I feel like I don't have time to do anything. I don't want to leave campus during my longer gaps because it takes me about 45 minutes to bike home, 45 minutes to come back, and then realistically about 20 minutes to find a bikeshare rack within reasonable distance from U of T. On most days I spend the gaps between my classes trying to study and then procrastinating by scrolling through my phone. Even though I fully acknowledge that procrastination comes from within, I just don't have the energy to do anything else. This campus is so big, I feel like I'm always running from one place to another trying to find a place to settle down.

Though I know there are a ton of things to do on campus, they seem to require such a high commitment and take place during inconvenient times that I don't feel motivated to participate. I am interested in more casual activities to relax between classes. I noticed that residence students have common rooms with TVs and tables for games, but we don't have any spaces like this that are open to everyone. I also wandered into a commuter lounge once but noticed that there was nothing to do in them beside playing board games that were missing pieces. I often feel bored and drained, which I think is impacting my ability to focus in class.

Right now, I don't feel like I'm living my university life to the fullest. I feel like if I can't study, then I just don't do anything. I want to change this, and I hope that I'll start to find some more opportunities on campus to engage in a way that will help me unwind but not feel like I'm not doing anything productive for myself.
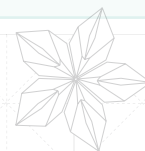
Personas

Jacintha (she/they)

- 1st year graduate student in social science
- Domestic student who grew up just outside the GTA
- 55-minute commute driving for 40 minutes and parking 15 minutes away for parking prices
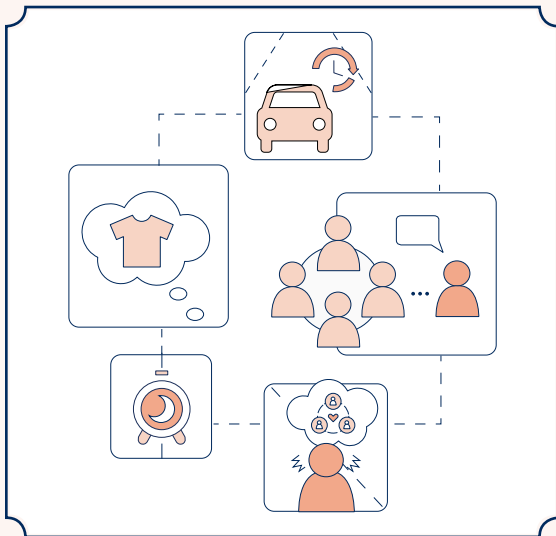
Being able to pursue my degree at U of T has been a dream come true for me. I've always wanted to go to school in a big city to meet people and expand my network. The diversity of the school and the city allows me to really apply what I'm learning and open my perspective to new ideas. I've also really been enjoying my program. My classmates are passionate people, and the program has great connections to local community groups, which creates collaboration and volunteering opportunities where I feel like my education can actually make a difference.

Last year, my commute into the city was quite difficult because I lived so far away and had to go through multiple transit lines. Luckily, this year I was able to get insurance on my parents' car, and I opt to drive to campus now because it makes my commute a lot shorter. If I leave at certain times in the morning and afternoon, I can avoid traffic and transit delays. However, I'm aware that I drive a family car, so I always try to come back at a reasonable time so that other people can use it too.

Recently, I've been feeling tired and unmotivated to come to campus. I think it's because there have been a lot of opportunities that I've had to pass on. The other week, my friend called me after class to invite me to go to a "meet the profs" networking event that she heard about happening that evening. I really wanted to go because it would be a great opportunity to meet my professors outside of class and ask questions. I also haven't seen my friend in a while, and it would have been nice to catch up. In the end, I realized that I wasn't prepared because the networking event required professional attire and I was wearing a hoodie. Had I known in advance, I would have worn something nicer. I was disappointed to miss out, but I know I wouldn't have been able to find something in time

It's disheartening to feel like I'm unable to fully take advantage of what the university has to offer. I've had such a great time learning and growing in my program, but I know that there is more for me to explore on this campus. Sometimes, I wonder if choosing to go to school in the city was the best choice for me and if I should have just gone somewhere closer. Now that I've been at U of T for a semester, I see the potential that this place can have for me, and I hope I'll be able to really seize all the opportunities I can.

Personas

Olufemi (he/him)

- 1st year undergraduate student studying physiology
- International student from Nigeria who has come to Canada for the first time
- Self-identifies as a Black person
- 25-minute commute via walk to campus
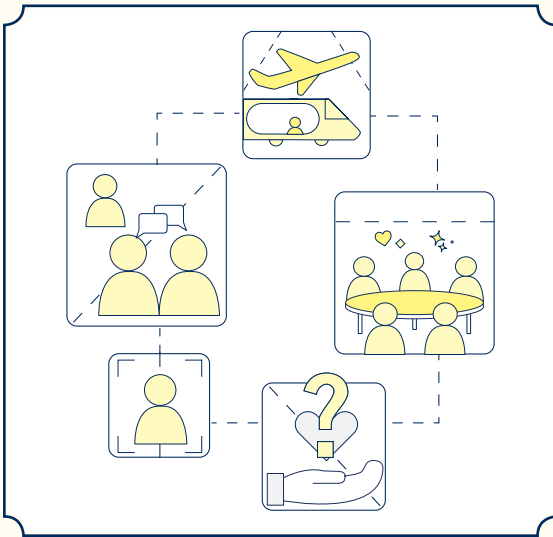
I decided to move to Toronto just to attend U of T because I wanted to attend a school known for medical research and a strong academic environment. My dream is to pursue a career in medicine and become a doctor.

My experience in Toronto has been mixed so far. On one hand, I've been enjoying my classes and I love all of my lab practicums. But at the same time, U of T has felt strangely intimidating and isolating. My classmates seem way smarter than me and I feel like so many of them already have opportunities in place for them. On top of that, I can't help but notice that there aren't a lot of international African students in my lectures, or many Black students in general. It's too bad, because I would have really liked to connect with other Black students.

My roommate suggested that I turn to campus events to expand my network and find more people who share my cultural identity. While walking from class one day, I saw there was an event being hosted by my college that seemed lively. The event was a course panel with many professors in my department set to speak. I decided to drop in and check out the event. During the networking portion of the event, I spoke to a few classmates that I recognized. We talked about how this term has felt so far and I shared a bit about how I was feeling lonely and hopeful to meet more people. While my classmates seemed friendly and tried to assure me that I would meet people eventually, I felt that they did not quite understand what I meant and how sometimes I feel like I don't quite belong at U of T.

This is still just my first year here, so I hope that there will be more opportunities in the future to meet other students like me. I would be interested in connecting with other Black students in my program or even professors that do work related to my career aspirations.

Personas

Theo (he/him)

- 2nd year graduate student pursuing a Master of Science in computer science
- Identifies as neurodivergent (Autism Spectrum)
- 30-minute commute taking the bus and then walking to classes
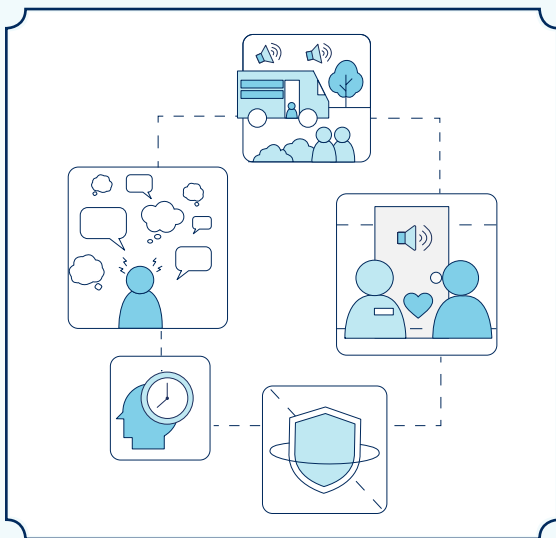
I'm excited to graduate this year because I have secured a job working for a new tech startup that I'm really looking forward to. I only have three mandatory courses left, but I've had difficulties keeping up with course deadlines, and I'm concerned that I'll fail one of my courses and won't graduate on time. This year I moved into a new apartment that is closer to campus but still requires me to take a bus. Last year, my route was longer, though I found that the commute was less grating on my brain because I took the GO train. The bus is busier and hence much louder, which means there are a lot of sounds piling up in my brain throughout the whole commute. The bus is also a lot bumpier, and I feel the vibrations of the engine more, which gives me headaches, especially because I haven't been sleeping that much. I feel like a boxer is punching my brain.

When I arrive on campus, I often look for a quiet place that won't overstimulate me so I can sit down for a while and focus on one thing. I used to go to the library, but lately with exams coming up, the space has been quite crowded. At times, hearing students whisper in groups somehow feels worse than the noises on the bus. So, I've just been trying to find another space because I don't think it s my place to demand that other students quiet down. Sometimes I try to book a study room for myself, but it's been hard as many students need them right now. I've been feeling quite overwhelmed on campus lately, but I try my best to stay focused in class.

I wish there was a place on campus where I could recharge and decompress when I'm feeling overwhelmed. I feel useless on campus when I spend most of my day trying to stay focused on tasks. I'm no stranger to having to self-advocate for my needs, but it would be nice if I didn't have to do it all the time. I hope things settle down soon and I'll be able to catch up on schoolwork and graduate on time.

Design Principles

PRIORITIZE COMMUTERS

Create programming, services, spaces, and resources directly geared towards commuter students. Ensure that commuters from all colleges, areas of study, levels of study, and disciplines are included.

- Upgrade existing spaces to ensure the available amenities meet commuter needs by including items like microwaves and comfortable places to sit
- Design programs that are promoted directly to commuter students and offered at times that align with transit schedules and common gaps between classes
- Create ways for students commuting from similar geographic areas to connect with their peers
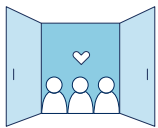
WELCOME ALL STUDENTS

Create open-access environments where all students feel invited to stay. Ease students' entry into new campus spaces by explicitly creating encouraging environmental cues. Be straightforward and clear with information to indicate that students are welcome.

- Design standard signage near entrances that clearly states all students are welcome
- Offer regular opportunities such as campus tours for students to learn about and find spaces to sta between classes
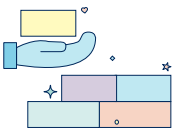
BUILD SPACES WITH INTENTION

Build spaces with purpose and intention to meet the needs of students on campus. Ensure that spaces are consistently updated and adapted to address the changing needs of student life.

- Consider a space's location relative to public transportation, other locations on campus, and the building's facilities when planning to maximize convenience for students
- Furnish the space with furniture, appliances, and other offerings that match the intended use of the room
- Run surveys periodically to receive feedback on the space from students to inform future upgrades
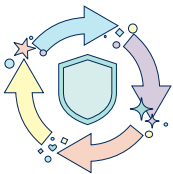
PROMOTE RELIABLE SPACES

Actively promote a range of campus spaces intended for casual student use so that students have places they know are reliable. Communicate closures in advance to avoid confusion or ambiguity. Ensure that these spaces are open during flexible and convenient times for students

- Use signage that clearly indicates the purpose and hours of a space and post schedules for upcoming space closures in front of rooms
- Create an app that lists all common spaces that are available for student usage
- Offer early morning and late-night hours for commonly used spaces

Design Principles

CURATE CALMING SPACES

Design spaces that prioritize rest to accommodate the long hours many students spend on campus. Ensure that spaces create an environment that feels calm and relaxing for both physical and mental health.

- Provide private spaces for students to rest and sleep with comfort and security
  - Provide nap pods and comfortable chairs
  - Offer places for students to store their belongings while resting such as lockers and cubbies
- Use signage to indicate room expectations such as noise level and room capacity
- Use calming colours in space design when painting walls and changing lighting

CREATE COMFORTING SPACES

Design spaces that inspire and motivate students to engage with the space. Implement design features and amenities that create a comforting environment for students to rest, study, or socialize.

- Design optional activities to populate spaces such as community message boards or written peer-to-peer encouragement to foster connectivity asynchronously
- Include furniture with customizable features for student use, such as tables with adjustable heights or lamps with adaptable brightness
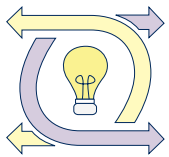
SCHEDULE FLEXIBILITY

Provide students with a wide array of options to participate in campus events and activities that align with their existing schedules. Ensure that programming runs during convenient times throughout the day so that students can attend.

- Offer events with a flexible commitment that allow students to engage even when they cannot stay the whol time
- Provide opportunities for hybrid participation
- Hold events and activities during the day and around lunch time to encourage participation between classes

Design Principles

RE-DEFINE PRODUCTIVITY

Design spaces and programming that provide students with multiple ways to spend time between classes meaningfully. Encourage the idea that there are different ways to use their time on campus that can all feel productive and worthwhile.

- Design spaces for multipurpose use to accommodate the many ways students spend their time between classes
- Provide students with more programming options for recreation and leisure throughout their day, such as art or mindfulness-based events
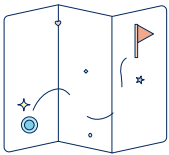
MAXIMIZE WAYFINDING

Ensure that information about spaces and room signage is clear and easy to access. Provide multiple avenues for students to find information about space locations and usage

- Provide campus maps that indicate open and main entrances into spaces in areas that many students walk by
- Update signage to reflect ongoing construction and maintenanc
- Prioritize accessible features in signage such as large print and readable fonts to make navigation easier for all university visitors
- Provide wayfinding resources in both digital and print option
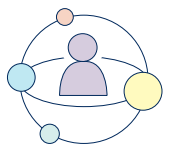
PRIORITIZE ACCESSIBILITY

Prioritize physical and psychological accessibility and comfort in campus spaces. Ensure that spaces can accommodate those with access challenges so that all students can comfortably engage on campus.

- Ensure that main door entrances are wheelchair-accessible
- Provide low-sensory spaces with dim lighting to promote calmness
- Prioritize intuitive wayfinding and ease of access navigating between building

Design Principles
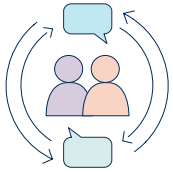
FACILITATE FEEDBACK

Actively promote channels of communication for students to share feedback about how to improve campus spaces to ensure that students feel heard. Provide opportunities for feedback on a regular basis to ensure improvements are sustained.

- Issue surveys, forms, or phone interviews to users of the space at regular intervals to collect their feedback on the space
- Designate representatives who are delegated to address issues in spaces
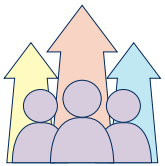
IMPLEMENT MEANINGFUL REPRESENTATION

Provide spaces and opportunities specifically for diverse community members to connect and feel welcomed. Increase the visibility of students, staff, and faculty from historically underrepresented communities at U of T.

- Create a permanent space on campus meant for Black students to hold events and connect
- Offer regular opportunities and events for diverse students to participate and meet one another
- Celebrate the achievements of diverse community members at U of T physically by showcasing photos and murals in campus spaces
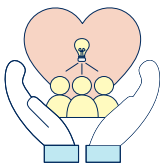
CURATE CONNECTIONS

Create opportunities for students to connect with others with shared interests and experiences. When providing opportunities to foster connection, ensure that standards of equity, diversity and inclusion are prioritized and clearly communicated to make all students feel comfortable participating.

- Establish ground rules and expectations for behaviour during formal events
- Host cultural night events in spaces on a regular basis to celebrate experiences of students across diverse backgrounds
- Explicitly welcome diverse students to events on signage and promotion

LILING'S DAY-IN-THE-LIFE
(THEY/THEM)

Current
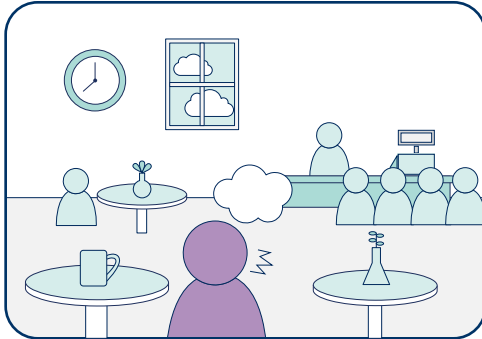
Liling wakes early to take the train to a cafe near campus, hoping to meet classmates. They are disappointed when they arrive to find no one there

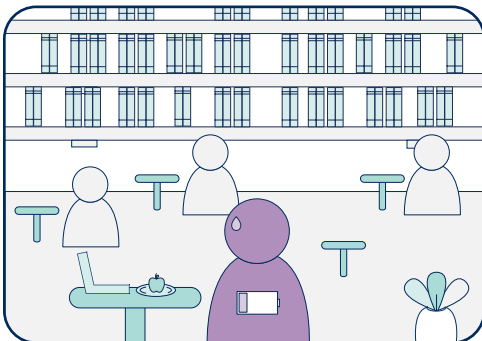Liling feels discouraged after being unable to connect with any classmates in the morning and decides to eat lunch alone at a desk.

Liling feels tired and disheartened from being unable to make friends. They decide that tomorrow, they will leave home later to reach campus just before class.

Design Principle Applied

Prioritize Commuters
The lounge provides a dedicated space for commuters to feel included and connect with others.
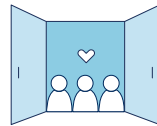
Welcome All Students
The common area includes clear signage stating what students can use the space for.

Prioritize Commuters
Liling is excited to continue using the commuter lounge's dedicated space for commuter students.

Future

Liling wakes early to take the train to a commuter lounge, hoping to meet classmates. They eagerly chat with some peers before heading to class together.
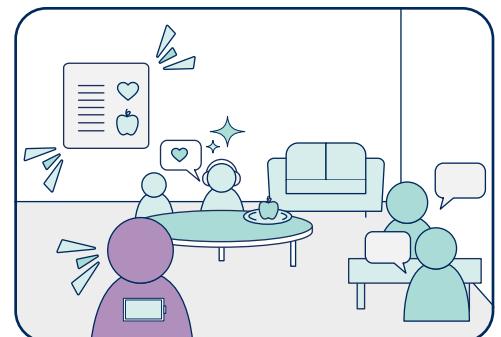
Liling is invited to eat lunch with their classmates. The group settles comfortably in a group study area at the library with signs indicating food is allowed.
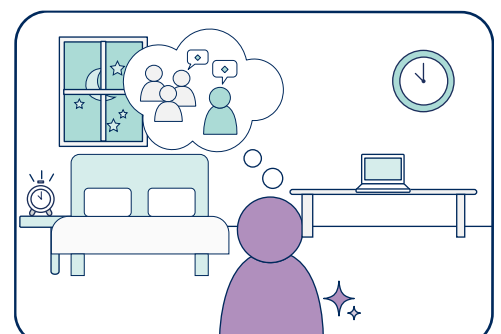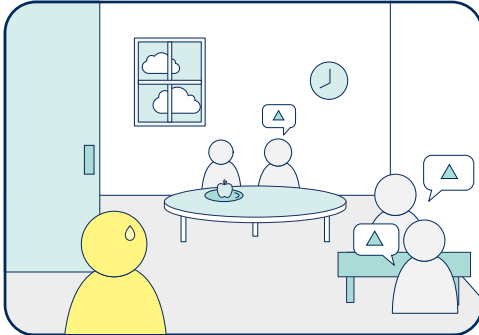
Liling feels happy and productive after a day with classmates. They look forward to returning to the commuter lounge tomorrow to join their new friends before class.
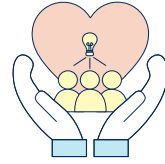
22

OLUFEMI'S DAY-IN-THE-LIFE
(HE/HIM)

Current	**Design Principle Applied**	**Future**

Curate Connections

Olufemi appreciates the event's effort to connect with BIPOC students and ensure that everyone felt comfortable.

Olufemi goes "speed networking" to meet peers sharing his cultural identity. He is disappointed to be the only Black student there, and a peer's remark dampens his mood.
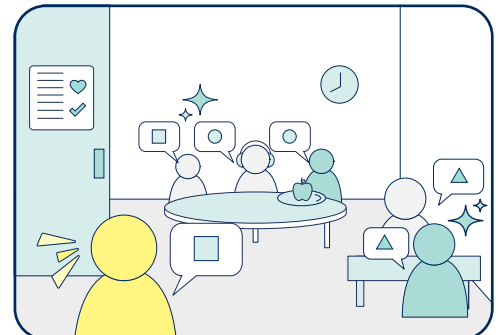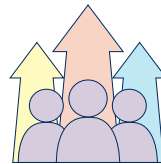
Olufemi goes "speed networking" to meet peers sharing his cultural identity. He feels comfortable because the event encourages BIPOC student attendance and sets ground rules.

Implement Meaningful Representation

The building feels more welcoming to Olufemi because it resonates with his experiences on campus.

Olufemi decides to study in his college. He feels awkward working by the historical paintings of college leaders. He decides to find a less outdated place tomorrow.
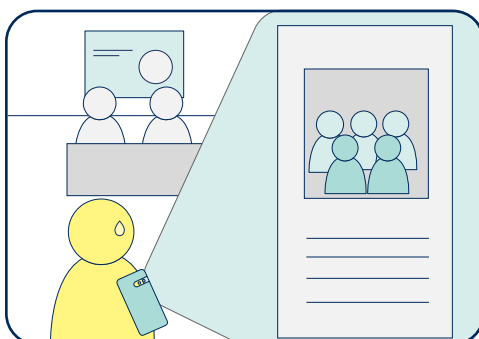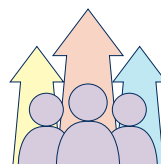
Olufemi decides to study in a building named after a Black doctor. He feels inspired by photos of diverse students who won awards and hopes to be celebrated with them.

Implement Meaningful Representation

Olufemi feels more welcomed in a course union after speaking to a Black exec who shares his aspirations.
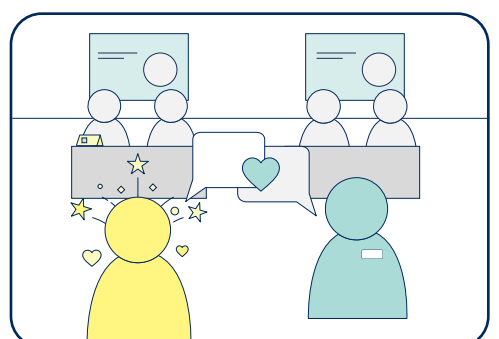
Olufemi considers joining his course union at a club fair. He feels unmotivated to apply because he is unsure whether he can picture himself in the team environment.
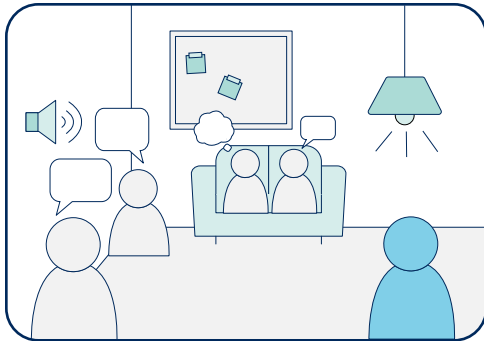
Olufemi considers joining his course union at a club fair. After meeting a Black executive with shared goals, he feels motivated to apply by the community there.
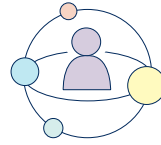
THEO'S DAY-IN-THE-LIFE
(HE/HIM)

Current

Theo attends a lab meeting in a room with overwhelming fluorescent lights. He has trouble focusing and feels guilty for asking his colleague for notes afterwards.
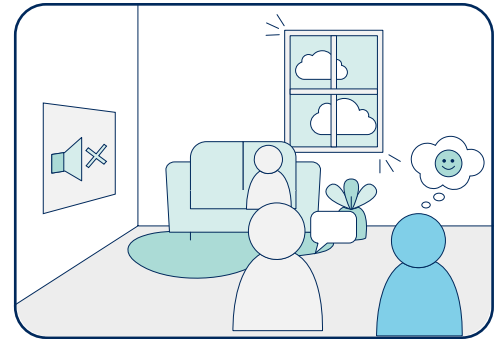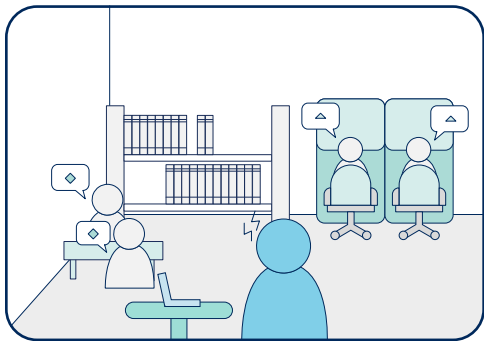

Theo feels tired and disoriented but cannot find a space to unwind. He falls asleep on a wooden table and wakes up before class feeling uncomfortable.
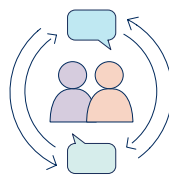

Theo searches for a way to submit feedback about his accessibility concerns. He feels confused because he does not know where to share his thoughts.

Design Principle Applied

Prioritize Accessibility

The meeting room was built with sensory-friendly design features that allow Theo to focus.

Curate Calming Spaces

The private nap pod meets Theo's need for a calm space to rest and reorient himself before lecture.

Facilitate Feedback

The survey is a clear communication channel that makes the process of feedback easy.

Future

Theo attends a lab meeting in a sensory-friendly room with soft lighting and a quiet atmosphere. He has a fruitful discussion with his lab mates in the space.

Theo feels tired and disoriented and goes to a private nap pod he booked in advance. The nap pod allows him to rest and calm down before going to his lecture.


Theo receives an email about a survey collecting feedback on improving spaces on campus. He appreciates the clear and transparent avenue to share his feedback.

Conclusion & Next Steps

In conclusion, the university journey is a time of change and transition for many students. While students shared an eagerness to engage in opportunities at the university, they struggled with feelings of instability, especially due to their daily commutes to and from campus. We found that students who find time to pause throughout their day found a sense of stability and control which, in turn, empowered them to better face their days ahead. Opportunities to pause also encouraged students to prioritize their health and well-being, particularly through mindfulness and rest. Our data revealed that campus spaces can play an important role in making students feel like they can actively engage in the present moment. **When students find moments of respite during their academic journey, they feel more grounded.**

The data and insights addressed in this report will be used to inform the design of both future and existing spaces on campus to accommodate the needs of commuter students and to provide students with opportunities for calm throughout the day. We hope that the findings from this project will strengthen Spaces & Experiences' understanding of the needs of commuter students.
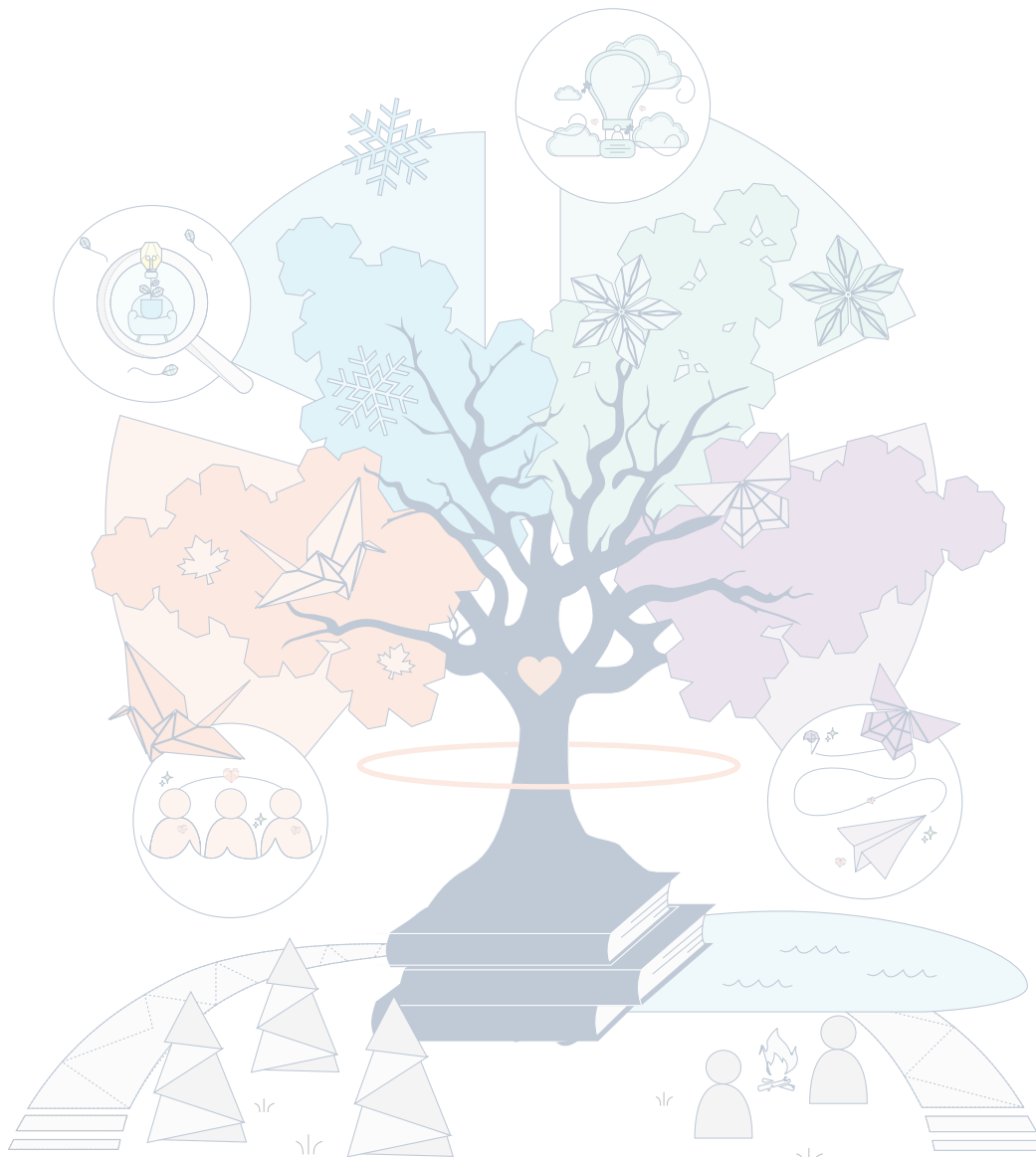
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